

FRACTURE

HOLLY DENISE



ELYSIAN PUBLISHING

REGRETS, I'VE HAD A FEW

IF ANYONE ASKED, BUFFY had decided to name her headache after Andrew.

It wasn't that the little twerp hadn't come a long way since the fall of Sunnydale—he really had. A long, annoying way that Giles kept assuring her would eventually show its dividends. And yes, he'd been a handy person to ship off to Los Angeles to rescue Dana from Angel, but the entire point of the operation had been to gather information. Well, after the whole *make sure Angel didn't get his hands on another slayer* thing, which Buffy figured was a given.

Fact was, over the last year and some change, Buffy had grown rather adept at identifying when someone, namely Andrew, wasn't telling her the full story. For starters, he wasn't the world's best liar, even if those lies were ones of omission. It was how she'd closed the Seal of Danzalthar after all. Figuring out the thing he hadn't shared.

This was not the same as that. She didn't know how she knew, only that she did. The same way she knew whether Dawn had actually done her homework: Andrew had a classic case of bullshit face.

"And that's it," he said with a little laugh, his arms dropping to his sides. He looked from her to Giles to her again. "It was pretty Bond, that speech I gave to Angel at the end, right? About how you don't trust him and stuff. He was, like, threatening to call you and everything and I was like, no, thou shalt not pass!"

"I thought that was Gandalf, not Bond."

Andrew sighed as though she was the one being all exasperating. "He seriously thought you were gonna just let him walk all over us. He's very...pushy. And you two used to date?"

Buffy rolled her eyes all the way to Giles, the way she used to back in the day. It wasn't until their gazes actually met that she remembered and snapped her spine straight, all business, no play. What they'd agreed upon back in Los Angeles in those first, fledgling days that already seemed a good forever ago.

A partnership of necessity. Convenience. She was the Slayer who had activated all the slayers, and he was the last watcher standing. They needed each other as they built this new world of theirs, but that was as far as the need went.

Outside of these walls—the shitty, bland walls of the shitty, bland London office building they'd rented out for the New Council—they were nothing. Not watcher and slayer. Not pseudo-father and pseudo-daughter. Just Buffy and Giles. Buffy and the man who had almost lost them the battle with the First by going behind Buffy's back.

It hadn't been immediate. None of this had. After Sunnydale had fallen, she and everyone else had been swept up in the thrill of victory and the utter disbelief of having made it to the other side. There had been people lost along the way, of course—too many missing faces on that bus to LA. Girls who would never get the honor of a funeral, whose sacrifices would never be truly appreciated by anyone outside the makeshift family they had patched together.

Only that had been her first mistake, thinking of her friends as a family. Maybe it had been true when times had been simpler, when she'd believed in the indestructible power of *them*. And she still loved them. Whatever else, Buffy deeply loved her friends. She loved Giles, too, in a way that hurt. She loved all of them so much. And that love had carried her into post-battle euphoria, the way it had so many times before.

Euphoria, however, could only get her so far. In her case, it had gotten her to Angel, and only by virtue of the fact that she hadn't had any other choice. Her home and everything in it had been wiped off the map and she had people to care for, especially those survivors like Robin who desperately needed medical attention. Hell, even those who had managed to survive the apocalypse with only a few bruises had been running on fumes and Angel had made the most sense. One of the perks of her ex-boyfriend housing his business within a former hotel was that there was room to spare, plenty of beds and, even better, plenty of showers.

Angel hadn't known anything of significance had changed for her then, too busy playing the ever-gracious host alongside the people Buffy even now couldn't help but think of as his Scoobies. Wesley had been the only familiar face in the crowd, even if that face had changed a *lot* since the last time she'd seen him. The others, Winifred and Gunn, had also been helpful. Understanding, even. Turned out they had recently battled a deity themselves, so it wasn't like there hadn't been plenty to talk about.

And plenty to not talk about. Plenty she thought she might never say aloud, plenty twisting the way she looked at the man she'd once considered the love of her life to the point. And it was because of that that Buffy didn't realize he hadn't asked about Spike, not once, until she was halfway through the longest shower she'd ever taken, watching as dirt from a town that no longer existed circled the drain. Her brain had been a messy place, chock full of new uncomfortable memories she didn't know how to handle, confused by the buzz in her body, the conflicting sensations of remorse and regret, and the inevitable relief that came with surviving yet another battle she probably shouldn't have.

Taking comfort in the knowledge that most of the people she loved were safe again, and those who weren't were being mourned as heroes. All except the one person whose name no one seemed capable of mentioning despite the fact that he was the reason they were there at all.

Buffy had stepped out of the shower and smoothed her hand over the aching gut wound she'd taken earlier that day. Upon closer inspection, it hadn't actually been all that bad. Strange. It certainly hadn't felt superficial when the blade had speared her insides, or when the First Evil had called it *mortal*. After satisfying herself that she wasn't in need of medical attention, she'd lifted her hand to her face, not sure what she was looking for until she realized what was missing.

There was no mark of the flame that had engulfed it just a few hours earlier. No sign whatsoever that it had ever been on fire. That she had, for a few stolen seconds, linked her fingers with a vampire's right before the sun had claimed him. Or that was what she'd thought was happening in those moments. What she'd been doing her best *not* to think, actually, ever since loading into the bus and taking off without even pausing to consider that Spike might have survived. It had seemed impossible—the whole town had caved in on top of him—but vampires could withstand cave-ins or whole town collapses. There was no need to assume that he was gone just because he hadn't run when he'd had the chance.

No reason except the hollow feeling in her chest, the dead certainty. The urge to rush back to the crater and look for him was intense, but ultimately, she knew, pointless. He wasn't there. He'd died in the Hellmouth, putting action behind a claim he'd made five years earlier—that he liked this world. That he wanted to save it.

"No, you don't, but thanks for saying it."

And Buffy had given in and cried. Standing in front of the mirror, the final vestiges of the town she'd never loved but had at least called home having just washed off her skin for good, thinking about the last moments she'd spent with the man she'd never loved but had always depended on, and how he was gone for good, too.

Except she *had* loved him. She just hadn't loved him in time to be believed. Hadn't *told* him when he'd needed to hear it. When he might have looked at her and known she wasn't just trying to be kind or give him a nice send-off.

Not that Buffy had blamed him for that. She hadn't and she still didn't. She blamed herself. Herself, and Angel.

At the time, she'd only known the part of why Angel had been to blame. Now she had the whole story. She knew all about the deal he'd made with Wolfram and Hart, the fact that he'd brought her that amulet without telling her exactly where it had come from, and the dangers of using it. He hadn't had any idea himself what it would do, and she could have accepted that if he'd gotten it from literally anywhere else. He'd just bulldozed his way back into her life, handed

her a doohickey that was supposed to help for reasons he still hadn't explained properly, given to him by people who wanted him dead at best and soulless at worst. It could have done anything. That the only casualty had been Spike, in the end, had come down to luck.

And even after telling him this, even after the argument in which she'd screamed herself blue in the face, he had the gall to think she would trust him with one of her slayers. Especially one like Dana, when Angel's history was one of fucking with minds, not repairing them.

"Well, at least he knows I'm not playing around now," Buffy muttered, rubbing her fingers along her brow, hoping to encourage Headache Andrew back to a lesser pain category. She had too much to get through today to deal with a migraine. "Thanks, Andrew, for handling that. I don't think I could've stomached being in the same room with him. I might have actually taken his head off."

Andrew let out a shrill laugh that had her temples ready to riot. "No, it's good you weren't there," he said, nodding a little too hard. "It would've been majorly awkward. After, you know, last time."

Buffy narrowed her eyes, dropping her hands back to the table. Her bullshit meter was blaring its siren again. "Is there something you want to tell me?"

"Nope!" Andrew said a bit too readily, his face burning maroon. "Nothing at all. I said everything I needed to say and not a syllable more."

There was a sigh from her left. Giles had risen to his feet and started toward the door of the rather meager conference room. Or what Buffy mentally referred to as the conference room. There hadn't been too many conferences yet, just meetings like this one where they discussed things like progress reports and training regimens and if Buffy was doing enough as the leader of all the slayers (*no* typically being the verdict) and, on occasion, calls with girls from across the globe who were just realizing the full scope of their powers.

So maybe it was a conference room if there were conference calls. Yay. One mystery solved.

"You know I know when you're holding out on me," Buffy said, keeping her gaze pinned on Andrew as her former watcher, current *whatever*, left the room. Just because Giles was satisfied didn't mean she had to play nice. It wasn't like they were on the same page much these days anyway.

"I... Well..." Andrew glanced down, his cheeks growing redder still. "I didn't know how to bring this up, really. But I thought... I stole something from Angel."

Buffy blinked. "You stole something from Angel?" Whatever she might have expected, this hadn't made the list. "Why?"

"Because I thought you might want it," Andrew said, frowning as though this answer should have been obvious. "I don't even know how he got it. But that Fred girl gave me a tour—so super nice, by the way—and showed me this

and, like I said, I thought it was something you'd want."

And then Andrew reached into his pocket and pulled out the amulet.

Buffy's breath caught and her heart performed a backflip. There was no denying it—it was *the* amulet. The gold chain, the prongs securing the large jewel to the center, the jewel itself, crystalline and gorgeous and deceptive because no one looking at that would think, *guess*, that it had the power to decimate an entire town, stealing the life of the man who wore it in the process. For months now, she'd seen this thing in her dreams. In her memories. She'd rewritten history a thousand different ways, tried to imagine what her life might look like if she'd just stopped at triggering the other slayers. If Sunnydale would still be standing, if the First would be contained—the balance tipped back far enough that it lost its momentum and faded into a specter who could do little but taunt from the sidelines. If she and Spike would have had the conversation they'd danced around there at the end, built on unspoken *maybes* that she knew now he'd never really believed in.

All the unknowns she'd explored, the paths not taken, the mulligans she'd wanted to call... Maybe none of it would have changed anything. Maybe Spike had always had to die, Sunnydale to fall, in order for the world to keep spinning. There were some things you never got to know, though god, that didn't make them any easier to bear.

It was only after Andrew started fidgeting that Buffy was able to break from the loop in her head, refocus on what she was really looking at.

"Angel...had this?" she asked thickly. "He just had it?"

"Yeah. I don't know how—he never told me. I kinda didn't want to draw attention to the fact that I knew about it because it'd be pretty obvious I'm the one who took it. If they ever noticed." He rattled off a high-pitched titter, and again, something struck her as off. "But I'm guessing they just... I dunno, didn't want to leave something as valuable and powerful as that thing at the bottom of a crater, maybe? Wolfram and Hart having the power to do pretty much whatever they want, getting it back wouldn't be a big issue, I'm guessing."

She supposed that much made sense, though Andrew was still clearly not telling her the full truth. Or maybe she was just too skeptical for her own good. The entire Los Angeles trip had been a big thing to trust him with, especially since no one had known how the whole *Angel* of it all would shake out. Andrew was good with talk but less so with action, so the fact that he'd been able to drop some harsh truths and collect the slayer without much interference was impressive enough. Add that he'd done all that while smuggling goods out of the country and maybe Buffy should cut him a lot of slack.

"I just... I know you don't have anything of his," Andrew said a moment later, his voice dropping in that dignified way of people speaking about the dead. "I thought you'd want it."

Buffy worked her throat, which had gone so tight she felt a little lightheaded.

The thought was sweet—really sweet, actually—but it didn't make looking at the amulet any easier. No matter what purpose it had served, or that she had given it to Spike and he'd accepted it, the thing wasn't a memento. It wasn't his duster or his lighter or the skullhead ring that had once doubled as her engagement band or any of the pieces of jewelry that had driven her the right kind of crazy during their affair. No, this was the thing that had killed him, snatched up the *maybe* and turned it into a definite *no*.

He'd saved the world with it, though, and that had to mean something.

But then, at the same time, it was exactly what Andrew had said it was. Something that had survived Sunnydale that had touched Spike's skin. That he'd held in his hand, worn around his neck. That had made him look at her in ways that she didn't let herself dwell on too much, because she'd known how much that had meant to him. To be her selected, her chosen champion. To be picked by her at all for something that important.

"Thank you," she said, and held out her hand the way Spike had done back in her basement. Felt the chain pool against her palm before the weight of the amulet itself was hers entirely, its gleaming face sparkling up at her with all its ostentatious bedazzlement. Elizabeth Taylor, he'd said, and her eyes began to fill.

"Is it okay?" Now Andrew sounded worried. "I didn't mean to upset you, really. I just wanted—"

"It's okay," Buffy told him. It was okay because it had to be. It wasn't like she had a choice in this. The man she loved was dead, and all she had left of him now was the thing that had killed him. "Thank you, Andrew. It's... It's good. If nothing else, this thing is seriously powerful, and I'd rather us have it than Angel."

He nodded, a relieved grin taking his face. "Yeah. That's good. I didn't think of that." He waited for a beat, maybe expecting her to say more, then gave his awkward little Andrew laugh and started walking backward toward the door. "And if Angel calls and asks about it, you won't, like, rat me out or anything?"

"You don't have to worry. I can handle Angel."

"Maybe you should just hang up on him if he does, though. Like, what good could come from talking to him?"

That was a fair point, but Buffy wasn't in the mood to entertain hypotheticals. Not once in the years since they'd split had Angel picked up the phone, and she didn't see a reason why that would change now, especially given the James-Bond-slash-Gandalf speech Andrew claimed to have delivered. Which, okay, probably better not to take that much on faith given Andrew's love of hyperbole. Even still, though, she thought it highly unlikely Angel would ever reach out to her. If he needed her attention, he would just show up the way he always did. Why make a phone call when you could do so much more emotional damage in person?

“Thanks, Andrew,” Buffy said in lieu of a response, her attention on the amulet once more. There must have been enough finality in her voice to have gotten the message across this time, for when she looked up again, the room was empty. Just her, standing in her rented office complex gripping the only thing that had survived the destruction of Sunnydale. The thing that had caused it.

And wishing so badly that she could talk to Spike that it was hard to breathe for missing him. The internal wound, always hurting, scored open once more in ways it hadn’t been in weeks. Since she’d had that breakdown in the grocery store over a tube of ready-to-bake cookie dough which, no, hadn’t been mortifying in the least.

Grief didn’t care where you were when it struck. It just struck. Also didn’t help that Buffy had a thing about crying in public, in that she hated doing it. Not that she imagined it was anyone’s favorite thing—who loved losing control while amid a crowd of strangers?—but she held herself to a certain standard, especially as an adult, that made her feel even more awkward and self-aware when she sensed she was on the verge of losing it in non-home places. The more she fought, the harder the crash, because then she wasn’t just fighting the feelings themselves but also the mortification of the spectacle she was making of herself.

She had privacy now. Could break down here in this maybe-a-conference-room and sob her fool heart out if she chose. But she didn’t choose because grief wasn’t a choice made but a force that couldn’t be tamed or predicted. She could stand here, holding the amulet that had killed him, the pain of missing him too deep to be reached or soothed, and no tears would come at all. That was just the way of things.

So Buffy decided not to stay put. She was a busy slayer and had plenty to knock off her to-do list before she took a turn around the local cemeteries—not because she needed to, but because the routine and familiarity of patrol was oddly comforting—and think about all the things she hadn’t said to him that she wished she had. Hell, all the things she hadn’t said to everyone she’d lost that she wished she had. No need to stop at Spike. There was plenty of mourning to go around, and she finally had time to get to it. Rebuilding the Council might keep her busy but there wasn’t an apocalypse on schedule for the first time in ages, so it wasn’t like she had a reason to put off introspection. Except that putting it off was another time-honored Buffy tradition. Bad feelings were easier to navigate if you ignored them. Then all you needed to do was worry about them creeping up when you were at the grocery store.

She snickered and made her way to the door, the amulet in her hand.

And wondered what other lies she might convince herself into believing were true before the sun went down.

It wasn't there all the time, the grief. Well, it was, but not at the forefront. Not consuming her every thought, commanding her decisions, or doing anything else that she might have expected based on both past experience and what she saw in the movies. Buffy wasn't sure what exactly was different about this breed of grief, the Spike breed, except that its intensity was surprising. She'd killed Angel what felt like a lifetime ago, stuck a sword in his gut and watched the mouth of hell consume him whole. She'd walked into her home on what had been a standard day in Sunnydale only to find her mother dead in the living room. She'd buried one of her best friends a little more than a year ago, the victim of a stray bullet meant for someone else. Death was a part of life for all people, especially for her. She couldn't outrun it if she tried.

Still, everything about each of those losses had been different. Angel had been a killer, restored to himself in time to be sacrificed to stop the destruction he had set into motion. Her mom was her mom, and that would never not hurt, but Buffy had long since accepted that yeah, Joyce had known just how loved she was when her time had come. As much as she wished she'd had the opportunity to say it, that she'd known the last time she saw her mom would in fact be the last time, Buffy had come to peace with the abrupt nature of that loss. Love had never been the problem between them, or at least not the lack of it. For Buffy, love was a thing shown rather than said. The words seemed like an omen better off avoided, lest the universe hear her and start to plan its next practical joke.

With Tara, Buffy was certain that there hadn't been anything unsaid between them. Nothing she regretted, at least. The only thing she regretted there was that she hadn't put Warren away before he'd had the chance to barrel into her yard, fire that gun, and steal anyone's tomorrows. There was a lot Buffy had done wrong in those first months following her resurrection, and even more she'd missed, and but for a few different decisions, the entire trajectory of her life might have looked different.

Maybe Spike wouldn't have come into the bathroom that night. Maybe the awful thing that had happened then wouldn't have happened at all. Maybe he would never have found a reason to go to the ends of the world to search for a soul. Then, maybe, he wouldn't have been on the list of contenders to wear the amulet in the first place. So many maybes.

And that was the fundamental difference. Why losing Spike hadn't been like losing her mom or Tara or Jenny Calendar or any of the other people Buffy hadn't managed to save over the years. It wasn't the things said or decisions made, but rather the lack of things said, the lack of decisions, the empty canvas that had been their relationship all those months since he returned from Africa.

The massive hold she'd placed on her life where Spike was concerned because even thinking about him, about them, about the relationship they'd had and the one they could have had, had been painful and terrifying. She'd held his hand and said goodbye to him just as she'd thought she'd been ready, at last, to say hello, and there was no walking that back. No accounting for the *should-haves*, the near misses, the *maybe-whens* that had gone ignored or unanswered, and all the potential she'd lost along with him. The possibility of them that she hadn't known she'd wanted until it was no longer within reach.

The amulet had done that, and now it was back. The piece of Spike that she had left just so happened to be the piece that had taken him away in the first place, and if ever a college professor wanted her to define *irony* again, well, at least she'd have a point of reference.

Buffy wasn't sure what time it was when she finally dragged herself over the threshold of her apartment, only that it was late and she'd spent another evening doing whatever she could to avoid the quiet at home. Patrol. Dinner for one at some bistro whose name she couldn't even remember even though they knew her order as well as her normal routine. What time to fire up the burners and what she'd request when they came to the table. Diet cola, water, basket of bread. Salad with dressing on the side. Then some lean meat and a few greens she'd barely touch.

It was all so boring.

And there it was—the thing she'd managed to go without acknowledging, no matter how often the Spike in her head whispered its mutinous, however accurate, observations of what had become of her since Sunnydale. Buffy being a cog in the wheel, a bureaucratic nightmare come to life. Not actually doing anything, but in charge of the people who did. Left to stealing patrols of sleepy, surprisingly demon-free cities in the hopes of finding something juicy to fix her attention on because god help her, she had no idea who she was if she wasn't the Slayer. This thing she'd spent most of her life resenting was now the only thing she knew how to do, and it turned out she was pretty damn good at it. Also that she liked it. Needed it. Missed the purpose that had come with being the one and only even if the pressure had been, at times, suffocating.

Hey, another definition of irony in the bag. Go her.

There was a necessary state of transition, Giles assured her whenever he was in the mood to be helpful these days. Much like there had been when she'd left high school behind and first enrolled at UC Sunnydale. Her life had changed radically, and any radical change required a period of adjustment before the new normal felt anything like actual *normal*. And that made sense. Time took time sometimes. Buffy's entire worldview had been upended, so the fact that she needed some breathing room to grow into the next phase of her life was a given.

The only thing that wasn't a given was how she felt about this phase of her

life. In college, at least, she'd known that there were reasons for pushing on even when everything felt hopeless or difficult. Going back had not been an option, and even if it had, it wasn't like she'd really *wanted* to go back. Her reflections on high school had not been sepia-toned nostalgia, and she hadn't flinched when the time had come to blow the place to smithereens. Instead, Buffy had shifted from a known entity to an unknown entity, and the unknown was what had thrown her off. Yeah, high school had been the pits, but at least she'd known the rules enough to understand the consequences of breaking them. College was just what came next in a person's life. College or the actual living thing. The easy years were over.

It wasn't that way now. The path ahead, the one where she was in charge of a host of new slayers, was what was expected but not the only option, at least not in the way that college had felt like the only option. Buffy might not have a ton of money or experience doing anything other than fighting evil, but the world was large and, as someone had said not too long ago, all cup-runneth-over with slayers who could take the baton and become the leader. That she was the one in charge now was negotiable. Anyone else could take it if they liked. Just because she'd been doing this the longest didn't mean her approach was the best.

The world had taken so much from her. Wasn't it time to start taking some of it back?

Not that Buffy had the first idea of where to go, or what else she would do if she were to leave. Slaying might not have been her dream profession, but it was still the only thing she knew. The only thing she was really good at and, at this point, did better than anyone else. Staying the course and sticking with the organization they were building out of the Council's smoldering ashes was the path of least resistance and most financial security. Whether that meant she was doing the right thing, she couldn't say, and there was no one around anymore she really trusted with questions like these. Giles had his agenda; Xander wasn't even in the country; Willow was occupied with the Devon coven in her attempts to hone some of the nifty new powers she'd unlocked with the spell that had activated all the Potentials. And Dawn was, well, Dawn. A kid who needed to start thinking about her own future before she spent too much energy worrying about Buffy's.

And all of them, not that long ago, had been complicit in kicking Buffy out of her own house. Doubting her judgment, her experience, her capabilities and deciding she wasn't fit to lead them anymore. Quite the dramatic turnaround. Granted, it hadn't been everyone she knew—Faith had stood to the side, not necessarily objecting but not rushing to her defense either, though also not holding back the few potshots she'd taken. And in a twisted way, Faith might be the only person Buffy trusted to be blunt without it being personal these days. Not tell her what she wanted to hear but give her something that might actually be of use.

Though if she were honest, the only person she really wanted to talk to was the one who wasn't here at all.

Buffy drew the amulet out of her pocket and wandered absently toward the couch. The thing glistened even in the dark of her apartment, glittering up at her prettily, innocuously, though she wouldn't let herself be fooled. The only link she had to him anymore—maybe it would do. Maybe she could whisper to it all the things she hadn't been able to tell him. Have her side of the conversations they had mutually put on hold, even if it had been a little more mutual on his end.

It was probably a bad idea. They didn't know anything about this thing other than that it had enormous capacity for destruction—and while that had saved their bacon back in Sunnydale, *now* was an entirely different story. She could practically see the look on Giles's face—the disapproval, the disappointment, the pinched brows and the pursed mouth—and from there it wasn't a stretch to imagine what he would say. How reckless it was for her to handle something so volatile, so unknown, and how dangerous it was to have brought it into her home.

And just as this was a bad idea, it probably said something that thinking of Giles's reaction was what convinced her to do it anyway. Buffy helped herself onto the couch—right in the middle—and tucked her legs up under herself, then glanced at the amulet still clutched in her fist. It was cold against her skin, having stolen none of her body heat, which was kinda weird but hey, what did she know about mystical jewelry that killed almost-boyfriends?

Woefully little.

That should worry you.

Yeah, probably. Still didn't, though. Instead, Buffy ran her thumb over the face of the amulet, the thing that seemed to sparkle even in the dark. And then, without realizing she meant to, she let out a breath and started to speak.

"I've never been good at this. Talking to someone who isn't here, that is, and not for lack of trying. It just always seemed weird or... I dunno, like something a person does that sounds good in their head but then it's just you in an empty room talking to yourself and pretending it isn't yourself. Like I'm trying to convince myself that you can actually hear me. But if I'm gonna do it, better do it while Dawn's at her study group so she doesn't think I've gone even nuttier than she already does." Buffy paused and wet her lips, her stupid eyes starting to burn, and she hadn't even said anything yet. "I don't remember if anyone talked to me when I was dead. Memories of that are kind of hazy. Like the longer I'm still alive, the more being dead feels like a dream. Everything was really clear at the start—not the place but the feeling. How nice it was to be finished. To be just...done with everything. I keep thinking of that, or trying to think of it, whenever I think of you. Because that's what happens when you die saving the world, right? You get to go on to...*that*."

Another pause, this one accompanied by a sniff.

“So I don’t know if you can hear me or not. I do remember this sense of knowing that my friends and Dawn were okay, though. Maybe not perfect—I mean obviously, I didn’t know the resurrection was coming or anything or... I don’t think I did.” She pressed her eyes closed, catching the first tear before it managed to slip free. “But if you can hear me where you are, then I guess it’s worth feeling like a moron for a few minutes. At least I’ll definitely get the last word this time.”

Buffy opened her eyes again, blinked away the water sticking to her lashes. “You never asked me to forgive you, and you never asked me if I did, but I’m guessing you knew. I wouldn’t have let you stay in the house if I hadn’t. Definitely wouldn’t have let you anywhere near Dawn or the other girls, and that chip would’ve stayed right where it was. I think all that is how I knew. More than you telling me about the soul, just... There were so many things, moments we had, where a different Spike would have hounded me to tell him what it meant, and you just never did. You never assumed anything, either. You just took what I gave you and let it mean what it needed to mean. And I think that’s what helped me get where I was at the end—you not making demands made me think more than I would have before. Like the entire time we were... Well, I didn’t want to think at all about us, whether it was those kisses or...or even the sex, I just wanted to pretend it wasn’t happening. Or if not that, then something like it. Like I could keep it in a box where it didn’t need to mean anything and if it did, no one needed to know about it, especially you. But last year, you were all about the space and the not making me think things about us or trying to figure out how I felt. You just gave that to me and of course, I kinda couldn’t stop thinking about you then. Even when I knew I should. Even when I tried to go out with Robin and you told me to move on, and god, I didn’t like that. I didn’t like that you weren’t jealous. I wanted you to keep wanting me because my feelings were all with the confused, and you seeming just okay with me going out with someone else made me feel like maybe I was the crazy one and you’re literally the one who was most recently crazy, so what did that say about me?”

She closed her mouth for a moment, her throat feeling strained in a way that was both odd and familiar. One of the running gags among the Potentials—and her friends, now, come to think of it—was she’d become speech-girl seemingly overnight. Long-winded but determined to be heard because every time she started talking, it was about something important. Life-or-death important. Big stuff. Only there hadn’t been much need to speechify over the last few months. The girls had scattered. The gang had split. Buffy had somehow landed herself a desk job—no one had ever seen that one coming—and though there were meetings, more meetings, and meetings about meetings, she spent very little time talking without interruption anymore, and those weren’t speeches so

much as they were heated disagreements, if not full-on arguments, with some order-giving in the in-between moments.

Odds were good she hadn't said this much in one go since she'd left her house for the last time. In a strange way, it made her feel closer to him. Or the version of herself that had been closer to him. Within reach of him even if she hadn't been brave enough to actually do any reaching until the end.

"I know I was crazy mixed-signal girl," she went on after a beat. "Right up until the end. So in case you're wondering, I do get why you... Why you said what you said when I said what I said. I probably wouldn't have believed me, either. Especially not since you caught the moment of lapsed reason with Angel."

Her stomach knotted. God, every time she thought of that...

"I still don't know why I did that," she said honestly. "Like a lot of bonehead Buffy things I do, I know why I do them. There's a reason. And I've tried to figure out the reason for this, especially since I felt so unbelievably stupid after it was over and I learned what I did about this." Buffy tightened her grip around the amulet, wondering fleetingly how much pressure it would take to crack the stone in the center. If doing so would make any difference. If maybe the amulet were a cousin of the necklace thing Anya had lost once, and if she destroyed it, the past nine months would zoom backward and she'd be back in Sunnydale, the fight with the First still ahead but the rest of her heart made whole again. What her life would look like if she could have had Spike with her on that bus—the endless arguments and meetings about meetings playing out differently because her voice wouldn't be the only one arguing her points. And his faith in her would give her strength. That's how it worked. Others doubted but Spike believed. And he might be on the other end of the amulet—crushing it between her fingers might be all that stood between her and that unprecedented support that she hadn't realized she'd been living without until it was gone again.

The thought took root and wouldn't relent. Rather, the longer it sat between her ears, the deeper and more plausible it became. She had the amulet, after all, and even if it didn't work, well, then she could at least say she'd destroyed the thing that had the power to level cities. Giles was likely to call that reckless too, but what did she care?

She didn't.

Buffy worked her throat, then slowly rose to her feet. She felt suddenly aware of herself, the movements she made, the steps toward the kitchen with its sinkful of dishes she had sworn she would tackle this evening. As though the apartment itself were watching her as she approached the counter, holding its breath along with her when she pulled open the junk drawer and drew out the hammer she'd tossed in there just the week before, telling herself it was time to start getting art on the walls. That's what Mom would have done to make the

place feel like home rather than just a layover—and what she, Buffy, needed to do in order to officially put Sunnydale in her rearview.

She hadn't hung up any artwork. Hadn't used the hammer for anything yet. Not even demon slayage, despite the fact that Dawn swore their neighbor might be something other than human. And now her first decisive act with said hammer would be destroying the amulet that had destroyed her town and made the whole *getting a new home* thing necessary. Seemed kinda fitting in that sense.

And if a vampire just happens to fall out of it in the doing, well, at least we'll know.

Buffy licked her lips as she drew back the hammer, keeping her eyes on the amulet prize. There was a sliver of hesitation, the Giles in her head trying to claim the full of her attention and restraint, but she was sick of Giles living there. Sick of restraint, too, for most every time she'd followed her gut she'd been punished and left picking up the slack caused by Giles-sponsored caution.

Not now. He wasn't her watcher anymore. These decisions were hers and hers alone.

She slammed the hammer home in a clean bull's-eye, and the face of the gem shattered down the middle, and there was no waiting. No lull. Just the burst of swirling black clouds through the fracture she'd made and the bottom of her stomach dropping out because *shit*, she hadn't expected that. Buffy dropped the hammer in favor of gripping the countertop, unable to think or yell or do much more than watch as the black clouds poured onto her kitchen floor, a scream filling her ears, one that seemed to bounce off her apartment walls. Or perhaps that's what was screaming—her apartment. For the sound was both within her and outside of her, making her temples throb and her heart pound, and it was too much for something that should have been nothing. But it wasn't nothing. It definitely wasn't nothing. The black kept swirling, kept storming, until she had a bona-fide tornado under her roof. A screaming, writhing tornado that settled on the floor at her left.

Only it wasn't a tornado. TORNADOS didn't have boots or long leather dusters. They didn't come with legs attached to torsos that stretched up into a chest she knew oh so well. They didn't grow shoulders and arms, didn't form necks or chins or cheekbones or those eyes, those lips, didn't transform into her dead lover in the middle of her goddamned kitchen.

Except that was what this tornado did. As she stood there and watched, her mouth agape, her heart thundering hard enough it nearly drowned out the scream tearing from Spike's lips.

Spike's lips. Lips of Spike. Lips attached to the rest of him.

It couldn't be real. Dear god, it couldn't be real.

Yet here it was.

And then calm, quiet. The swirling stopped, the tornado having completed its transformation. The wind and the loud blipping out of existence.

Then Spike looked at her, his chest heaving, and light touched his eyes.
“Did it work?” he asked, his voice full of hope.

THIS COULD BE HEAVEN OR THIS COULD BE HELL

SOMETHING HAD BROKEN INSIDE of Buffy's head.

She hadn't really believed it. Over the years, she had made some radical leaps that turned out to be good leaps. The right leaps. Leaps that needed to be leaped in order to reach the correct conclusion, informed by little more than experience and a gut-level intuition she still didn't entirely understand. She'd be sitting somewhere—the library, Giles's place, the Magic Box, her own living room—thinking through a problem and talking at the same time, and words would happen and they would be the right words. The words she needed in order to do what came next. It hadn't mattered that a lot of that had been nothing but conjecture treated as fact—she was the Slayer and she had to go where her gut led her.

That hadn't been what had led her to the kitchen, the amulet dangling from her hand. It hadn't been why she'd decided to smash it. The images of Spike swirling into existence from the depths of the thing that had killed him hadn't been planted there by slayer certainty or even an honest *maybe*. Every step had been informed by grief and wishful thinking.

Buffy hadn't known that ninety seconds ago, but she did now. Now that she was staring into a pair of striking blue eyes she was supposed to never see again. Now that he was looking at her with a mixture of confusion and hope, uncertainty tightening the corners of his face every silent second that ticked by.

Finally, the silence grew to be too heavy, and Spike—or the thing that looked like Spike—staggered toward her. “Buffy? What is this?”

She opened her mouth, closed it, opened it again.

“Where the sodding hell are we?” The Spike-thing finally broke his gaze from hers, started looking around the sparse apartment she shared with Dawn. The kitchen separated from the living room with a long stretch of counter, the crammed eating area just behind him, the hall on the other side of the living room that led to the two bedrooms and shared bath. There wasn't much else to see beyond the stark walls where Buffy kept meaning to hanging something, but somehow, that bland nothing was enough to ensnare Spike's interest and hold it. As were the cartons of take-out piled up in the trash, the glasses in the sink, the low hum of the refrigerator that didn't have anything but diet soda

and hummus inside.

It was her home, or whatever passed for that these days. The place where she slept and ate and watched television and spent her time when she wasn't working with new slayers or trying to hunt down something to kill. The first place she'd lived since Sunnydale. Since Spike.

And Spike was right here. Standing *right there*, panting and looking around, and that should be impossible because Spike was dead. She'd left him with her heart at the bottom of a crater almost a year ago.

"Am I dreaming?" he asked suddenly, holding out a hand as though to touch her. "Or is this it?"

Buffy drew in a sharp breath, forcing her way through the haze that had settled around her head. "Is this what?"

"Heaven. Never imagined I'd actually get there, but..." He met her gaze again, the blue breaking with uncertainty. "Slayer, you gotta say something or I'm gonna start swinging. Where the sodding hell are we?"

"London. We're in London." Buffy shook her head, and bits of fog broke away with it, the shock settling back into something more familiar. "Sunnydale is gone."

"Gone?"

"You destroyed it. You saved the world, but you destroyed Sunnydale."

Some of the tension in Spike's face relaxed, but hardly all. "You made it then?"

"I made it. So did Dawn. We lost a few people. Anya." She swallowed. "You. We lost you, but we made it out. And that was almost a year ago."

"What?"

"It's February. Of 2004. You've been... You've been gone a long time."

He knit his brow, confusion falling back into place, though there was something familiar about this too. A sense of understanding—or lack of understanding—filling his eyes and the lines of his face. A displacement in time, the world different from the one he'd left behind. For her, it had been a fiery hellscape of her hometown, a likeness of herself ripped to pieces by an invading army of demons there to celebrate the Slayer's death. The thought and feel of that safe place from which she'd been torn almost a tickle against her skin, something she knew existed but couldn't quite touch. And she'd wandered for what felt like hours before she'd found anything of the world she'd known before, only it hadn't been the same. Everything had felt off. Colors not quite so vivid. Tastes not quite so strong. Air not quite so life-giving. The funhouse mirror version of reality.

"If I'm dead, how am I here?" Spike asked at last, his voice having gone rough. "Did you...?"

"No. I mean...maybe?" Buffy shifted her gaze to the remnants of amulet left scattered across her kitchen counter. "I didn't think it would work." She paused,

a horrible thought striking her, and whipped her eyes back to his. “Spike, you weren’t *in* Heaven, were you?”

The answer was there without needing to be voiced—the confusion on his face deepening—but she wanted to hear it anyway. Be absolutely sure.

“Last thing I remember is bein’ with you in that cave, the world coming down around us. If I was anywhere in between then and now, it’s not there. Why else would I ask if this was Heaven?”

That was a reasonably good point, but she’d had to ask just the same. “I’m sorry, I’m just...” Buffy blinked hard, giving her head another shake, everything inside of her starting to swell in that horrible way it did before she lost control completely. It hadn’t happened in a while, maybe not since that time at the grocery store, but with the day she’d had today, the day she’d had yesterday, and all the days she’d had since last May piling upon one another along with the agony that was missing someone, *him*, as well as her home and her life as she’d known it, standing here talking to Spike and having him talk back was beyond overwhelming. Beyond anything, making her brain hurt to the point she would swear it was beating at the inside of her skull to be set free, just to get some distance from the crazy mess that was her life.

“You didn’t believe me,” she heard herself saying as though from a distance. “I told you and you didn’t believe me.”

It was hardly the most pressing matter at the moment, yet it was all that was there when she opened her mouth. That burden one of the heavier ones she’d been carrying the last few months, the most desperate to be unloaded. Buffy coughed and stepped back as though to distance herself from the instant wave of vulnerability—that uncomfortable place of being seen and perceived and heard, particularly while she was still humming with shock, not to mention hurt. But if this was Spike, if he was truly here, then she had some things she needed to say.

And thankfully he wasn’t in a mood to play dumb, or she would have to stake him on principle. She saw that when he opened his mouth. “Buffy, I...”

“I mean, maybe you heard all that when I was talking to the amulet like a not-so-crazy lady, but I need to say it again in case you didn’t.” She squared her shoulders and forced herself to look him in the eye. “Just for future reference, telling someone that they don’t love you is pretty darn crummy, especially if they just told you that they do.”

“I know.”

Her heart spasmed. Yes, he would know. He’d had plenty of experience in that department to know exactly how bad it felt. Which, *yes*, she was aware made her a hypocrite but Spike had always known her better than anyone else had, had always been able to read her, had always been there to confront her with uncomfortable truths and chase her down until he was certain he’d been heard.

He wasn’t chasing now, though. He wasn’t telling her that he knew just how

rotten that felt because she'd made him feel that rotten on multiple occasions and how did she like it? Somehow, his tacit acceptance made everything worse. She didn't want to feel worse. Of the millions of things she felt at the moment—elation, terror, confusion, grief, and love to name a few—anger was the easiest one to manage. The one she had the most experience with. It was more comfortable than exploring any of the others. For those, she would need time.

“You know how crummy it is, but you said it anyway.” Buffy folded her arms. “What was that, Spike?”

“That really what we ought to be focusing on?”

“You were dead two minutes ago. I think all other things can wait on account of you not being dead.”

Spike sighed as though she was being unreasonable and lifted his hands. “I dunno, all right? All I can say is it made sense at the time. You there, lookin' at me like that. Everything was fallin' apart except you and then you said that and... It just didn't seem real. *We're* the thing that falls apart. Instead, we were what was holding the bloody line. Bit much for a man to take, I suppose.”

Her throat had grown tight. “You suppose?”

“Like I said, made sense at the time.” Spike held her gaze, caution reflecting back in his own, and no matter what happened from here until the real end of the world, that would never fail to catch her off guard. Not that it was new—he'd been looking at her like that ever since he'd come back into her life. Hesitant. Thoughtful. A Spike who made no sudden moves—and she knew why, and he knew why, but it was still *weird*, knowing he was thinking thoughts he wasn't sharing, weighing his words without letting his mouth run away with him.

“You're in London,” he said at length. Nice, carefully neutral subject. “Where's Dawn?”

“It's Thursday, so she's at her study group.” And Buffy should get a medal for remembering. When every day was the same, keeping track of the individual names became kinda meaningless. “Then she does some work with Giles on Mondays and Fridays, and Wednesdays are her Key lessons.”

“Her what?”

“She wants to learn how to use her Keyness,” Buffy explained, trying very hard to keep hold of her calm. It was just surreal, and staring at him didn't make it any less so. Spike, who had been dead and gone and buried under several metric tons of rubble, standing just a few feet from her, looking at her, listening as she described Dawn's extracurriculars like it was nothing. Like they hadn't been separated by time and death and more besides. Like she hadn't spent months having mental conversations with him to say all the things she'd thought she'd say if given the chance, none of which were the things currently leaving her mouth. “You know. We all said she wasn't the Key anymore because Glory's gone, but that doesn't really make sense, when you think about it, so

after we got set up here, she asked if she could start digging into what it means to be a mystical Key thing and if that might help us prevent the world from ending sometime down the line. Turns out she can. It's a process but she's actually doing it. Giles hooked her up with some shaman to help her identify the power source inside her and start something called shadow walking."

Spike didn't bother to mask his surprise. She couldn't blame him. The amount of progress Dawn had made over the last few months was not unimpressive, or un-terrifying. Sunnydale being gone meant the whole school system was gone too, and no one was questioning Buffy's authority as Dawn's guardian... Not that that even mattered all that much anymore, considering she was seventeen. Not quite an adult in the eyes of Buffy's US-based understanding of the law but close enough that Buffy had started to step back from the whole parenting thing almost from the moment they had landed. Dawn wasn't her ward anymore, rather her increasingly absent roommate. Developing her own routine, her own friends, her own everything in the world that had been saved for them.

And in the meantime, talking about casually taking tours of other dimensions in a way she assured was safe and not as crazy as it sounded. All a part of exerting some control over the powers that had given her shape in the first place.

"And what are you doing?" Spike asked, jarring her out of her thoughts.

"What, you mean besides talking to and then smashing amulets that leveled my hometown?"

"Everything's a mite fuzzy, but it worked, didn't it? I think I remember that." He waited for her to understand, then continued when she didn't. "The spell, I mean. The one that you wagered would save the world. Turning all the baby slayers into the real bloody thing. That happened, yeah? Willow worked the mojo that saved the day?"

"*You* saved the day, Spike."

"Sounds nice, but gonna guess we both know it's not as simple as that. Neither of us had any sodding clue what that thing would do. The plan was yours. Tip the balance back—put it to rights. Fight off the armies of—"

"I know what the plan was. I was there giving speeches, remember?" Buffy released a long breath, feeling at once bitchy and... Well, bitchy pretty much summed it up. Everything she'd wanted since leaving Sunnydale was standing right in front of her, looking at her with Spike's eyes and talking to her with Spike's voice, and it was all so real while also being all so *sur*real. That perfectly imperfect cattywampus way that fantasy overlaid reality and tricked you into thinking you were awake when you weren't. It would explain why she felt off. Why she wasn't rushing into his arms, burying her head in his chest and making the proclamation that he hadn't accepted the first time in the hopes he did now.

But the rest of the day hadn't been like this. Hadn't been dreamlike at all, actually. Had been standard slayer fare, complete with Andrew and Giles and a

whole briefing on Angel. Whatever this was couldn't be a dream. It had to be real.

Or at least real enough.

"I'm sorry," she said, then laughed a little at the words. She already had a massive deficit where Spike and apologies were concerned—the least she could do was not dig herself in any deeper, even if her mind had detoured into insane territory. "I'm just... I can't believe you're really here. How much I've wanted you here and now you are and it's like I can't trust what I'm seeing."

"Know the feeling," Spike replied softly. "Been there myself."

"Right." And how she felt especially dense on top of everything else. His bedside manner had been a lot better than hers, too. The first thing he'd done was tend to the wounds on her hands. All she'd done was stare and yell and doubt. Buffy wet her lips and hazarded a step forward, half-certain for a wild instant that he would just flicker out of existence if she tried to touch him. If she moved too quickly or appeared too eager—if she at all acted the part of a woman who had just watched the man she loved return from the dead. But he didn't flicker. He just stood there, watching her with that guarded expression that she knew and hated and loved, giving her the courage to take another step. Then another. And then she was reaching for him, a thrill racing down her spine, hope starting to burn out all other thoughts and fears.

The next step would bring them together. For the first time since Sunnydale, she might get a good night's sleep. It was right there. All she had to do was seize it.

So, steeling herself, holding fast to that hope, she did.

And promptly tumbled right through him.



Nothing could ever be easy.

Buffy was sitting on the edge of her bed, elbows on her knees, trying to massage away the pulsing in her temples with little success. Every time she thought she might be getting ahead, it was there again. The stumble, the fall, the hard slap of *real* reality, and the look on his face. The look most of all. Spike staring at her agog as she tried to find her footing, tried to balance herself, tried *not* to fall flat on her ass like a massive idiot who had just fallen for...well, if not the oldest trick in the book, then one that was up there.

Then the yelling had started.

At least it had been yelling and not crying. She'd wanted to sob. She'd wanted to scream. She'd wanted to collapse in on herself and wait until daylight when this could be someone else's problem. The First having survived the final battle wasn't exactly headline news. As something that wasn't alive, it couldn't strictly be killed. Giles had gone over all of this ages ago. The First would always

exist in some form—the spell to activate the slayers had simply done what the faux-Spike had suggested and tip everything back the way it was supposed to be. Balance the dark magic of the resurrection spell with the light magic of the activation spell. Buffy still wasn't sure how that worked, only that she'd felt it in her gut that it was the solution and she'd followed that to the end of the world and back. Maybe she hadn't been thinking long-term—honestly, she wasn't sure she could recreate the thought process that had led her to the conclusion that had, maybe, ended up averting the apocalypse. Just that it had been there and clear and when her instincts told her to do something, she tended to listen. It was what had kept her alive this long.

More than that, it was what had helped her win this long.

Except there in the kitchen, half a globe and several months removed from where she'd stood after the final battle, a thing wearing Spike's face had spilled out of the amulet that had killed him. Maybe that was where the First had gone—not vanquished, just in some cosmic timeout, and waiting for someone stupid enough to smash it to freedom. Knowing it had to happen sometime and probably delighted to discover that someone was Buffy and that she'd done so because she'd missed the dead lover it had so delighted in mocking.

“Bloody hell,” the Spike-thing had said, whirling around with wide eyes—still *his* eyes—and gawking at her. “What the—”

But that was as far as Buffy had let it get before she'd yelled at it to get fuck out and bolted for her bedroom. Another stupid move. It wasn't like she could hide from the evil she'd let loose in her apartment. And, *god*, she definitely couldn't let Dawn come home and find the First not only back but wearing Spike's face. She knew that, knew this was her problem now and she had to deal with it, but the thought of going back out there was too much on top of everything else she'd been through tonight. Or, hey, the better part of the last decade.

It took longer than she thought it would, but eventually, she heard the Spike-thing say her name. The sound came out soft, steeped in a combination of confusion and concern that made her stomach twist, and right on the other side of the closed door. She didn't reply, but that wasn't enough. It never was. Just like everything else she did.

“Buffy,” he said again in that heavy, weighted voice. “I dunno what happened back there. Know what you must be thinking, though. And it's not that. Not the First.”

“Fuck off.”

“If I knew where to go or had the first sodding clue what to do, I would. Maybe... Balls, I don't know.”

Give credit where credit was due—the thing certainly sounded like Spike. Or Spike enough, which was almost weirder, for the parts that didn't sound like him managed to do so in a way that did. The hesitation, the words, the pitch of his voice as he delivered them, everything was what she would imagine the

true Spike might say in this scenario if he'd stopped tiptoeing around her. If he'd found confidence in the version of himself she always knew he could grow into.

But she hadn't seen that. They had never had the chance.

A moment and no response later, the Spike-thing apparently tired of pretending that doors were actual barriers for incorporeal beings, though he kept the performance part going till the end. Blinking in surprise at his surroundings, or perhaps that the trick had worked at all, and taking a look around the room that she had yet to truly make hers with interest too intent to be called casual.

Then he stopped taking stock of her miserable bedroom and met her eyes, showering her in all the concern she'd heard in his voice. And though it was stupid—beyond stupid, in fact—something inside of Buffy sat up and took note.

The First had done the whole ghost routine, appearing as Cassie to Willow and Mom to Dawn, putting on Academy Award-winning performances to satisfy its ends and then gloating amid the damage and the hurt and the doubt it had managed to sow among its enemies. With Buffy, though, it had always been straightforward. Boastful and cocky and delivering the evil monologues, delighting in the knowledge that it had her exactly where it wanted her. All big-picture view of the coming storm.

And it had been pitch perfect. Enough that Dawn, even now, remained convinced that she had been visited by the ghost of Joyce Summers and not just another pit-stop of Sunnydale's last Big Bad.

"Suppose there's no point in me tellin' you things only you and I would know," the Spike-thing said, sounding defeated. "The First knew what buttons to push. No secrets for the dead, and what all."

Buffy nodded absently, not even aware she was doing it until the scene before her bobbed with the movement. And then came another swell—anger and hatred and grief, both at the First and herself for even playing along for a second. For finding anything it said reasonable. For her stupid brain and stupider heart trying to discover a loophole that would give her reason to think any of this wasn't exactly what it was.

Only no, that wasn't right. The First had known what it observed, what it deduced, what it gleaned from the people it fooled into thinking they were talking to something else. It hadn't known what Buffy planned to do when she and the girls had attacked the Hellmouth that morning, or about the amulet itself. It hadn't been able to read minds, or had it? God, even now, she wasn't sure what all it had had the power to do—where its knowledge had stemmed from, where its limitations existed. Faith had told her that the First had claimed to be everything, the entity, the concept of evil itself plus the people whose faces it borrowed. It had been as close to omniscient as anything she'd ever encountered on this planet but not entirely. Not enough, at least, to see its

objective fulfilled.

So no, it hadn't known everything. Just enough to make the difference between knowledge and guesswork negligible. The one thing it hadn't been able to do, hadn't been able to sustain, at least, was compassion. Not without showing its hand.

The absence of everything Spike had told her in that house the night they had spent together when the world seemed to be crumbling down around them. Saying the things they had carefully avoided saying for months but still holding back because, well, they had both been hurt and were both afraid of hurt. Afraid of what they could do to each other and themselves. And Buffy hadn't stopped being afraid until their hands had been linked by fire, and it had been too late.

If this was the First, it would be unmasked by compassion.

"Tell me why," Buffy started, forcing herself to speak through the rasp that had taken residence in her throat. "If you're Spike, tell me why. For real. Why did you say that after I... After everything?"

She thought she would have to wait. She didn't.

"Cause I believed it," he said, and dropped his gaze from hers. "Dunno what else to say."

"You...believed it."

"Yeah."

"That I just...what, said it as a thank you? Do you really think that little of me?"

"Not a thank you. Not a bloody thank you," he retorted, scowling a very Spike scowl and bringing his head up once more. "I knew you felt something. Knew it was strong, too, else you would've staked me a thousand bloody times over by then. Maybe even love in that moment, seein' what you saw, understanding that I wasn't gonna leave that cavern with you. You love with everything you are, always have, and you don't say things you don't mean."

"Then *why*?"

"I don't know." His voice had grown harsher, rougher. The way it always did when he was frustrated or struggling to find the words he needed, the ones that would make her understand. "Just felt too easy, is all. I go and win back my soul, manage to get you to keep from staking me long enough to pity me, worm my way back inside, and all I have to do is save the world once to get you to love me?"

"Don't say it like that."

"Like what?"

"Like it was nothing! Like saving the world is something anyone can do."

"Compared to what I did to you?" Spike replied, this time with a little indignant huff that made her heart hurt. It was all him. All so very him, and if it wasn't, then it was the cruelest trick that had ever been played on her, making her want it and hate it at the same time. "I never dared, Buffy. Not once. Never

dared think that being with you could be like that. Maybe before I popped off to sodding Africa with nothin' more than some half-cocked idea that I could patch things up real nice like once I found that missing piece, but after? It wasn't a parlor trick, and it wasn't anything that could ever be made right. That was why I wasn't even all that cross when I saw you snogging Angel. It hurt, yeah, but compared to the hurt I caused? Drop in the bloody water."

"Wow. You sure have a high opinion of yourself, don't you?" Buffy crossed her arms, straightening her spine. "You really think you hurt me more than anyone else?"

"No. Yes. Bollocks, Slayer, I don't know what you want me to say. I was just another monster in a life that's bloody full of them."

Well, if nothing else, her doubts were fading again. Even on its very best day, putting on its very best performance, the First could only hope to aggravate her the way the real Spike did. "And this is why you didn't believe me when I said I love you."

He rolled his eyes, and that clinched it. Banished the last of the uncertainty the way nothing else could, for no one *but* Spike would make that expression in a conversation like this.

"I believed you meant it," he said, and held up a hand before she could throw his own argument back in his face. "I believed you meant it *then*. In the moment. You looked at me, and what I saw was love. I just didn't think it'd last for rot if I managed to live. At least not the way I wanted—the way I'll always want. Not the way I love you."

"So you're deciding what is and isn't love now."

He'd let her get away with it once. Twice was asking too much, and she knew it. Which was why when he narrowed his eyes and drawled, "Don't think you're exactly one to make that argument with me, Slayer," she had no recourse but to sit there and look at him, even if all of her was burning with the need to lash back with an argument she didn't have.

But then, Buffy had never let a little thing like being wrong stop her in the past. "Do you have any idea what it's like living with that? Thinking that you sent the man you love to die, and he didn't even know what it meant to you?"

Spike's eyes softened. "I knew what it meant."

"What *you* meant to me, then?"

"Not gonna have this fight with you. I can't make it better. Can't make that *not* what I thought in that moment. And were I granted the power, there are a few things higher on the bloody list than giving myself the sendoff you thought I should have." He sighed, his shoulders drooping. "This mean you believe me, at least? That I'm not the sodding First?"

"The First would be a bit more direct in trying to hurt me, so yeah. I believe you."

He lifted his eyes to her again, his own tired. All of him looking about as

exhausted as she had ever seen him. And it hit again, the way it hadn't before, that this wasn't some crack in her psyche, the result of another long day in an endless line of them. She'd broken the amulet and Spike had come out. Spike, whom she'd lost. Whom she'd spent nearly a year wishing for just so she could finally address all the wrongs that had been left unrighted, and her first attempt had been nothing but an exercise in self-pity. The confirmation that what she'd feared the most had been true, yes, but also the chance to make it untrue.

"I'm sorry," she said, the words raspy in her throat. "I'm... Spike, I'm so sorry."

"For what?"

"Just...for all of it. You're right. It was a lot to put on the end. It's just... I think that's the moment I realized it too. That I loved you. And it was too late for me to say it. I knew you had no reason to believe me. I just hoped you would anyway." She licked her lips and sighed, landing her gaze on a patch of floor. "It wasn't easy. None of it has been. And I just..."

But that was all she had in her. The words ran out. When it came to the things she needed to say, it seemed they always did.

The room remained quiet a long beat—long enough for Buffy's sense of reality to begin to warp again. Whatever he was, specter or fragment or memory, he was what Spike had never managed to be in life. Still and silent, and just absent. No familiar tingles along the back of her neck, no magnetic pull of her body toward his, no awareness that seemed to seep down to the molecular level that made it impossible to fully relax when he was around because some part of her was always screaming *Spike*. He had a presence she'd never *not* felt, and not feeling it now when he was in the room with her, not even catching a glimpse of ethereal otherlight or something that would make the slayer part of her think *ghost* made it hard not to start wondering again.

Only she knew he was there. This was too hard, too unpretty for anything other than brutal reality.

"I'm sorry, too," he said finally. "It... Buffy, it never occurred to me that I'd ever be anyone you'd mourn."

She tried to hide her wince but wasn't quick enough, and she heard his answering sigh even if the air around them remained still.

"Balls, that didn't—"

"No, it's fine. It's honest. That's something I could always count on from you. Honesty." She hesitated then raised her gaze back to his, a shudder trembling through her. "We need to figure this out. The whole you-being-here thing. What happened with that amulet."

He offered a half smile that had no business breaking her heart but did anyway. The thing was too fragile these days. She'd need to work on building back the wall that she'd somehow let fall into bad enough disrepair that just anything could scale it.

“Might be worried if anyone but you were on the case,” he told her.

“It’s different now. Everything’s different.”

“You’re not different. All that matters, I expect.”

Buffy looked away and swallowed. “I am different, though. It’s not like it was in Sunnydale.”

“It’s still *you*, Slayer. Geography doesn’t change who you are inside.” He was quiet again, then the colors that made up her periphery shifted, and she saw him moving toward her. Turning to sit beside her on the bed—which, yes, made her brain go off-kilter again with a thousand rapid-fire questions that had no answer, like was he actually sitting and why and how did he keep from just falling through the mattress—but there all the same. That flicker that refused to go out.

“I guess we’ll see,” she muttered, first to herself then to him when she realized she’d spoken aloud. “Can you...stay here tonight?”

“Dunno where else I’d go.”

She didn’t either, but she didn’t want to slow down long enough to acknowledge it. “It might be better if you just kept to my room, too. Just until we know what’s going on. Dawn might—”

But she didn’t need to say it. Spike was nodding, his hands raised. “Understood.”

Buffy relaxed and offered a small smile she didn’t feel. It wasn’t until later, once she’d moved to the kitchen again to start rummaging around for something to eat, that it occurred to her what was wrong with all this. The reason behind the shifting, the sense of displacement that felt both personal and not at the same time. And that was that something was missing. Something specific and undefinable—the crucial piece that kept them connected when logic and reason would have had them severed. It was what had nearly gotten him killed the previous year, what had brought him to her the night everyone had kicked her out of the house, what had given her strength to go fight Caleb and claim what was hers. What had snapped her back to her senses when she’d been with Angel and reminded her of who she was now rather than who she had once been.

There was no way to tell whether it was truly gone, of course, considering she didn’t know how to measure *it* in the first place. Hell, she didn’t even know what it was called.

Only that it wasn’t here. And if that really was Spike in there, she didn’t know how to get it back.



Buffy’s experience with ghosts was rather limited. She wasn’t certain, for instance, if Spike could just follow her into London and into the New Council, or

if he was confined to the space in which she'd busted open the amulet. If he was only visible to her, or if other people could see him as well. There was no good way to test that until she arrived at the train, where some underpaid transit staff member had yelled at Spike for not having a proper ticket. So, one item crossed off the list. She hadn't finally snapped and was talking to a hallucination of her dead vampire not-boyfriend. One that talked back. He was there, and other people could see him, too.

Also, vampire ghosts were not subject to the same rules as regular vampires. Spike stood in direct sunlight with nary a hint of flame, though he winced on what she assumed was instinct before relaxing again with a somewhat sheepish expression that made her heart hurt and her sinuses burn.

Somehow, though, she managed to push that back. Push everything back. She needed to be academic about this.

This resolve lasted all the way until the New Council office building was in sight, and all the things that had been crowding in her head since last night began screaming again. Only louder now. Answers more imminent. She hadn't been living with what-ifs for long—barely twelve hours—but with her nerves as frayed as they were, and her emotions having been left marathoning all night, it felt like decades had passed since Andrew's debriefing.

"I know I said this is an office, but it's really nothing special," she heard herself telling Spike as she fumbled for her keys. She typically wasn't the first one on the premises, but her body hadn't seen fit to let her sleep long enough to wear out her alarm clock's snooze button, and she'd decided it might be better to be early so she had time to gather her bearings. Dawn had thankfully been asleep still, which had helped avoid that awkward conversation for at least another day. She'd much rather do the whole *Spike's un-un-undead* reveal when she knew what the hell she was talking about. "The Council had a lot of money but we're trying to be a little conservative in the spending, especially since we still don't know how many girls were activated in that spell. So right now, it's just this."

Just this was the dumpy three-offices-plus-a-receptionist area that comprised the New Council. It looked like a dentist's waiting office circa 1987, only without the coffee table and the wide but tasteful selection of out-of-date magazines. Andrew had petitioned to add an actual water cooler just before his mission to the States, which was about as fancy as they were liable to get with so much still in the air.

"It's nice," Spike said, clearly lying, as she flipped on the overly bright fluorescents and flooded the place. "Who all's here?"

"Right now, just me, Andrew, and Giles. We have a training facility, too, in the Harringay Warehouse District. The girls who chose to come to London after we made contact spend their days there." Buffy paused, waited for him to ask, then went on when he didn't. "Faith and Kennedy are heading the training

part.”

Spike, who had been studying whatever their receptionist hadn't locked away the night before, swung his head up and blinked. “You're not involved?”

“Giles seems to think I'm more useful here.”

Which begged the question, now that she'd said it aloud, why the hell she was doing what Giles had told her to do. A question she saw clearly reflected in Spike's eyes when their gazes met again, though he didn't voice it. Just regarded her with a frown and turned his attention back to the receptionist's desk as though there was anything interesting written there.

“I did just recover a slayer from LA,” Buffy said hurriedly, more to fill the quiet than anything else. Spike holding back his thoughts made her feel more self-conscious than if he'd launched into a lecture. It wasn't like him—not post-soul and definitely not pre-soul—and the silence he wasn't rushing to pack with sound was grating. “That's part of what I do now. A lot, actually. When you flip the switch on girls all over the world, you learn that some of them were not in good places to be flipped. This girl, Dana... It was a bad situation that could've gone a lot worse.” Could have gone better, too, but Buffy didn't want to bring up the Angel of it all just yet. “We were thankfully able to track her down and get her somewhere safe.”

Or safer, at least. Buffy wasn't sure anywhere was safe.

“I know it's not... None of this is what I thought I'd be doing when I came here,” she said, still speaking at a clip. “It's just, you know, stuff that needs to be done. And I'm the one who made the decision to change all these girls' lives, so shouldn't it be me doing the cleanup?”

Spike brought his eyes back to hers again, not bothering to hide his confusion. “What are you on about, love?”

“You're just being really weird.”

“*I'm* being weird?”

“Yes.” No further explanation needed. It was what it was. “Not like you.”

At this, the confusion hardened into something that *was* familiar, thank god. He rolled his eyes and threw his shoulders back with a hard groan. “Dunno what exactly you expect of me. I'm supposed to be dead and I'm not. Not exactly alive, either, and spent half the sodding night tryin' to convince you I'm not the thing that I died trying to stop. If I—”

The door behind them swung open, carrying with it a voice Buffy had never thought she'd be happy to hear, but she'd decided she was wrong, actually, and she preferred a Spike who didn't want to lecture her, and Andrew being here meant he wouldn't have the chance. Not right now, at least. There were bigger fish to fry. Like the whole *how is Spike here at all* fish. And she was eager to get the fire going.

She swung around in time to watch as Andrew's annoyingly chipper-for-this-early face went slack, and as Giles, not realizing he'd stopped dead,

collided into him without ceremony. He immediately started cursing, nudging Andrew by the shoulder, and growing increasingly irritated the longer he went ignored, and not bothering to look around him until Andrew drew in a shrill breath that Buffy would swear registered as soprano.

Then he began spouting nonsense.

“Oh, Spike, I knew you wouldn’t be able to stay away!”

Not that nonsense was all that unusual for Andrew. Only this nonsense seemed even more nonsensical than his usual nonsense.

Spike blinked in clear wordless agreement. “Well, I sure as hell didn’t.”

“Like you could really *not* come after Buffy. What kind of sense did that make?” Beaming, Andrew swept forward with his arms outstretched, practically prancing his way across the room, and—before Buffy could think to warn him—promptly gliding right through the vampire and crashing into the watercooler hard enough the thankfully mostly empty water jug went thumping to the floor, splashing its remaining contents onto the carpet. Something that she was sure she’d laugh at during future retellings, but her funny bone still had some healing to do before it could be of use.

“Buffy,” Giles breathed from behind her. “What on earth...”

But Andrew was on his feet, his eyes wide and wilder than before. The goofy half-in-love look gone too, replaced with pure and utter confusion. “Is it a hologram?” he asked the room, stepping closer to look Spike up and down. “It’s very good if it is. Where’s he projecting from?”

“Projecting?” Buffy repeated. A dull ringing filled her ears and without warning, her heart started to pound as though her body knew something she didn’t. “I don’t understand.”

Andrew waved his hand through Spike, who scowled and stepped back. “Wanna keep your parts to yourself, mate?”

“I don’t see any light source, either,” Andrew mused as though he hadn’t heard. “Seriously, how are you doing this? Did Angel set it up?”

“Angel?” Buffy’s heart skipped. “What does Angel have to do with anything?”

At that, Andrew finally pulled his attention away from Spike to favor Buffy with a frown. “I don’t get it,” he said, then laughed a little. His nervous laugh. The laugh she hated most. “How else would Spike be here?”

The question made no sense. Buffy looked at Spike to see if he understood, but his brow was furrowed in clear confusion. That didn’t make her feel any better. Nor did the expression on Giles’s face—something between grim and resigned. Like he’d come to a conclusion, or worse, made a decision.

“Spike came out of the amulet,” Buffy said, turning back to Andrew. The only person who seemed to have the slightest idea of what might be happening. Only the second the words hit the air, his face fell, too, the elation vanishing, leaving nothing but wide-eyed astonishment behind. “I broke it. I don’t know

why, it was just an impulse. Then *ploop*, out came Spike. Only like this.”

“Ploop?” Spike echoed, arching an eyebrow. But she caught some warmth in his gaze that went a long way to calming her racing heart. It was the first expression that had felt genuinely like him.

“Maybe there was no ploop, but there was definitely you. All go-through-able.”

“Like the First, you mean,” Giles said.

“No, we already figured out he’s not the First.” Or Spike had said a bunch of things and Buffy, beaten down by grief and shock and more yearning than she could begin to put into words, had seized on those things and held. Regardless, she was confident that much was correct. “I think he was sucked into the amulet—”

“Which you received, how?” Giles demanded, pulling his gaze off Spike long enough to glare at her. “Last I heard, it was buried under Sunnydale.”

“Andrew brought it back from L.A.”

“Oh no,” Andrew said, spurred into motion by the sound of his name. He hopped away from Spike as though he was radioactive. “Oh, no, this is not good.”

“What?”

“I didn’t know it would do this!” He waved at Spike, trembling from head to toe. “I just thought you should have something. He was acting like he wasn’t going to come back, and I couldn’t make him, but I also promised not to tell. I’m trying very hard to keep my promises now, and it’s not like he made it easy on me!”

“Who?” Buffy snapped. Her heart had started pounding again, this time echoing in her ears. “Andrew, who are you talking about?”

“Spike! I’m talking about Spike.” He turned to her, panting. “He’s alive, Buffy. In Los Angeles. I saw him.”

Buffy’s insides ran cold. Like arctic cold. “What?” she asked, her voice sounding a million miles away.

“I mean *Spike’s alive*,” Andrew said fervently. “He’s working with Angel for some reason and he’s definitely not a...not-hologram or ghost. He’s alive. I saw him two days ago. I don’t know who *this* is, but it’s an imposter.”

WHAT THE HELL AM I DOING HERE?

Imposter.

It was stupid to feel betrayed. To feel pain. To feel anything. It was stupid to have gotten her hopes up at all—to even entertain the thought that maybe she could get a third chance to do something right when she'd made such a fucking mess of the first two. Still, there was that familiar pang, and it brought friends. Stabbed into her again and again until her legs went numb and her hands went numb and all of her went numb.

She'd thought it last night. Had rushed into her bedroom to put distance, however artificial, between herself and the Spike-thing. Listened to it speak in his voice while wearing his face and saying words that sounded Spike-like enough to pass the smell test but knowing, *feeling*, on a gut level that something was wrong. Something was *off*. And the truth was her first instinct had been on the money. She was the idiot who had let herself believe.

"I am not a bloody imposter!" the Spike-thing was saying—snarling—when the white noise in Buffy's head began to quieten again. "What the hell are you on about? You *saw* me in LA?"

"I did!" Andrew squeaked, backing away from the Spike-thing—though to what end, she had no idea. It wasn't like it could do anything to him. Unless that was more stupidity talking. God, she'd gone to sleep with whatever-it-was in her apartment. Felt *comforted* by the knowledge it was there. If there was a denser slayer in history, Buffy would hate to meet her.

Then the penny dropped and she heard, truly for the first time, everything else Andrew had said.

The part about Spike being alive.

"I saw you," Andrew continued, damn near tripping over his own feet as he back-pedaled toward the door. "You were working with Angel. I thought it was mega weird but—"

"Like hell!" The Spike-thing's eyes flashed exactly the same way Spike's did. His jaw tightened in the same way, too. "You see some bloke wearing my face and palling around with Angel and it doesn't bloody occur to you to ask what I'm doin' there?"

"I did ask! I so asked!" Andrew whipped his head to Buffy, his lower lip

beginning to wobble. “I asked. And he asked. About you, I mean. If you knew he was alive and that he didn’t want you to. Something about how he went up in a blaze of glory and it’d be really hard to top that exit.”

The Spike-thing snorted and rolled his eyes. “Bollocks.”

“I mean, I thought it was super weird and everything because hello, the man’s stupid in love with you, but he made me promise not to tell you that he was alive. And I knew that’d be, like, really hard because you’re my boss and I know you’ve been seriously bummed ever since he died.” Andrew swallowed. “That’s actually why I went to find the amulet. Like... I couldn’t bring you Spike but maybe I could bring you the thing that... Yeah, none of this sounds good, does it?”

“Sounds exactly the way it should,” the Spike-thing growled. “Like a load of rot.”

Andrew looked back at him and seemed to find a helping of courage—at least enough to puff out his chest and stick his chin in the air. “I touched him, okay? When I saw he was there, I hugged him and touched his face and it was *definitely* Spike.”

The Spike-thing grimaced and took a step back, himself. “So this ghost gig does come with its perks. Good to know.”

“Oh, but that reminds me!” Andrew whipped his focus back to Buffy. “Spike. He said he was a ghost.”

Buffy’s world just kept turning over on itself, and she was too overwhelmed to follow it. Spike here. Spike not here. Spike in Los Angeles. Spike *alive* and not coming home. Not even calling. Just letting her believe he was dead. Letting her live with those last words between them and nothing more. And now a ghost. Again.

The most she could offer was a hoarse, “What?”

“Spike. He was a ghost. When he came out...” Andrew’s already buggy eyes went even buggier. “Holy guacamole, he came out of the *amulet*. Buffy, he came out of the *amulet*.” He whirled back to Spike, regarding him with renewed wonder. “And you came out of the amulet. Like a mystical copy machine.”

“I am not a sodding copy!”

“Well, what else makes sense?”

“It could still be the First,” Giles said softly, and though Buffy had been waiting for it, she couldn’t help but flinch. “The First is not a being that can be killed in the traditional sense. It was bound to return at some point, less powerful but no less cunning. Assuming Spike’s visage would be an excellent way to slip past Buffy’s guard.”

“Oi!” Spike moved like a blur, on one side of the room one second and the next in Giles’s face. “You think that wasn’t the first thing that came outta her mouth last night? The first thing she thought?”

“I am sure she considered it, but the fact that she didn’t call me immediate-

ly—”

“Just means that you’re *still* not used to not being the big man. Are you forgetting you lot tossed her out of her own fucking *house*? Ever apologize for that? For showin’ just how much you think of the sacrifices she’s made to keep you alive and this miserable world spinning?” Spike—and Buffy realized with a jolt she *was* thinking of him as Spike again, *god* this was so confusing—barked a hard laugh and shook his head. “You pissed away being the one she trusts and haven’t done a bloody thing to earn any of it back, have you?”

Giles didn’t respond, but he didn’t need to. The answer was in his eyes, in the tightening of his jaw and the movement of his throat as he swallowed. Everything boiling over—arguments and discussions and feelings and resentments that had been there beneath the surface for months, ever since taking those first tentative steps after the last apocalypse. All the things they had pretended were settled were not; they had just been waiting for someone to acknowledge them again.

And Buffy hadn’t. After the fight, she hadn’t had the strength. She’d lost too much to lose any more, and provoking old tensions in a world made new again had seemed fruitless. If she didn’t watch herself, she’d wind up alone. Only no vampire to come seek her out this time, tell her that she was right, that she didn’t need to give and give and give in order to get. That she was the one.

“He’s not the First,” she heard herself say, not realizing she meant to speak or even that she entirely believed it until the words were there, out in the air between them. But once she started, she couldn’t stop. “I know Spike, Giles. And I got to know the First pretty well, too. He’s not it.”

There was a beat, then Giles slowly pulled his gaze off Spike to meet hers. “And this other Spike? The one Andrew encountered in Los Angeles?”

“I don’t know. Maybe that one’s the imposter.”

“I don’t think so,” Andrew said, raising his hands when Buffy turned to glare at him. “Just the messenger here, sorry, and I know you know Spike better than I do, but if that *wasn’t* Spike, I don’t think he knew it.”

That angry throbby place behind her eyes started to pulse once more, and Buffy didn’t have the energy to fight it this time, rather sank, defeated, into the empty receptionist’s chair and dropped her face into her hands. Flashes of thought tried to break through the fog that started to settle, the memory of two Xanders laughing uproariously into each other’s faces, of a robot bearing her likeness staring back at her through lifeless eyes, of Warren Mears swearing sideways that he wasn’t Warren or the First, but in fact Willow. That Spike could be right in front of her without a body while also on the other side of the planet wasn’t impossible. In their world, impossible didn’t exist.

But it still hurt. Even if Spike was with her now, he also wasn’t. He was alive in this world, and he hadn’t thought to let her know. He’d decided, like everyone else in her life, that she was too difficult to love. And the real bitch of it was she

was actually surprised. She'd told him what she thought of herself—how she kept everyone at arm's length. How she was unattainable, how she didn't let anyone in, and how he should know that better than anyone. And then he'd gone and told her that she was wrong, that her weaknesses and her darkness and every bad thing she'd ever thought about herself were part of the whole that made her *the one*. The one he could look at and know inside and out, could love despite the bad and the ugly, maybe even because of it, as he saw everything else as well. How she didn't let that darkness define her, how she fought back, how desperate she was to be more than her worst parts. He'd given her strength to stand up against insurmountable odds. He'd given her love without asking for it. He'd given her his whole damn self.

And maybe that was the problem. Before, Buffy had always considered Spike the one constant—the person she could always expect to find at her side, no matter what was going on with them. Even after the bathroom. Spike always found his way back to Sunnydale, to her, and that was just the way of things. Their way. He left and returned and left and returned and each time was painful and difficult but it was also them, and she relied on it almost as much as she did the oxygen that filled her lungs and the gravity that kept her tethered to the earth. If Spike wasn't with her, it was because he was somewhere where he couldn't reach her. Dead. Dust. Gone.

Not in LA. LA was not out of reach. They had phones in LA. She should know—she'd lived there once.

“Do you have the amulet, Buffy?”

The question seemed to come from very far away, but when she looked up, she was still in the office. Her office in London, and everyone was looking at her.

Including Spike.

Was he wishing he'd spilled out somewhere else? Was that why everything between them felt so strained? Could it be that the love he'd once professed had burned up along with him on the Hellmouth? A nice monkey's paw twist on the fervent wish she'd been sending out to the universe since that first night she'd gone to sleep without him. Give her back the man she hadn't loved in time only without the part of him that loved her in return.

“Buffy.” Giles's voice again, firmer this time. “Do you still have the amulet? You didn't throw it out, did you?”

Buffy blinked slowly, her head swimming. She hadn't thrown it out, she didn't think, but she couldn't say at the moment. The last clear memory she had of the thing, it had been on her countertop in a sea of sparkly shards. Had Dawn seen that this morning? Had she asked questions? Had she swept all the bits together before shooing them into the trash?

“It's in the apartment,” Buffy said flatly. She couldn't feel her legs but thankfully that didn't stop them from working. In seconds, she was on her feet

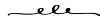
again, moving in a daze toward the door. “Trash day isn’t until Friday, so even if one of us did throw it away, it should still be there. I’ll go check.”

“Buffy,” Spike said, coming toward her. But that was all he said, and though it had no business doing so, it broke her heart.

She was used to him trailing after her no matter what. So much so his absence had felt like an amputation these months that he’d been gone. And still did as she stepped into the sun, where he could follow her but hadn’t.

Somehow, she was more alone than she had been since before he’d died.

If that wasn’t ironic, she didn’t know what was.



Spike didn’t fear the sun. He never had, and he wasn’t about to start now when he couldn’t feel anything, let alone warmth or pain. It was an obstacle, a challenge, a dare, a daily way to flirt with death. Except it wasn’t even that at the moment. It simply was.

And since the sun wasn’t presently an obstacle, a challenge, or a dare, it would have been so easy to follow her. He didn’t. Couldn’t say why, exactly, except the look on Buffy’s face had given him pause. Like she needed time or he needed... He didn’t know. Only he did, because the sense of *wrong* that had clung to him the night before hadn’t done anything but intensify and he wagered she felt it, too. He’d never been good at hiding things from her.

So despite the urge, the *desire* to trail after her, fill her ears with a load of reassurances he had sod-all evidence to support, Spike turned to Andrew, who worked his throat with the sort of gulping sound you usually only caught in cartoons and the like.

But this wasn’t a cartoon. It was his life—his afterlife, at least—and he was owed answers.

“Tell me about the bloke you saw in Los Angeles,” Spike said slowly. “Start from the top.”

Andrew shifted his weight between his feet and glanced at Rupert as though seeking permission. Rupert, however, didn’t so much as flinch in his direction, keeping his gaze firmly on Spike.

“It was...you,” Andrew replied when it became clear he wasn’t going to be told not to. “You were fighting with Angel when you came in.”

Well, at least that part didn’t sound made up. “What about?”

“There was a girl in Los Angeles. One of the ones that was switched on with the save-the-world spell. It was why I was there, actually. To get to her before Angel did.” Andrew paused and again looked at Giles, who remained stoic. “She’s kinda *loco*, this slayer, which made her extra dangerous. So naturally, Giles sent his top man to do the job.”

That finally got a rise out of him. “Quite,” Giles said with a sigh. “My list of

options was an embarrassment of riches.”

But Andrew continued as though he had not heard, and perhaps he had not. Or perhaps Spike’s vampire hearing had been preserved in spirit form. Didn’t seem to matter, either way. “Apparently,” Andrew said, “you—or that Spike—and Angel had just gone out to try to find her and you—*Spike*—were all in a tizzy because you didn’t realize she was a slayer when you fought and—”

A laugh erupted from Spike’s throat, harsh and surprised but genuine, and *Christ*, it felt good to laugh after the circus that had been the sum of his experience since he’d whirled into being in Buffy’s flat. For the idea that there existed a version of him that wouldn’t know a slayer when he saw it was more than ludicrous—it was bloody insulting.

“Something funny?” Giles asked in one of his deceptively soft tones.

“Just my life, I suppose. Can’t even die the right way.” Spike snickered again, the thought tickling his incorporeal funny bone in such a way he doubted he’d find relief anytime soon. But hell, it *was* funny, wasn’t it? His entire existence had followed this line. Wasn’t a proper vampire ever, according to his own family, and he hadn’t even managed to return back from the dead with the same dignity as those who had come before him. Instead, there was some pillock out on the other side of the planet wearing his face and pushing the idea that William the Bloody wouldn’t know a slayer when she was using him as a punching bag, and doing a decent enough job of it that not even *Andrew* had been able to sniff out that something was wrong. Furthermore, had the ponce believing that there was a world, any world, in which Spike would subject himself to Angel’s company when Buffy existed out there somewhere. No matter what she thought of him, no matter what he was to her, he belonged by her side. That was all he knew, all that made sense. Moreover, all he wanted, even if the last few hours had taken his head for a spin.

“What do you recall?” Giles went on, ever the academic. Or ever the something-or-other.

“About what?”

“Any of it.”

He lifted a shoulder. “World came down, lights went out, and the next thing I know it’s as I said. Dunno where the hell I am except Buffy was there. No gap, no in-between. Just goes from one to the next.”

“Mhmm. And how do you feel?”

That time, Spike didn’t answer, and not only because he knew that the watcher truly didn’t give a damn. It was simply too close to unveiling the thing he’d spent the morning trying to smother. Sure, he’d have to face it eventually, but he wasn’t keen on doing it now. With someone who wasn’t Buffy.

He didn’t need anyone else knowing just yet that something was really wrong.

It hadn’t occurred to him until after Buffy had fallen asleep last night, the rush of things he was feeling that were both foreign and familiar. At first, he’d

thought it a likely response to being something other than dead—jerked as he had been from the ever-after and crudely plopped back into the world he had tried to sacrifice himself to save. He'd sat on the floor of the Slayer's bedroom, listening to the soft rhythm of her breaths, envying her the sleep that wouldn't find him—what use did a ghost have of shut-eye?—and taken inventory of himself, trying to get a feel for the specter he knew as Spike. Suss out the pieces that were missing.

He'd started with what he knew to be true. His name, where he'd been born, his mum, the comedy of errors that had seen him stumbling his way across more than a century, eventually landing in Sunnydale where his life had changed forever. Those bits were there. All of them. So he'd shifted his attention to the last days he'd been alive. The most accessible emotions ought to be the most recent ones, yeah? The rush of pure bloody hope when Buffy proclaimed she wasn't ready to see the back of him, how he'd tried not to get too excited when he caught the jealous glare she'd shot his way after discovering him and Faith cozy on his basement cot. How he'd entered some abandoned house, found her licking her wounds, and determined his role was to instill his belief in her *into* her, that if he could do that, maybe he was worth something after all. How he hadn't known to expect the best night of his life and definitely not a Buffy who, the next day, would refuse to let him downplay the significance of that intimacy.

Then...Angel. Spike remembered that, too. How he'd trailed after Buffy to the vineyard, desperate to continue the conversation he'd been daft enough to walk out on, follow the crumbs she'd dropped for him, see if there truly was a world in which they could discuss *them* as an actual option. If perhaps loving her wouldn't always be as lonely an endeavor as it had been these last years. And for his troubles, he'd caught her touching reunion with the specter that had haunted him since his rebirth.

And then pain. Bright and burning and toxic. Pain that wanted to consume him, soul and all. He'd gone into the Hellmouth with it, placated somewhat at being her chosen champion but still haunted by the fear that he was second best. Second choice. Even some darker thoughts that he'd worked like hell to banish, like he was the sacrificial lamb so she could go snuggle up with Angel after.

That hadn't been fair or accurate, and he'd known it. But knowing a thought was wrong didn't make it any less present, especially when it was steeped in more than a century of doubts and insecurity.

And that, *remembering* that, was when it had hit him. He was remembering these things but not *feeling* them. The doubt and insecurity he'd died with had not come out of the amulet with him. They were just gone. Gone as if they had never been there at all. No sensitive area to tread, no mental place that was still tender but healing, no ghosts or phantoms or anything but the memory of what he'd felt when he'd died.

He'd wondered at it, worried about it, thought it might be a part of being a ghost or whatever he was, separate from his body and its tendency to feel emotional discomfort.

But now... If there was another Spike... And if he *was* indeed also Spike...

"Dunno how I feel," he said at last, which he figured was as true as a lie could be. He knew how he *had* felt, knew how he *should* feel, and had only the faintest idea why those feelings were even less tangible than he was. "Just that... What did he think she was?" Spike turned to Andrew so fast the little git started. "You said that this other me, the thick one, didn't know the girl you were there to find was a slayer. He have any theories?"

It took a moment for the question to land in Andrew's eyes, for it to be clear he knew exactly what Spike was asking, but he became an explosion of animation once it did. "I don't know for certain what he thought she was—all of that happened before he saw me. But he and Angel got into a fight about who went after her, and you...Spike...*that* Spike was all, 'I know slayers!' and Angel was all, 'You didn't even know this was a slayer!' And that Spike said something like, 'Excuse me, I didn't recognize it without you trying to shag her!' and he said, 'You're one to talk!' and it went back and forth like that for a while until that former watcher guy stepped in and said they were acting like children."

"But the punchline doesn't change," Spike replied, deadpan. "He didn't know she was a slayer. This other me."

Rupert groaned. "You are not about to let that go, are you?"

"Would you?" Spike shot back. "If you found out there was some speckled berk calling himself Giles but not knowing the difference between tea and hot water?"

"That is irrelevant."

"Yeah, when it's not you." Spike turned back to Andrew, who looked equal parts enthralled and terrified.

"Angel was the one who really...drove it home," he said in a rush. "The other Spike... He was kinda cranky about it. But he did ask about Buffy, like I mentioned earlier. If she knew he was alive, that he didn't want me to tell her he was alive if she didn't."

"Because he went out in a bloody blaze of glory or some nonsense?"

Andrew shrugged. "It didn't make sense to me, but I was going to do it. Or not do it. Not tell Buffy."

"Why didn't you just tell *him* that she's been missing me? I mean, him?"

"I dunno. It...just seemed like something he wouldn't believe if I said it." There was a beat, then Andrew sighed. "And it's not like Buffy talks to me all the time, you know? We're not exactly besties. Most of the time I think she's just trying to not punch me."

"An affliction that affects us all, I assure you," Rupert intoned.

"Whatever. You said I'm your top man."

“And I believe I already addressed why that is especially tragic.”

Andrew rolled his eyes and returned his attention to Spike. “Like I said, Buffy and I don’t really talk. But I see her here most every day, and she’s not like she was in Sunnydale. Like—she’s still bossy and sometimes bitchy, but she seemed more... I dunno, focused, or something? She comes in, she goes to her office, she makes phone calls, she yells a lot, she orders lunch, and she leaves. I swiped the amulet in case it helped. She didn’t just lose you, you know. She lost, like, everything. And I think she thinks no one knows that.”

Well hell. Maybe Andrew was a mite sharper than he appeared. He concluded that speech by aiming a sideways look in Giles’s direction. A sort of covert *he doesn’t know it* that was more than a little pointed.

Yet it still didn’t do much to answer the question. Why Spike felt the way he did, or didn’t. Why this other plonker was wasting his time playing Angel’s sidekick. Why any of it.

Except if the other Spike was truly Spike, and *he* was truly Spike, then they had themselves a real situation on their hands.

One Spike had fuck all idea how to fix.

DO YOU THINK YOU CAN TELL?

SPIKE HAD A THEORY.

That was good. Buffy had nothing but the empty. The place where shock and excitement and joy and relief and love and worry and heartbreak and grief and devastation had collided—the result of having traversed such immense highs and overwhelming lows without giving herself time and space to think or feel or breathe. She'd come back to headquarters with the amulet, the amulet she had shattered a thousand years ago—*last night*—for a reason she could no longer remember. And because it was her life, rather than closure or satisfaction or *whatever* she'd been looking to find, she'd ended up with a dose of pain at its maximum setting. The thrill of getting everything she'd wanted—hell, had been too terrified to want because what was the point of wanting impossible things?—and then having it yanked away. The wound made fresh. Scabs ripped from skin that hadn't finished healing.

Buffy had thought all the way home. She'd also thought all the way back. She'd convinced herself of things and then talked herself out of those things and started the cycle over again. She'd wondered, she'd hoped, she'd decided maybe there was an explanation, and then she'd asked herself why she was determined to hurt so much. Why was she set on hope when hope was a goddamned bastard that had never done anything for her except kick her when she was down?

But Spike had a theory. Spike in all his ghostiness, his maybe not-Spikeness. He was still there, of course—*the better to torture you with, my dear*—and he'd had enough time to think through what might be behind the mystery that was his continued existence when Andrew had seen Spike alive and well and very much not interested in talking just yesterday. Or the day before. Whatever. It didn't matter.

Except it all mattered, and that was the worst part of it. Everything mattered. There was still further *down* to fall. There always was.

Buffy didn't say anything to anyone. Didn't do much more than nod absently in maybe-Spike's direction as he rattled off his theory, not listening but still catching more than she wanted to catch. Something about how maybe he had been split—that he hadn't been feeling right since last night, not entirely like himself but enough that he knew who he was, and this other Spike in LA,

maybe that was him too. It had happened before, hadn't it? He'd heard about it, the two Xanders and how different they'd been, but only because they were the same parts of a whole.

And goddamn him, that did it. Made the part of her she'd been certain was shuttered and dead stir; made her wonder if maybe it was too soon to call the coroner on hope. That she couldn't know before she knew, and reacting in the moment was exactly how she ended up miserable.

Buffy deposited the amulet on Giles's desk and collapsed into a seat. Any seat. It didn't matter. Nothing was fixed. Everything was broken. Her most of all.

"Dear lord," Giles said from what sounded very far away. "Buffy, you need to hear this."

Of course she did. No pauses for Buffy.

Buffy blinked and did her best to refocus on the present. The office around her that was and wasn't familiar, Andrew sitting at a desk she was pretty sure was hers but not sure enough to yell at him to get out, the maybe-Spike-ghost hovering in the doorway, eyes full of concern and fixed on her. Looking at her the way *he* looked at her and making her feel sicker than she did already. Maybe that was good. If she could feel sicker, she could still feel. Not numb or empty after all.

"What is it?" she asked, not sure what to think when her voice didn't shake.

"Look here. I assume you did not see the inscription."

Clearly, she had not, as she had no idea what he was talking about. "What inscription?"

"It was under the amulet setting," Giles explained, crossing the distance from his desk to where she sat. Then the broken thing was under her nose again, and he was tapping at a series of funky looking figures engraved along the back. "I must assume Angel didn't know about this—although it could explain why he did not insist on wearing it himself."

"What's that, now?" Spike asked, also coming closer because, well, why not? Not like Buffy needed any personal space.

"I have no idea," Buffy intoned, shoving the remains of the amulet back against Giles's chest. "He's doing that thing where he forgets I only know English and not Sumerian."

"It's not Sumerian," Giles replied, "it's Greek."

"It certainly is to me."

Giles rolled his eyes, which awakened a flare of annoyance from underneath all the numb. And hey, she supposed that was something. Maybe in a minute she'd be able to feel her fingers and toes again, too.

"What's it say, Watcher?" Spike demanded, stopping just short of the point where he would have bumped into her if he'd been something other than a phantom. "Can't get a good look at the bloody chicken scratches from this

angle and no one's gettin' any less dead around here.”

“Unfortunately, quite right,” Giles retorted under his breath. “Though I believe this lends credence to your theory.”

At that, Buffy felt her heart do something she wasn't prepared for. It jumped. “Meaning?” she asked, and stood to crowd closer, personal bubble be damned.

“The energy the amulet generated to accomplish what happened in Sunnydale had a specific requirement. You said Angel told you it needed to be worn by a champion?”

“Someone more than human, with a soul, yes.” As if they had a mind of their own, Buffy's eyes flittered toward Spike, caught that they were still fixed on her, the cerulean blue that had haunted her dreams for months now. She remembered how those eyes had widened, the look that had crossed his face when she'd dropped the amulet into his hand. The rightness of the feeling, the moment, not realizing that she had just condemned him to death.

“There are not many creatures who could meet those qualifications,” Giles said. “You could, of course, as well as Angel. And Spike.” He threw Spike a look that was just a shade too dismissive given the weight of what he'd said. “But this was given to Angel specifically, therefore we must assume that the intent was for him to be the one to unlock its potential.”

“If you have a point, now's a great time to get to it,” Buffy said.

“Taken literally, the amulet was designed to separate...*fracture* the essence of the person who wore it.”

“In English, please.”

“You're asking me to draw conclusions based on information I just received,” Giles said through his teeth. It was the version of her watcher she'd come to know best since they'd settled in London. Never mind that he had pretty much demanded that she bask in the glorious news it turned out he couldn't define. “All I can tell you is that this inscription—it reads more like a spell, actually—calls for a sacrifice on behalf of the wielder to channel the energy needed to... Well, I'm assuming what happened in Sunnydale. The hellmouth closed, permanently, because of the power of Spike's sacrifice.”

At some point, not now, Buffy thought she might need to remind Giles he'd said those words. It was the first time she'd heard him plainly acknowledge the events of that final fight in a way that didn't downplay Spike's role in their victory. For the moment, she let it go. What he was saying was too important to derail with yet another rendition of a now-familiar argument.

“The amount of power it took to demolish an entire town is not insubstantial. That has been a question of mine ever since we left.” Giles held up the husk of the amulet and gave it a shake. “This, I believe, explains how. I can't say anything definitively without additional research, but I believe the need for a powerful, ensouled individual was to provide that soul as an exchange. Split down the middle, with the soulless half standing and the soulful half consumed.

The amulet then expelled the soul's energy to purify the area. Purge it of demon influence entirely."

Buffy worked her throat, pinpricks suddenly in motion along her fingers. "You're saying that it *ate* Spike's soul?"

"Rot," Spike spat without hesitation. "I still have my soul, Rupert. I feel it. Not the sort of thing you're likely to misplace without noticing."

"I didn't say you didn't," Giles retorted in the same manner. "I said I believed it was *meant* to fracture the essence of the person who wore it and perform as I described. Once split, one half of the essence would be consumed by the amulet in exchange for its cleansing power, much the same way you were."

"Just one half?" Buffy asked, her heart thumping. "But...all of Spike was gone. Or are you saying there's a Spike still at the Hellmouth?" Either starving to death or already dusted, courtesy of the sun. The thought made her stomach roil.

"Spike was unanticipated. The amulet was given to Angel with the intention that he wield it," Giles said. "What I am trying to convey is that I don't believe it worked the way it *would* have had Wolfram and Hart's plan unfolded as they planned."

"But wouldn't that mean that the law firm meant for Angel to die? Because you take the soul away from Angel and he has demon energy to be purged."

"Perhaps," Giles replied in his I-doubt-it voice. "However, I find it more likely that the amulet itself was meant to provide the wearer with some sort of immunity. There is a protection incantation inscribed under the spell itself."

"Fat load of good that did," Spike muttered. "Suppose then those lawyer gits aimed to give their new CEO an upgrade. Make him more palatable for their lot."

"Soulless," Buffy said without thinking, but also thinking faster and harder than perhaps she ever had. The pieces Giles was dancing around were suddenly starting to take shape, not neatly but in a way she could follow the leaps he was making. The law firm that Angel had assumed control of, one of the final two reasons she had severed ties with him, had handed him this weapon shaped like a piece of jewelry with the belief that he would be the one to wield it. Angel would step up to the plate to cleanse the Hellmouth, not knowing the soul was the price. The soul would be sucked into the amulet, balancing out the amount of purification power needed to do the cleansing, and left in its place would be a newly liberated monster.

And no one would know. Not at first, at least.

"So the Spike in Los Angeles," she said, her heart starting to pound again, this time so hard it seemed to make her whole body rattle. "The Spike that Andrew met... Are we saying *he* doesn't have his soul? I mean, can he? If the Spike that's here has his soul, is it even possible for the other one to have one?"

Giles frowned. "Well, yes, Buffy, it's quite possible. As has already been

discussed, Xander did the same just a few years ago. Two halves of one whole, merely split.”

“But you said the spell called for the soul to be sacrificed,” Buffy said, her mind racing now. “So maybe that’s where it went wrong. Instead of consuming the soul, it took all of him. The one in Los Angeles got released without a soul, and the soul stayed with this Spike, in the amulet until I let him out.”

It was the only thing that made sense to her—or as much sense as it could given the way her head was throbbing combined with the general *what the fuck* of the situation as a whole—but Giles didn’t look convinced, and he didn’t seem to be too concerned about sharing why. In analytical mode, or research mode, or thinky-thoughts mode, or some kind of mode Buffy hadn’t discovered yet. It wasn’t helping. She needed him to be in *answers* mode. In *talking* mode. In something other than stoic-with-a-frown mode.

For if the Spike that had poured out of the amulet really was Spike, *and* the one that was running around Los Angeles was, too, they had more than a problem on their hands.

“Umm...” She turned and saw Andrew with his hand raised, his cheeks red but his face set in one of those pensive expressions that always looked so out of place on him. “I know my vote probably doesn’t mean much, but... Mr. Giles has already said the amulet was supposed to be used by Angel and that might be why it went funny.”

Buffy furrowed her brow, her patience approaching a narrow-thin margin. “And you have a theory?”

“Maybe? Just... What if it split Spike in a *completely* different way from what it was supposed to do with Angel? Like the soul doesn’t factor in at all.” Andrew shifted his gaze between the two of them as though debating whether he should go on. “I just... The Spike I met in Los Angeles? He seemed like Spike to me. Maybe not a hundred percent but I definitely didn’t get the vibe that he didn’t have his soul. He didn’t act like that. So... I dunno, I just don’t think that’s what happened.”

There was a pause, then Spike shifted soundlessly. “Dunno what it’s worth, but I don’t think that’s what happened, either.”

“You don’t?” Buffy echoed. “How?”

The question was fair game for either of them, but Spike was the one who answered first.

“Just that, Slayer. I’ve never before felt the way I feel now. Not once, living or dead.” For the first time since she’d returned, he seemed to be trying to avoid her gaze—either that, or there was just something super fascinating about the carpet in the office. “Was goin’ through it a bit last night after you... Just trying to suss everything out, you know. Work through how I felt, best I could. Not like I had any experience being brought back after saving the sodding world.”

At the words, Buffy snapped her mouth closed, her chest going tight. She

should have thought of that. “I’m sorry.”

Spike shrugged as though it wasn’t a big deal, but he still didn’t look up. “Nothin’ to be sorry for, pet. Was a surprise for both of us.”

“Maybe, but the sort of surprise I’ve had before. I... I wasn’t thinking.” The amount of *not herself* she’d felt after opening her eyes in that coffin would have made her believe just about anything in those first few weeks, including the possibility that her soul hadn’t made the return trip. She *had* wondered that, in fact. Worried amid the other worries that had plagued her that perhaps she hadn’t come back wrong, just without all her pieces. That the essential components of Buffy Summers had been left behind, too scattered to seize with one hand, and that whatever had been slapped together was nothing but a rough facsimile of the girl who had saved the world a lot.

She didn’t know how long that had sat with her before she’d realized that worrying about whether she had a soul, the sort of damage she could do and the fear of actually doing it, probably meant that the worries themselves were baseless. Soulless creatures didn’t sit around and ruminate on the fact that they were soulless, after all. They didn’t care about the damage they had the potential to cause, or the hurt they sowed along the way.

Well, she thought now, staring at Spike, *most* soulless creatures, at least.

“I still should have... Last night, I should’ve... I’m sorry.”

Spike’s mouth twitched, and he looked up at last. “Two sorrys from the Slayer. Be still my heart.”

“Isn’t your heart already still?” Andrew asked, probably not meaning to but effectively shattering the bubble that had started to form. “Like, as a ghost. *And* as a vampire. It doesn’t beat. So you don’t...don’t need to tell it to be still.”

Buffy sucked in her cheeks and glanced down, though only for a second, before she felt compelled to look up, look at him, take him in the way he seemed to always take in her. It had happened a handful of times the previous year—she’d be in a room and someone would say something and her eyes would seek out Spike. Spike specifically, because he knew her better than anyone. Could read what she was thinking from a glance, understand all the subtle things that tickled her funny bone or scored high on her pet peeves list, or just triggered something inside of her that demanded a response. More than Willow and Xander, more than Dawn, and definitely more than Giles. She had known she’d see whatever she was feeling reflected in Spike’s gaze, and without exchanging a word, they would share whole conversations.

Right now, that unspoken conversation was charged with a mixture of amusement and exasperation that Andrew excelled in provoking. And god help her, she couldn’t stop her heart from doing the stupid thing. From hoping. From giving one of the most powerful, soul-crushing words in the world a chance at life.

Maybe.

“Regardless, I also wanted to say that I didn’t know Spike all that well before last year,” Andrew added, blissfully ignorant, only now wearing that awkward, self-effacing smile he put on whenever he talked about life before he’d tried to become an even somewhat decent person. “I mean, he did come to see Warren that one time about a chip and he was...very threatening then.”

Buffy frowned and looked at Spike again, this time with her eyebrows arched.

“It was after I learned I could hit you,” Spike explained. His voice was softer. “Took my fangs for a test drive. When the chip went off, I dropped by Warren’s. Wagered he was the only person in the sodding world who might be a deft hand at sussing out what was going on other than Willow.”

An uncomfortable if not unreasonable conclusion to reach. Buffy had never given much thought to how Spike had determined that she and she alone failed to register as human. He’d just shown up and thrown that in her face, and she’d punched him and he’d punched her and then, sometime later, a building had collapsed with them at the center.

“He was so scary,” Andrew went on. “To Jonathan. Not me. And he threatened us if Warren didn’t help.”

At that, Spike groaned—a very low, familiar groan. The sound, so raw and Spike, hit Buffy with a bizarre collage of emotions that completely shattered the shaky place she’d landed just seconds earlier. For in that groan she heard *him*, the him she had been without, and if she could hear him like that, so clearly—if she could seek him out the way she had before, have those unspoken conversations with their eyes alone—they were beyond *maybe*. Some part of her had blown right past debating possibilities and settled firmly into accepting that he *was* back, and as much as she wanted to believe that, she knew she couldn’t entirely. Not when it wasn’t certain, when there were still so many questions. Right now, a smart person would retreat. A smart person would do what she could to protect the heart with its still-bleeding wounds and the scars that could be scratched open at any time. A smart person would know the best way to keep herself safe was to keep Spike on the periphery. Not share glances or smiles or sorrys or anything else—not think about what his night must have been like, freshly resurrected against his will, not fall into habits that hadn’t had time to break. For even if he was Spike, he wasn’t the entire package. He wasn’t whole. Half of him was running around out there as Angel’s lackey, and she had no idea why.

As long as that was true, as long as Spike was here *and* there, Buffy didn’t have him back at all. Just a piece of him.

“Bloody hell,” Spike was saying when she clued back into the conversation, “they had a sodding toy I threatened to tear apart. Not like I could do much more than posture. Got Warren to run the test I wanted, and I left the toy undamaged.”

“It was a limited-edition Boba Fett action figure! And the psychological

trauma—”

“Andrew,” Buffy snapped. “Focus.”

“I’m just saying, there were less valuable collectibles you could have targeted,” he retorted with a huff.

“Is there a point to any of this?” Giles asked. He’d been quiet long enough Buffy had thought he might have drifted off as he had in years past whenever the others had gone on random tangents. Apparently not.

Andrew scowled at the lack of empathy he was receiving for his so-called traumatic experience, but nodded and went on. “Just that the Spike I saw in Los Angeles, he wasn’t that scary. I mean”—he glanced nervously at the Spike standing in front of him—“he could be. If he wanted. But he was helping out, trying to do the right thing, from what I could tell. It was like the Spike I knew after the soul. So if there are two of them... It’s like what I said. I think if the amulet was supposed to steal someone’s soul, the someone would’ve been Angel. Since Angel wasn’t there but the amulet was still used, it didn’t work the way it was supposed to where the soul part is concerned. It made an entirely different split.”

“Your keen sense of observation notwithstanding, I do think it pertinent we try to refrain from further guesswork at the time being,” Giles replied. Then, in a softer tone, “Though if you’re right, there are other ways the amulet might have...malfunctioned. It bears further research.”

Spike snorted. “Think that’s already been decided, mate. If it was supposed to leave someone soulless on the outside, safe to say something went wrong, seeing as the both of us were coughed up by that sodding thing.”

“Yes, it’s almost like I had further research in mind when I said *it bears further research*.”

“No need to get cute, Rupert.”

“All right,” Buffy said, pleased when her voice came out sounding all firm, like she wasn’t being torn apart from the inside. “So the first order of business is confirming what you read is right—that the person who wore the amulet was supposed to go all splitsville in the exchange. If yes, the next question we need answered is if the amulet was made specifically with Angel in mind. And if that is also true, then what would happen if someone not-Angel wore that amulet.”

“So we have essentially talked ourselves into such a wide circle that we have arrived back where I said we were at the start of this conversation,” Giles drawled. “I must confess I often wonder what life would be like if people listened to me the first time.”

Buffy bit her tongue before she could respond with something that would just start another fight. It wouldn’t do any good, nor would it make her feel better.

“So start researching,” she said instead. “And I’ll start making calls.”

Giles favored her with a questioning look.

“If both Spikes are Spike, they need to be put together again.”

“It is premature to make any arrangements,” Giles argued, but seemed to see enough in her face to stop before he dug that hole any further.

“I’m not making arrangements,” Buffy said anyway. “I’m making a call. To Willow. If we don’t need her, then we don’t need her. If we do, well, I’d rather we make the effort to get into contact now rather than later.”

All the better to get those conversations out of the way, too. Eventually, everyone would have to contend with the fact that Spike was back in one way or another. The gang might not be *the gang* of old, the gang she’d once regarded as something better than family, but they were still the gang, and what happened to one of them happened to all of them. It was the nature of relationships that lasted as long as theirs had, regardless of the shape they took.

Buffy licked her lips and, not really meaning to, found herself meeting Spike’s gaze again. Expressive and intense as ever, impossible not to feel even when you didn’t want to.

She didn’t want to now. Not before she knew more. Getting used to him, to that look, to the way her skin buzzed and her neck tingled when he was around, would make the crash of losing him again the sort she could never recover from. She didn’t even have all of him now—didn’t know if she would or could, if those pieces that were missing *were* Spike as Andrew thought, or if something else had happened. They were in the land of maybe and her stupid, grieving brain was trying to make her believe it was a quick jaunt, rather than a grueling trek, to the land of certainty.

If the Spike in LA wasn’t really him, or if they couldn’t be reunited, or if this was temporary, or if she was being fooled, then the fallout would be a million times more awful if she let herself believe she could have him back. She’d be worse than devastated, tasked all over again to live in a world without him in it.

And that was one battle Buffy didn’t know if she had in her to fight a third time.

WHEN EVERYTHING'S MADE TO BE BROKEN

THESE DAYS, IT WAS hard to predict how long it would take to reach Willow, busy experimenting with her new coven as she was. The last Buffy had heard there was a lot of work in and out of various planes of existence—whole new branches of reality her friend was learning to access and manipulate, a prospect that was truly terrifying when she factored in the number of sacrifices she'd made to keep *this* world spinning. More worlds meant more chances to fuck everything up, and god knows Buffy didn't need the pressure.

"There's so much we can learn from other dimensions, though!" Willow had told her the one time she'd been brave enough to ask. "Some are just like this one, just a little different. Like there's one where Robin never came to town, we rebuilt the Magic Box, and you opened a self-defense business in the back. Instead of fighting the First, we waged war on the Council."

That reality sounded okay to her. At least the Council had come with people she could actually punch.

"Of course, for every normal dimension, there's one that gets... Well, let's just say I have a new and expanded understanding of what qualifies as weird and what doesn't," Willow had concluded. But it was a neat bridge to understanding different possibilities, gauging the path not taken, even anticipating what the future might bring. Like there was another world, a mirror world close to this one, where Buffy had gone undercover at Wolfram and Hart to keep an eye on Angel, and therefore been present when the amulet had landed on his desk out of nowhere and Spike had come tumbling out of it. Thus, the news that Spike was back and in ghost form didn't so much as earn a gasp. It was like Willow had been expecting it.

"It's exactly what happened in that universe," she'd said.

"But it was just one of him. Just one Spike. We have two."

"Each world is going to have their variations," Willow had explained. "The way the amulet works might have been different in that world. You clearly made a different decision, too, based on circumstances singular to *that* Buffy. Anyway, let me do some digging. I don't think I saw anything like this in another dimension, but there might be something in Callista's notes that I missed."

Buffy hadn't been invested enough to ask who Callista was—also kinda

worried that maybe she already knew but had forgotten—though she did take a moment to inquire about how things were going with Kennedy, as only seemed fair. The last she'd heard, Willow and Kennedy had been going through some growing pains, what with Kennedy being all superpowered herself now and therefore less in awe of the power Willow had at her fingertips. Buffy hadn't wanted to say anything, hardly being in a position to judge anyone's partners, but none of this struck her as particularly surprising. She just hoped whatever Willow was getting into wasn't the sort of thing she would lose herself inside should her relationship turn sour.

But then, Kennedy wasn't Tara. And that might have been the problem as well.

Having had those conversations in the past made Buffy feel less bad-friendly about jumping to the point when Willow called back this time, which happened to be a lot faster than Buffy had expected. Also good—Willow hadn't done a lot of interrupting during Buffy's hurried recap of everything and was ready with an answer when she finally ran out of breath. "We had a good place to start," Willow said brightly. "Since this happened with Xander a few years ago. Remember Toth?"

"Yeah, comparisons have been made."

"Right. Toth was the last of his kind, a member of the Tothric Clan."

"Toth of the Tothric Clan. That sounds uninspired."

"Well, maybe Toth wasn't his name," Willow went on. "Maybe it was, like, a title or something. The important thing is I had a name and was able to look him up all over again. The thing that split Xander was called a *Ferula Gemina*, or *twinning rod*. We never got a great look at it, but I would bet dollars to donuts that a similar spell was written on it somewhere. Or maybe on the inside, like the amulet."

"So, what? Are you saying that the amulet worked *exactly* the way Toth's thingamajig did?"

"Pretty much," she replied. "A separation of bad qualities from good qualities. My guess is that Wolfram and Hart thought the split would sever soul and vampire and leave them with a soulless Angel ready to jumpstart the apocalypse. Oh, that's another thing—there's a prophecy they're all gung-ho about involving Angel and the end of the world. Something about a vampire with a soul fighting and getting to live."

That made the sort of sense that didn't, but Buffy couldn't afford to get distracted or start chasing yet another rabbit. "There are some differences, though," she said. "From what happened with Xander. Like when there were two Xanders, they were both...you know, solid. And I don't think he died when Toth used his staff-thing. Spike has come out of the amulet as a ghost now twice, only one of them has a body now."

"I know, but I think that comes down to intent. Like, Toth's plan was to kill

the girl part of Buffy to kill the Slayer. The staff itself didn't do that—it was just what he used to make people go all splitsville. The amulet had at least one other function that we know about.”

At that, Buffy's stomach turned. “Cleansing powers.”

“Right. And that's what closed the Hellmouth. It just cleansed Spike in the process, too.”

That wasn't all it had cleansed, but Buffy didn't want to open that particular can of worms. Not now, at least. She hadn't talked to anyone about that side-effect of the amulet at all since Sunnydale had fallen, mainly because she wasn't interested in hearing anyone argue that the rather appalling choice he'd made had been the right one. And they would, she was certain. Somehow, Angel was always the definitive authority on what was right for Buffy. Buffy herself was just a bystander to her own life—the parts of it that were actually her choice, at least. Not to be trusted.

“The good news is, it should be just as easy to reunite Spike's halves as it was with Xander,” Willow said, blissfully oblivious to the turmoil in Buffy's head. “Only I won't be able to actually do it for a little while. With everything that's going on here... I mean, I can let Callista know you're in need of a witch. The spell's pretty straightforward and anyone can do it. I—”

“No,” Buffy said, not entirely sure why, except that things were moving too fast, and magic was one of those things she'd had enough bad experiences with to not trust with just anyone. Even if that person came highly recommended by the only one in her social group who could make such a judgment. It was just a lot—the whole *everything* she'd learned over the last day. And unlike certain exes who would remain nameless, Buffy didn't want to be the sort of person who made unilateral decisions without consulting the person those decisions would impact the most. Plus she figured she owed Spike a conversation.

“No?” Willow asked, understandably puzzled. Because right, who wouldn't want the recently undecceased love of their life to be in one touchable body? It was a crazy thing to say no to.

“I need to talk with him first,” she explained, knowing said explanation was weak but having no other recourse. “He needs to... It's just been a long day, Will. And I don't know how Spike feels about any of this.”

“You don't think he wants to be whole?”

“I just need to talk to him, okay? And it... I think it'd be better to wait until you are at a point where you can help with the unifying. Or the *anything*. Unless he says differently. I mean, he's not wild about magic anyway, but at least he actually knows you. An unknown magic person? I don't see him going for that.”

“I don't know how much knowing him matters in terms of spell success,” Willow replied uncertainly, but she also didn't push the subject. That was one of the few improvements that had been made over the last few months, at least

insofar as her relationships with her friends went, though Buffy wasn't sure if it was because trust had been reestablished or because everyone was doing their best to play nice to avoid another big blowout. Not that they were in danger of a blowout, considering they didn't have an apocalypse on their hands and tensions weren't exactly high. Either way, Buffy figured it safer to take the win where she could get it.

"When do you need to go back to everything?" Buffy asked. "Can you wait a day? That should give me time to talk to Spike."

"Yeah. I'll need a day to recharge my witchy batteries, anyway. Dimension travel takes a lot out of you and the days of pushing myself beyond my limits are... Well, let's just say I'm in no hurry to repeat them."

Big win for the world, as far as Buffy was concerned. She ended the call with Willow and sat back in her desk chair, mind rushing in with a slew of options of what she should do next, though she knew there wasn't really a slew, more just the one thing she didn't know how to approach. The idea that Spike had been back in her life now for almost twenty-four hours had never felt more unreal than it had then, for it wasn't truly Spike. Parts of the whole, parts of the man she loved, scattered and split half a world apart. Between her freakout the night before and her freakout today, she wouldn't be surprised to learn Spike's better qualities had decided she wasn't worth the effort. She wasn't someone with a history of bringing out the best in others, especially herself.

Ultimately, though, she knew she couldn't avoid him forever. So she closed up the office, such as it was, and headed home for the first time reasonably certain that the apartment wouldn't be empty when she arrived.

Which brought its own thought. Dawn. God, how would she begin to explain any of this to Dawn? They had been lucky so far that Dawn's schedule had kept her perpetually absent but her sister was bound to make an appearance at some point.

Though thankfully, that point wasn't now. When Buffy got home, she found the apartment minus a younger, emotionally volatile sister. Just a ghost who was one half the man she loved, sitting on the couch in the dark, looking about as lost as she felt.

Well, that was something. If they were going to be lost, at least they were lost together.

"Hey," she said, trying for noncommittal. Like the day hadn't been emotionally charged and confusing, like she hadn't accused him of any number of things. Like she hadn't done the exact opposite of what he'd done when she'd reappeared in *his* life—no, she'd treated him like something other than a hero, like he wasn't the very person she'd spent nearly a year mourning, wishing for more time, any time with.

She'd had her reasons, she knew, and they weren't bad reasons. There was logic behind every bad thing she'd thought since yesterday. That didn't help

her feel any better.

But Spike was Spike, and when he looked at her, it was without reproach. He understood her better than anyone else, which meant nothing she'd said or done or thought or accused him of today had surprised him. Even more, Buffy could tell that he hadn't taken any of it personally. There was understanding behind those eyes, understanding and that soft, special Spike quality that had been her constant companion her last year in Sunnydale. Not demanding, not asking, not doing anything but remaining present. Letting her know he was there for whatever she needed. For *anything* she needed.

God, it would be so much easier if he could just hate her sometimes. She deserved it.

"Umm, I heard from Willow," she said, moving deeper into the room. Jacket off and thrown against the sofa, shoes kicked in either direction. If this were a normal day, she'd have had the bra stripped as well, but she didn't want to make things any more charged than they were already. Not before she and Spike talked for real, at least. "It's what we thought. When Xander split, he had an absolute goober self and super suave self. Based on everything you've said...how you feel and stuff...I think you're everything good about Spike—his best qualities. And the Spike in LA is all the bad qualities." That sounded extra judgmental. "I didn't mean it like that. I meant—"

"I know what you meant, Slayer," Spike said softly. "Also know I can be a bloody pillock. Mite strange feelin' it like this but that doesn't change what I remember."

Buffy nodded and sank into the seat next to him, which in itself was strange. Knowing he was there, seeing it, but not feeling it. The cushion not indented where he sat, her instincts not alerting her to the presence of a vampire, all of it as distant as he felt. If she closed her eyes and told herself she was alone in the room, it wouldn't take much convincing, and that wiggled her out. Made Spike's presence here feel tenuous, temporary. Like if she moved too quickly, he might fade away for good.

"I'm sorry. I need you to know that."

His eyebrows winged upward. "You're sorry?"

"I've thought about it, you know. You coming back." She swallowed. "I thought about it so much I drove myself crazy hoping it would happen, even waiting for it to happen because some part of me thought it had to. That the way it ended couldn't be, you know, *the end*. I mean, since when have either of us ever managed to stay dead? And there was everything I'd say to you, everything I'd—"

"Buffy—"

"—tell you that I was too chicken-shit to do the first time. But when you actually do come back, I completely wig and act like you've done something wrong."

“No,” Spike said firmly, shifting weightlessly toward her. “You act like someone who’s been through the bloody wringer, because you have.”

“I just don’t want you to think I’m not... That seeing you again didn’t make me happy. That I haven’t wanted this. I was just also really scared to believe it. If I believe it and it’s not real, if *you’re* not real, then I’ve lost you all over again.” Buffy let out a breath, deflating, her head falling into her waiting hands. “And I don’t even know if this is coming out right.”

“It’s coming out fine, love.”

“Yeah, well, I have a bad track record of saying things to you and you not believing me. Forgive me for being a little jumpy.” She was still for a second, then sighed again and smoothed her hair back, even though nothing felt especially out of place. Nothing except Spike not taking the bait, just letting that last comment sit, uncontested, when it seemed like the sort of thing that would ordinarily be a launch-point for a larger discussion about all the things they had yet to sort through.

She wasn’t sure what it said about her that she didn’t like the quiet. That part of the reason everything felt off was she wasn’t wholly with Spike, just the version of him that wasn’t bad or rude. It reminded her too much of the tentative dance they had done around each other those first few months after he’d returned, and she didn’t like it. Spike being still, Spike being respectful, Spike being quiet was a Spike she didn’t know, and didn’t know how to navigate.

“So,” he said at length, snapping her back to herself, “what’s the plan? We go grab the other bloke and do some mojo to put Humpty Dumpty back together again, or you fancy keepin’ us like this?”

“You say that like it’s my call.”

“And you say *that* like it’s not.”

Buffy blinked, frowning. “Of course it’s not. Everything is up to you.”

“No, it’s bloody not, so let’s not fool ourselves.” He smiled, and there was nothing pointed or unkind in it. “You can’t convince me you haven’t given it some thought. Half-expected you to storm in here tellin’ me what’s what and to fall in line if I know what’s good for me.”

“Am I really that bossy?”

“Don’t be put off, Slayer. Hot, is what it is.” His smile turned into a grin—the sort that let her know he meant every word. “Suppose you could always keep us separate, if that’s what you prefer. The version of me that buggers everything up might be better off caged up somewhere.”

“You think I want that?”

Spike lifted a shoulder. “Wouldn’t blame you if you did.”

“I don’t. At all. That’s not even close to what I want.”

“Then why is it we’re not racing to sodding Los Angeles to set things to rights? Thought that was the plan.”

It had been the plan—her all-instinct, no thought plan, absent context. Context, unfortunately, had a habit of complicating the fuck out of things once she slowed down long enough to consider it. “Because I can’t just make gut-check decisions anymore. That’s one of the many lessons I’ve learned since Sunnydale. A good leader thinks before conclusion-jumping.” Even if it went against every natural impulse she had. “For one thing, I just made a power move against Angel, which means he’s probably already on alert for anything else. I don’t know if I want him to know just how closely we’ve been watching him, or that Andrew took anything from Wolfram and Hart while he was there. Since the amulet came from Evil Incorporated in the first place, it just seems like something we should be extra careful about flaunting that we have, especially considering *we* as an entity are very much in the growing pains stage of becoming a functioning organization.”

“You think he’d put up a fight, then? Stake his claim?”

“I think if the Spike who’s over there hasn’t reached out, is working with Angel, there are reasons,” she said carefully. “Reasons more than just he doesn’t believe I love him...you...whatever. Angel *also* hasn’t reached out, hasn’t let me know that he’s there, and he very much *does* know how I feel about Spike. You, I mean. If he wanted me to know, he’d have told me well before now, so it’s reasonable to assume that he doesn’t. And I don’t know what *this* Angel is capable of. If he wants to fight... I’m not saying we’d lose, but we’re scattered, everyone focusing on their own thing. Not really ready to put our money where our mouth is. The girls I have to spare just got back from statement-making, and I’m not about to risk them in a fight so heavily stacked against us.” Buffy rubbed her fingers along her brow. “Part of me was honestly surprised he let us get away with Dana as easily as he did. Like, he started his own company when he left Sunnydale, so you’d think he’d have an idea of how hard it is to get an organization off the ground. He knows the Council was wiped out, and being that he’s Mr. Law Firm guy now, he should *also* know how many legal hoops we had to jump through to take charge of the assets that weren’t all smithereens-y. Which all goes back to the whole thing where he’s lost sight of the fight and can’t be trusted and oh my god, stop me when I start rambling, Spike, or it’ll just go on forever.”

“It’s not like I mind,” he told her, his voice warm, which in turn made her warm. He was the one person who always made her feel grounded even when she lost her filter. “Could listen to you ramble for hours and die a happy bloke.”

“You *did* die, though, Spike. That’s what I’m getting at.”

“It is?”

“Well, it’s where I was planning on going before you let me wander off into Buffyland.” She waved her hand in a somewhat airy motion to punctuate the perils of Buffyland, as though he needed the reminder. “But it’s the other half of the answer. You asked why we’re not booking a flight now, and the other

half of the answer is you died, and you were split in half and then stuffed into a necklace, and half of you is missing. And I don't know anything about how you're feeling or dealing or what it means that you're just half Spike because I just spent the first twenty-four hours of your not being dead making it seem like it was a problem instead of exactly what I've wanted this entire time."

"Slayer..." His voice was still warm, even if there was a touch of annoyance there now. "You can climb off the cross anytime you fancy. You reacted exactly the way you needed to. Not saying I had a grand ol' time today but I wouldn't have expected anything less. Would've been a mite concerned if you had just welcomed me back with open arms."

"But you deserved open arms. Way open." Buffy shifted and started to demonstrate, but stopped when she realized doing so would mean waving her hand through Spike. She wasn't sure she wanted to experience that if she could help it. Touching him and not feeling him would be a different kind of torture, and it already seemed so fragile, his being here at all. Blink and you miss it.

She so didn't want to miss it.

"Buffy, I didn't do what I did on the Hellmouth for you to look at me like some sodding hero. It was so you'd live."

Buffy frowned. "I know that."

"Then let's not pretend I deserve a ticker-tape parade, all right? It doesn't make up for anything."

"I didn't say it did."

"But the way you've been looking at me since you got home—" He broke off, shaking his head, like he was at a loss for words, which was way with the weird because words were a thing Spike always had handy, even when he wasn't using them. "Sorry," he muttered a second later, evidently having given up. "Dunno what it is I'm trying to say. Must be something I need my less-than-pleasant half to figure out."

She didn't know what to say to that, so she decided not to try. And for a moment they just sat there in the uncertainty they'd created. It wasn't fair, she guessed, to goad him to a conclusion when her own thoughts on the subject were so jumbled. She wasn't even sure what she'd intended when she'd started this conversation, overwhelmed as she was. Not even a near decade living in a world where the impossible was just another Tuesday could have prepared her for everything she'd learned since waking up.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing now," she heard herself say, not realizing she'd meant to give the thought voice, but also not willing to take it back once she did. "That's why I'm not rushing off to Los Angeles. I have been second- and third-guessing myself on every decision I've made since you died, because the ones I made before that are the *reason* you died."

She felt the weight of his gaze, which was a comfort. Made it seem less like the room was empty—that the presence sitting beside her wasn't just colored

air. Absent the way her body reacted whenever a vampire was near, whenever *Spike* was near, she needed that. Craved it. Anything to convince the part of her brain that relied on instinct more than sight and sound to trust what she was seeing wasn't an illusion.

"Like kissing Angel after you told me you were terrified," she said. "Or kissing him at all. Like we're people who just fall on each other's mouths whenever we're in proximity, and that has never been us." A pause. "Okay, well, it hasn't been us in a while. Not since he broke up with me the last time. After you died and there wasn't any... I just thought maybe I had self-sabotaged in epic Buffy fashion. Getting close to you scared me, so what do I do?"

"It's not like you knew I was there. It's all right."

"But I always know," Buffy argued, catching his eyes before she could talk herself out of it. "That's the other thing, Spike. I *always* know when you're around. I always have. So maybe there was a niggler in my head that was like, *ooh, Spike's here*, and things with you were getting heavy and real and I was also a little pissed at how you'd blown me off—"

"I did what now?"

"Just leave it. We'll go be heroes."

Spike stared at her for a moment, his brow furrowing—and it was a strange thing to watch, because she knew every inch of his face so well. Every nuance to every expression. She could almost hear him react to her before she got a chance to give him something to react to, only now that she knew what was missing, she could see it. Understand that the frustration, the anger, the outburst that would come on a normal day wasn't going to come because the part of him that felt those things was on the other side of the planet. Far from her, from them, so the furrow he gave her now was nothing more than actual, honest confusion. He wasn't about to do what Spike would do in this situation—get defensive, get jealous, get heated, and that made her crazy too. Made him an unknown with a familiar face.

"I asked you," he said with anti-Spike calm. "I asked you what it meant, what we'd shared. You said it didn't need to mean anything."

"Yes, and as we all know, Buffy has never said anything that could be construed as avoidy. No, she's always very forthright with her feelings and has no trouble sharing them at all."

He barked a laugh, the sound warm. A laugh-with-you laugh that told her she'd been heard and understood, which made her brave enough to continue.

"I could have let you off the hook. You were being Mr. Evasive when I got home. You called it a fluke and something we wouldn't do again, if you remember. I was the one who didn't let you get away with that—who wanted to make sure you understood that... I didn't know exactly what it was then, but I knew it wasn't a fluke. And when you tried to brush me off... Yeah, I got mad." Buffy wrapped her arms around herself, keeping her gaze on the coffee

table, aware this was the first time any of these things had left the sanctuary of her brain. It was one thing to have conversations with a ghost—another when the ghost was *right there* and responding to every word. “You’ve always been so dog-with-a-bone. I never had to chase you before, and it was scary, being in that position. The only times I’ve ever chased anyone I love, they’ve left me anyway.”

There was a beat. “Is that what you think I did?”

“Not consciously, maybe. And not without reason.” She exhaled, releasing the tension that had gathered in her shoulders. “It’s more like we just keep missing each other. Or catching each other doing or saying something we don’t mean or not asking what we *do* mean when we’re not sure. I didn’t know what it meant, that night, but I knew it was something. But I couldn’t answer that question at that time. So instead of understanding that, you blew me off. And then I went out and kissed my ex-boyfriend and you saw that, and we were just—”

“A sodding comedy of errors?”

“I was thinking more tragedy.”

“Tragedy implies an unhappy ending.”

She peered at him from the corner of her eye. “You do remember the whole *you dying* part, right?”

“Not dead anymore. Not alive, either, but not much has changed there.” Spike offered her a half smile, his eyes soft and full, and she wanted so badly just to crawl into him, let him envelop her the way he’d always wanted to before—the way she’d never let him. It was a bit of their kind of irony, she guessed, that she couldn’t touch him now. Less comedy, more error.

“Dunno if it helps things or not, but sitting here, I can tell you I have no doubts at all,” he said a moment later. “Not about you or us. What it meant, those last days we had. You telling me you love me—I felt it, Slayer. Christ, I’d been feeling it for months. You gave me that speech in your basement before the buggers broke in and dragged me off, and there was no reason for you to do that. To tell me you believed in me. Not sure if you knew what it meant, hearing that, but it’s what kept me alive. Buffy Summers believing in me. Then when I tried to do what I wagered was the honorable thing and scarper when the First made it clear I was still in its toybox, no matter how much I didn’t want to, you said no. Not because of what I could do for the sodding team, rah bloody rah, but because you wanted me there.”

Buffy worked her throat, met his eyes. Of all the words he could’ve said, those were some good words to choose. Still, something felt off. “You believe me? Just like that?”

“Don’t think it’s as simple as *just like that*.”

“No, but you definitely didn’t believe me when I said it the first time.”

“Already told you that’s not right.”

“But you said—”

“Bugger what I said, Buffy. I was there—I know what I felt. Can’t tell you why I said what I said. Maybe the other bloke knows, the one who’s carrying around the bits of me that are missing.” He broke off with a grunt, sucked in his cheeks and shook his head. “And that’s it. I remember feeling things. Remember wanting to rip into Angel when I saw the pair of you snogging. I remember hating him, hating you a bit too, feeling it so rich it nearly tore me apart. Easy enough there to tell you why I felt that way and bloody baffling that I don’t now. Nothing has changed. You told me what it was, and I accepted it, but I didn’t stop resenting it until the second I came out of that sodding amulet. I don’t care that you kissed him now.”

“You don’t care that I kissed another man, that I kissed *Angel*, after we spent the night together and you told me you were terrified.”

“Can’t say I’m thrilled about it,” Spike retorted dryly. “Wouldn’t be all right if you decided to start bed-hopping across Europe or what all, but you tell me you love me, you tell me it was part of what you needed to do to see if you wanted something with me, and no, I don’t care. The worry, the fear, the bloody terror that I felt after that night? It’s all gone. All with the other bloke.”

“That...must be nice?”

He favored her with a look that made her want to punch him, which was also nice in a weird, *them* way that no one else would ever understand. “It is, yeah,” he said. “And I bloody hate it.”

That made the sort of sense that didn’t.

“Not saying I have a load of fond memories of worrying over the people I love, but the worry is what makes it feel real.” He paused, sighed and turned so he was in profile again. “Too much fear’ll bloody kill you, but without it, you’re not really alive. Those things you make me feel—how you make me want to be better. I dunno who I am without it. Could become someone who takes you for granted if I’m not worrying over the thought of losing you.”

“You’re already worried about losing me?” Buffy blurted. “We’re not even really together, are we?”

“Maybe I’m already taking you for granted, then. You love me. I love you. Seems a bloody waste to not be together, even if I can’t touch you properly at the mo’.”

She blinked, not sure whether to be impressed or annoyed at what felt like a drastic oversimplification of their situation, then realized that was probably the point. That everything *would* feel that obvious, that black and white if the half of you that usually got caught up in feelings of inadequacy and doubt were suddenly no longer present. And yeah, put in those terms, she understood exactly what he was saying. The danger of becoming too sure of oneself, not feeling the need to navigate the landmines that littered the battlefield of their relationship, was as dangerous as it was liberating. A balance was needed to keep everything in check. To keep someone’s best qualities from turning into their

worst.

Buffy released a long breath and slid forward, pressing her hands together. “So...we should go get this other you, then? Is that what you’re saying? So you can have the fear and everything?”

“Much as I hate feeling like that, yeah, that’s what I want.” Spike paused as well, and she waited. She might not be the sharpest tool in the shed, but she knew damn well what an unspoken *but* sounded like. “Dunno if it’s right, though,” he added after a moment.

“Why wouldn’t it be right?”

“Cause of bloody Angel, what else? The amulet proves it, doesn’t it? Those sods had something in mind for him—something I doubt they just gave up tryin’ to get because their plan didn’t go the way they wagered it would.”

“What does that have to do with the other Spike?”

“Everything, because there’s no one on the planet that I hate more than Angel,” Spike replied in an alarmingly neutral voice, given the weight of what he was saying. “Everything I’m not feeling now, *he* is. All the rot from before, the doubt, everything that ever made me feel like I was someone’s bloody consolation prize—he’s living that without restraint. And you better believe if that’s the case, he’s going to watch Angel like a sodding hawk. Wait for him to slip up, to be something other than the golden boy. Anything to take the shine off the armor or give him reason to sound the alarm.”

Buffy dragged her teeth over her lower lip. “You’re saying we should leave him where he is because he’ll spy for us?”

“A bit. Mostly I reckon that keeping him where he is will help you determine if there’s anything there to worry about. Not a lot he’d let Angel get away with.” He waited for a beat, swallowed. “And that’s it, love. Why I don’t know if it’d be right. You try to nab any version of me, and I guarantee he’s not gonna go down easy. He’ll make as much noise as possible, try to do as much damage. And even if you do catch him unawares, not like we know who’s watching what. The lawyer gits have to be keepin’ an eye on him, right? Even if Angel doesn’t know?”

That was a fair point. She had no idea the extent of Wolfram and Hart’s resources. For such a large enemy, never mind one that had been around for as long as it had, she knew woefully little. Just enough to be wary, to give Andrew the go ahead to put Angel in his place if push came to shove. And given what she now knew about how the amulet had been designed to work, it almost seemed guaranteed that the other Spike would be under surveillance.

And Angel didn’t know. Or he had the ego to think that what he didn’t know didn’t matter. Either way, everything she’d learned over the last thirty-six hours underscored the law firm’s reach and its power, and that they were playing a longer, deadlier game than the one they’d advertised. Swooping into town to collect her vampire wasn’t the sort of thing that would go unnoticed, and Spike

was nothing if not loyal. If he saw something or learned of something larger, something dangerous, he would come to her then.

Wouldn't he?

Buffy's throat tightened, but already the hurt was less. The pang. It had only been a day and she was getting used to it. "Your worst qualities... What are those, do you think?"

"You telling me you don't have a list at the ready?" Spike replied with a snicker.

"Well, *pain in my ass* is so nonspecific," she shot back, feeling lighter still. "Okay, so arrogant, stubborn, sarcastic—"

"Don't think *stubborn's* a flaw much, myself. You're stubborn as hell and brilliant for it."

"Insecure," Buffy went on, speaking as though he hadn't. "Wishy-washy, impatient, jealous, possessive, doesn't know when to stop, let your mouth run away with you—"

"You're just having a go, aren't you?"

"Have I said anything not true so far?"

Spike grinned, and it was a real grin. One that brightened his face in ways that made her heart skip, for it hadn't been often she'd seen him look like that. There hadn't been much cause to smile together, always an underlying *but* lurking in the corners. *But* she shouldn't be there. *But* she'd just repeated a mistake. *But* he didn't have a soul, and she couldn't let herself love him, even if the rest of her already knew that ship had left the harbor. There were no *buts* now.

No, just a host of other problems.

"Any of these things the kind of deal-breakers that I should be worried about?" she asked. "If we're going to wait before putting you two back together again? Like, even with the worst of all your bad qualities, would you still..."

"Still what? Be in love with you?"

She wasn't sure *that* was the question she'd been hedging around, but fine, now that he'd said it. "Yeah, I guess. Would you still be my... I don't know the right term for this but, like, in Sunnydale. You had my back. Always. And this version of you is not here because he has all the parts that make him believe I didn't mean it, so does that come with resentment too? Enough that he wouldn't reach out if things got really bad?"

It would take a while before she got used to it—the thoughtful crease along his brow, the lack of indignation in his eyes, the frown that told her he was giving the question some thought. And then she hoped she didn't get a chance to get used to it, for that would be its own torture. He'd asked her if she'd prefer him like this, and maybe she should, but she didn't. Not even a day had passed, and that was the only thing she was absolutely certain about. Having just part of Spike, even the good part, wouldn't be real. Just be a reminder of everything she was missing.

“No,” Spike said at last, shaking his head. “No. That’s not him. That’s not...*me*. Might be a thick git most of the time, but what drives me, *us*, I’d wager is gonna be the same no matter which half you have in your living room. He’s gonna fumble around, most like, make a right mess of things. But if he thought there was something the Slayer needed to know, that only she could fix, pride’s an easy enough thing to sacrifice.”

That sounded nice but she wasn’t sure she believed it. For now, though, she supposed she just had to.

“We could try to tell him,” she said. “Reach him somehow, let him know he’s just one half of Spike and that the rest is waiting to be reunited once we know what the master plan is behind putting Angel in charge.” Though she wasn’t sure she could follow through with that plan, much as she suddenly, desperately wanted to. They had just gone over all the ways Spike might be under surveillance, and without being there on the ground to take in the view up close, without Willow reliably present to find some magical workaround, the gamble was a lot. Any number of things could go wrong.

Angel could find out and make another decision *for her own good*.

“Could try,” Spike agreed after a beat, though in a way that made her think he was just as unconvinced. “If he knew you were out here, that you feel the way you do... Though knowing me, and the parts he’s missing, he’d probably scarper and flap his trap about it on the way out. No sense playing the sidekick when the girl who thinks of him as a hero is waiting for him to come home. Lose your potential of having a man there on the inside.”

Dammit. Buffy let out a breath and wiped her hands along her thighs. “So we don’t tell him?”

“Ball’s in your court there, love.

“I can ask, at least. See what Giles thinks.” Though she was pretty sure she had an idea of how that conversation would go. “I guess, until then, we’re decided.”

“Guess we are.”

“You feel good about it?”

“Best I can, I expect. Though I wouldn’t say no if Willow decided to work some mojo so I can feel again.” Spike was staring at his hands, tapping his fingers against his knees. “Can hold out, if I need to—”

“You don’t need to. We’ll find a solution.”

“Yeah?”

Buffy nodded. “It’s weird, not feeling you.”

“Is at that,” he agreed, looking up and catching her eyes, making her breath hitch and her heart somersault all over again. Had her feeling lightheaded with relief and dread all at the same time, the gnawing uncertainty of what would come next. Of being this close and having miles to go. Of a lifetime’s worth of emotional highs and setbacks crammed into a solitary day.

She was so tired and the road ahead was so long, but he was here. Kind of. Spike was here.

And it was on her to figure out what was next.

WHAT WILL THE VERSION BE WHEN ALL IS SAID AND DONE?

SPIKE HAD LEARNED ABOUT the incident with Toth after all the fun was over and the two Harrises merged back into one, but what he had heard had always made him wonder just how it was that the smoother version hadn't cottoned on that something was amiss. Sure, sleeping in filth and tripping over himself hadn't seemed much of a reach for Xander, but charming the knickers off a real estate bird and convincing some higher-ups to trust him with more responsibility sure as hell had.

The joke was on him, then. He knew half of him was missing, but despite this, he didn't feel like half a person, just a different version of the man he'd been all his life. It had bothered him when he hadn't known, when he'd felt for the bits of himself he knew should be there but weren't. Except now he knew why they weren't. He understood. And understanding made everything else fall into place. All the right parts were there—brain, hands, cock, though he supposed he'd only get a look at the goods after Buffy and her mates had solved the whole issue with his lack of a physical body. But even not having flesh and blood and bone that was his own didn't trouble him all that much. If one version could be restored then both could, and he had the Slayer on his side so likely a lot quicker than it had for Spike the Lesser.

For he *was* Lesser, that version of him. Brash and jealous and prone to action without thinking, to running on instinct and trusting it alone to guide him, when nothing was ever that simple. Even at his daftest, Spike had understood the mechanics of the world enough to respect his place in it. That the call of blood and violence alone wasn't enough to sustain a man in the long term. He needed some measure of order, even the slightest bit, to ensure he was the one who lived to fight another day. Without a modicum of restraint to curb his darkest and most foolish impulses, it seemed highly unlikely that he would scrape out of this mess alive at all. The idiot part of Spike out there ruining the chances of any sort of future.

Yeah, the Spike that was here, that was in Buffy's world, was clearly the superior candidate...except he was lacking, too. Missing the crucial ingredients that made his brain and heart work the way they should—the same ingredients Spike knew Buffy was looking for every time he caught her staring. That she

seemed to think might just pop into existence if she wished it hard enough. As though those qualities weren't on the other side of the planet, going through life and likely making even more questionable decisions than he had on even the worst of his worst days. A version of Spike that perhaps didn't feel the loss of half his being, or if he did, had ascribed it to something more believable. Something more like being apart from Buffy.

Spike had that, at least. Had Buffy. Had her soft looks and her voice and her words—those words in particular. And once Dawn came through the door that night after the first full day, he had her too.

She was distracted at first, rambling off what sounded like a well-rehearsed excuse for her lateness, which she abruptly abandoned when she saw Spike standing beside Buffy in the living room, both of them having jumped to their feet at the sound of the door opening. There was a beat, then everything Dawn was carrying—schoolbag and her takeout—hit the floor, along with her jaw, as she gawked at him like the ghost he was. All eyes, his Nibklet.

Buffy,” she said, her voice shaking, “is that Spike?”

Buffy let out a breath and took a step toward her. “He’s not—”

“I mean, you see him too, right? Because if you don’t, we need to go to the hospital right now.” Dawn blinked and rubbed her eyes, then looked at him again in a way that made his chest lurch with the inability to assure her of anything. “Are you really there?”

“A bit,” he replied, then winced. Bugger, maybe he *was* the lesser half on all accounts, but it wasn't like he'd known how to talk to Dawn before the latest apocalypse, either. She'd made it clear the second he'd gotten back to town that he was stake fodder if he stepped out of line, and he'd heard her. Believed her. Hadn't wagered the soul would change much about how she felt and hadn't thought it should. And it seemed the parts of him that had known how to navigate sharing space with someone he loved who also happened to hate him were on the other side of the sodding planet.

“A bit,” Dawn echoed and then, thank fuck, turned back to Buffy. “What the hell does that mean?”

The explanation came, and balls, it sounded even stranger hearing it in story form—standing in the room as Buffy went over what they'd been through the last day. She accepted Dawn's scolding for not immediately telling her, for letting an entity she hadn't known for sure was Spike occupy space in their home, wander around while they were sleeping, for taking a risk like that just for a whisper of what she'd lost back in Sunnyhell. And Buffy accepted it all with aplomb that humbled him. Told her she was right but it was done and they knew now, didn't they? They knew he was Spike, just half of Spike. The other half out living the good life with Angel (“Angel?” Dawn screeched. “What the hell?”) and the path forward decided for now.

Granted, Dawn wasn't nearly as impressed with their conclusions. She

looked at the pair of them as though they were both soft in the head and crossed her arms. "You're going to use the Spike that's over there as a spy but not let him know he's a spy," she said dully. "Right, because nothing can go wrong with that plan."

"Angel bumbles up more than usual, first thing I'd do is call the Slayer," Spike replied, though the look she gave him did a number on his already-wounded confidence. "He just needs a reason, pidge."

"A reason beyond being totally in love with her, you mean? Because *that's* the Spike I know. He doesn't just pal around with Angel waiting for an excuse to tattle. God, how lame are you?"

"Dawn," Buffy snapped, but she didn't do more than that. Not just then, and he understood why. They'd already run through the bloody wringer discussing all this, and it wouldn't do either of them any good to revisit a sodding point. She needed a kip, and he needed... Well, he wasn't sure what he needed, except space to try to think while half of himself was a world away, being an especially thick git.

Eventually, Dawn let them speak more than a few words at a time—long enough for Buffy to get the full explanation out. The bit about Toth, the theories about what had happened when Spike had used the amulet, and what they planned to do now.

"Which is doing nothing," Dawn said bluntly. "You're doing nothing."

"We are not doing nothing! Were you not listening at all?"

"I was listening. I was listening when you said you're just going to let this other Spike run around, half a person, be your so-se-cret-he-doesn't-even-know-it spy until...when, exactly? You decide that he's used up all his usefulness? What if Angel is in charge of Wolfram and Hart for, like, years? Are you going to go decades letting Spike be two different people? Because that might be the stupidest thing I've ever heard in my life, and I talk to Andrew like, every day almost, whether I want to or not. You haven't thought this through at all."

And as much as Spike didn't want to admit it, the girl had a point. The sort not even Buffy could deny, though she closed down in that way of hers, threw up her hands and declared that she wasn't talking about it anymore. And as anyone who had ever had an argument with the Slayer could attest, that indeed put an end to the discussion. She quickly moved onto other subjects, like how much homework Dawn had and if it was too late to call Willow to see about spells that would give Spike a body until the time they decided to merge the two back together. It wasn't until later that evening, when Dawn stomped toward her room, that Buffy turned back to him, her expression wary and uncertain.

"Never tell her I admitted this, but Dawn wasn't entirely wrong," she said. "This thing with Angel... It might not be just a few weeks or months. I mean, it's *already* been months, and my apocalypse watch remains very much a watch

and not a warning. Everything I've learned about Wolfram and Hart since I've been here has told me they play for keeps, which means they're probably not in a hurry to unveil their master plan. And even if I think he's an idiot, I *don't* think Angel's stupid."

Spike snickered. "Flawless bloody logic as ever, pet."

"I mean yes, he was an idiot to take this deal in the first place, but he has to also know they have plans for him, right? So that if they were all flamboyant with their evilness, he'd clock it immediately, and that would be the end of things."

At that, he had nothing to add. She was right. Annoyingly so, in fact. Angelus was the sort of bloke that always expected attack—bloody had to in order to survive, given the number of enemies he'd earned over the centuries. To pull one over on him, you had to do it slow-like. Lure him in, make him feel like he was the one calling the shots. Keep pulling until he's in so deep he can't say for certain at which point he started to fall in the first place. Everything Spike knew about Wolfram and Hart, and everything he was learning now, told him this lot wasn't too worried about how long it took a thing to happen so long as it happened the way they wanted. Put in those terms and Angel could be in charge of the place for half a sodding century before he started to lose himself.

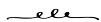
"I think six months," Buffy said as though reading his mind. "We give it six months max. Or less, if we want less. Maybe we give it to May 20th."

That seemed oddly specific. Spike arched an eyebrow. "Something of note happen that day?"

"Nothing major. Just my almost-boyfriend sacrificed his life to close the Hellmouth, and my hometown became a big crater."

Spike looked down, chagrined. He ought to have known. Wasn't like he was ever going to forget the day she'd taken the leap off that tower, or the hundred-and-forty-seven days that had followed. The fact that she'd come back didn't erase the pain of having lost her in the first place. And even though everything he'd told her was true—that the bits of him that were with her now understood that Buffy truly did love him—it was still humbling to know just how much.

But she did, and she was proving it with every breath.



Spike found himself going through his days not feeling like anything was missing but at the same time knowing that it was. Wondering what that said about him that he could feel this way, though thinking he might already have the answer.

For now, his life was defined by small goalposts. The first was getting a proper body—something with form and texture, where he could feel it when he flexed his fingers, when he drew in breaths, when Buffy touched him. The next was

becoming whole, something the watcher had agreed was too dangerous to do now or even warn the other bloke about, considering how careless that Spike was liable to be with any information he received. All other goals were a dot on the horizon beyond truly becoming himself again. There, as in he could sense them, feel them, but so far out as to not have shape or definition. And outside of his control, maddening as that was.

In the interim, Spike would have to be content with just that first goalpost. The one that he knew he could cross if he just waited. And while that wait ended up stretching longer than he would have fancied, the day finally came when Willow was able to break from whatever magical mystery tour she'd been on for a visit.

"Oh, wow," she said, stopping short in the doorway of the office Buffy had more or less made Spike's over the last couple of weeks. Not that Spike needed an office, but it was a place for him to be safely tucked out of the way while everyone else ran around doing their work. "You'd think I'd get used to it."

Spike glanced at Buffy, who wore a tired smile. "People coming back from the dead?" she asked.

"Well, you have to admit—it's a little weird that there are a grand total of two vampires with souls running around who have both died apocalyptically, and both been upchucked back from the great beyond." Willow moved deeper into the room, her eyes not leaving Spike's face. She stopped when she was a foot or so away and gave him a more thorough once-over. "And he's really just one half of Spike, huh? The better-qualities half?"

"That's the theory," Buffy said. "Though I think the fact that you just compared him to Angel and he didn't throw a fit is proof enough."

"A fit?" Spike drawled, more because he sensed they expected him to say something than out of a real desire to. "Don't think that's the word for it, love."

"Right, I forget," she replied. "You're very levelheaded when it comes to Angel."

"Look who's talking."

Buffy rolled her eyes, but her smile remained, more natural-looking than it had been a moment ago. "So," she said, turning to her friend, "you think you can make him non-ghosty? It's really weird to be in the same room with Spike and not feel him." A pause. "I mean, like a slayer should. Not, like, feeling him up or anything. Tinglies. *Slayer* tinglies."

This was one of those rare moments where he felt the loss of self. Not because the smirk he summoned wasn't real—it was, just as real as the sentiment behind it—but he also felt the empty place that was bolder, more reckless, the posturing prick who had bluffed his way through history itself. Still, he enjoyed reaching for those parts all the same; enjoyed how right they felt, if not expressly natural. "Have to tell me more about those later, sweetheart. Sounds like something worth exploring."

She gave him a look that was one part *shut up*, one part *it's a date*, one part embarrassment, and the rest confusion, all wide-eyed and flaring nostrils and delicate rosy shades rising to her cheeks. And this was where he felt it the most—the knowledge that if he had a bit more of his other self with him, he would have pressed, would have put her on the spot just to enjoy the way she squirmed. And hell, it wasn't like that thought didn't appeal to him now, but something held him back. The not knowing at the other end of it, he supposed. Just what their relationship would look like these months if they'd decided to let the other version of him run around Los Angeles. If tinglies were all she was up to feeling, because god knows he hadn't even gotten his senses back, and he was already dying to touch her.

Nothing new there, of course.

"I can definitely make him non-ghosty," Willow said with a nod as though the talk of tinglies hadn't happened. "Not even a new spell—the same one we did when you came back from the dead with that hitchhiker, remember?"

It took a moment, but Buffy finally pulled her gaze off Spike to arch an eyebrow at the witch. "Do I remember being resurrected and immediately hunted by a body-possessing entity that was determined to kill me so it could live? Yeah, vaguely."

"Yeah, well, it's the same idea," Willow replied in a hurry. "Caught between worlds kind of thing. Only this time, we won't be making him solid just to kill him."

"Thanks ever so for that," Spike drawled.

"And it won't mess up the plans to unite them down the line at all?" Buffy asked, a bit of an edge to her voice now. "Like that demon thingy was presumably in one piece, not split down the middle."

"Is it down the middle? Do we know that for sure? I kinda got the idea the split was more..." Willow made an odd zigzag pattern with her hand. "Like, pieces here and there, otherwise the whole soul thing would've come into play."

"Please just tell me this won't impact Spike being reunited with himself."

"Oh, no, it won't impact that at all." Willow beamed. "I think I told you this already, but if you need the reassurance, it should be as easy as it was to put Xander back together. Maybe even easier. That was a few years ago now, and I am... Well, I'm a stronger witch than I was then. But to answer your question, making Spike all with the solid right now is safe as houses."

Buffy hesitated, glanced back at Spike. "What kind of house? We've knocked a couple of those down."

"A really, really safe house," Willow confirmed. Then paused. "Wait, when did you knock down houses?"

"That would be back when she was feeling the tinglies," Spike said, and again, it felt right if not natural. Right enough that he congratulated himself when the Slayer went red. Nice to know he could still do that, if little else.

“And you’re the good version?” Willow asked, a faint smile on her face now. “Believe me, it was better than good. It was a bloody revelation.”

“If we could just get to the spell part of the spell, please, Will,” Buffy said quickly, still red but looking more pleased than not, which left him feeling an odd combination of warm and cold. The worry that maybe she’d expect more—that those looks he caught her throwing his way would intensify. The hope that maybe he’d just snap into being, fully Spike, without having to do any of the heavy lifting.

But he knew that wasn’t true. And even if it was, he couldn’t blame her. The part of him partial to blaming her for his own insecurities was a bloody world away, oblivious to the fact that he was half a man. Even more oblivious to the fact that soon, maybe even within a handful of minutes, one version of Spike would be able to touch Buffy. Feel her warmth against his palms, fall into the rhythm of her rushing blood and beating heart. Everything on this side of the veil was muted—there, as in he was aware of it, but distant in a way that he doubted he’d ever be able to explain. And soon that barrier would be gone as well, and he’d be one step closer to having everything he’d always wanted and never dreamed he could have.

“I’ll need a few minutes,” Willow told Buffy. “It’s not a complicated spell, but the last time I did it, I wasn’t doing it alone. I’ll need to go over the part that...that Tara did to make sure I don’t miss anything.”

“What happens if you miss something?”

At that, she frowned. “Well, I guess I do it again, but I’d like to not miss. It’s better for the ego if I knock it out of the park on the first go.” Willow turned to Spike and gestured. “You wanna get comfy while I set up? Or...you probably can’t get comfy, can you?”

“Not easily, no,” he replied. “I’ll just stand about. Best I’m good for these days.”

“Do what you need to, Will,” Buffy agreed. “We’ll just...chill.”

It was a nice thought, but one she had absolutely no way of pulling off. Buffy was too much like him in that regard—incapable of standing still while waiting for something to happen. Even so, she was good enough to give Willow a decent berth to get ingredients and the like set up, keeping her pacing to about three feet of office real estate, all while making an effort, it seemed, to avoid looking at him, as though she thought she’d hurt their chances of this going right. It wasn’t five minutes before Willow said she was ready to work the mojo and helped herself onto the desk in the middle of the room to start doing her chanty business.

Just as quickly, it was all over. Willow opened her eyes and looked at him with full expectation. “Well?”

“Well what?”

“Are you... Did it work?”

“Shouldn’t I be askin’ *you* that?”

“Oh, you’re both impossible,” Buffy said, though in a way that had him thinking it was more compliment than insult. The next instant, she was in front of him, and Spike knew—he knew before she reached out, before her skin made contact, that the witch’s magic was true. He knew, for when he inhaled, air filled his dead lungs. Air that tasted like Buffy. Smelled like Buffy. Air that he could feel against and inside of him. He opened his mouth to say as much but then her hands were on him, warm and soft and vibrant and *Slayer*, and god, it took nearly all of his composure to remain still, to not fall to his knees and wrap his arms around her to hold her to him. Bury his face in her belly, in her warmth and her good, and drag as much of it into himself as he could. Make sure he had enough to sustain himself through another drought, because having *touch* after not having it was the most miraculous thing he’d ever felt. Close to that moment in the caverns below Sunnydale when he’d felt his soul, but divorced from it still, for this was not an end but something so much better.

Buffy blinked up at him, her hands still on his face. He realized belatedly that she was shaking, not a little, but from head-to-toe. Shaking and regarding him through shimmering eyes and with a watery smile.

“It’s you,” she said softly. “Welcome back, Spike.”

He huffed a laugh that wanted to be a sob and let his brow find hers. “Not all of me here.”

“Mood-ruiner.”

“Just wanted to keep things in perspective, love.”

“I’m perspective girl.” Buffy sniffed but didn’t pull back, and the air between them exploded with the scent of wet salt. Warm just like her. “Still, gotta admit, this doesn’t suck.”

“Doesn’t at that,” he agreed, hesitated, then let himself reach for her in return. Let his hands find her shoulders, feel the firmness of skin and muscle and bone, of blood and life, this warrior he knew so well yet in many ways not at all. Not the way he’d wanted.

Only that was possible now. Everything was possible now. “Buffy...”

It was a bloody good thing Willow chose that moment to clear her throat, as Spike was certain he might have done something to embarrass both her and the Slayer. He was also certain that once he kissed Buffy, he wouldn’t want to stop. It had been such a bloody long time, it seemed, even if it hadn’t been long at all. Enough to make the desire to taste her feel tangible—an ache inside a body that hadn’t existed just a few seconds ago. Everything old was new again. It’d take a minute to relearn restraint.

But Willow *did* clear her throat, breaking through the fog starting to muck up his more Victorian sensibilities. “I’m feeling a little third wheel-y,” the witch said, slipping off the desk and hastily clearing away the ingredients she’d set about. “So... Glad it worked.”

“Yeah,” Buffy agreed. She hadn’t budged, her breath crashing against his mouth. “Thank you, Will. Thank you so much.”

“Don’t mention it. I’m just sorry it took me this long to get here. But, you know, interdimensional whatnot.”

“Wait.” Now Buffy did move, pulling back just enough to turn and meet her friend’s gaze. “Plan to be around in May, will you?”

Willow furrowed her brow. “In May?”

“Yeah. Maybe before then but definitely by then if you haven’t heard from us.”

“What am I missing?”

Spike tightened his hold on Buffy to ground her back to him, reveling that he had the freedom to do so, that he felt her pulse under his fingers, that his skin was absorbing some of her heat. “Slayer and I decided we’d give it till then. Suss out if the other me’s learned anything of use from his time spent with the plonker. Don’t much fancy bein’ split in two longer than that.”

“And you’re giving it until May, why?”

“That’s when it’ll have been a year,” Buffy explained, “and I think that’s long enough for someone to not be a whole person. Maybe too long.”

Willow huffed and gave her head a slight shake, her lips twitching. “You two have the weirdest thing,” she said before raising her eyes to his. “But you make her happy. Or I think you do. This is the happiest I’ve seen her in...a long time. So please don’t be a doofus. And if your other self ruins any of this, I might just have to come off the evil wagon long enough to curse something I have a feeling you’d really, really miss.”

Well, he certainly couldn’t fault her for that. “Thanks ever so.”

“Just try me.” Willow shifted her attention back to Buffy. “So, May? I’ll keep my calendar open.”

“Thanks, Will,” Buffy said. “For everything.”

“Just one less IOU that I, well, owe you for saving the world all the time,” Willow replied, this time with a faint smile. “But really leaving now. I want to be very gone by the time buttons start flying.” And as though to punctuate that sentiment, she rushed through the door and into the hall, issuing loud goodbyes to Giles and Andrew on the way, along with at least one hurried confirmation that the spell had been a success. It sounded less like an explanation and more like a warning.

When Buffy turned back to him, her eyes were bright with something he hadn’t seen there in a long time. “Really, like we’re going to start screwing on the desk.”

Spike pressed his brow back to hers and breathed her in. Sugar and spice and everything Slayer. Everything he’d been missing. “That not an option, then?”

He felt more than saw her lips pull into a grin—lips he was suddenly desperate to taste, to feel, to remind himself just how *alive* life felt when she was in it,

but something held him back. Something he doubted he would have clocked had he been wholly Spike and not just half. Buffy was warm against him, and when she pulled away, it was to regard him as she had the night she'd battled her way through the First's boobytrap and found him chained to a cavern wall. That look that had powered him through the pain of letting her go, understanding that it was worth it to not be the one she wanted if that was how she saw him now.

"We should probably cool it," Buffy murmured, backed up a step. "At least for now. Until we get back to my place. Giles walking in on us might be the thing that kills me for real."

"Can't have that," Spike agreed. "Think the pair of us should stop dying for a bit. Nice change of pace."

"On that, I most wholeheartedly agree." The smile she wore turned a mite bashful, making his chest go tight. "Though I might see if Giles needs me for the full day. I'm not sure how useful I'll be now."

"You're the boss, aren't you?"

"You raise an excellent point." Buffy hesitated, then pressed forward again, this time brushing her lips against his in a brief but tender kiss. The sort that could set a man on fire.

But strangely, while he missed her warmth when she left the room, her absence didn't hit him as acutely as it had in times past. The thought flitted in and out, a gnat begging to be squashed and forgotten, but remained stubbornly in his periphery. There was hunger—he felt that in his bones, his veins, his fucking cock—but it didn't feel like the same hunger that had defined him for more than a century. Fueled him with the need, the bloody desperation to pursue, to chase, to capture and claim. An ache he'd carried until he could touch her again. Or maybe it was the awe that he was touching her in the first place. That she'd let him close at all.

It wasn't until she returned a moment later that he understood. For the first time since he'd broken free of the amulet, he could truly feel where the rest of him wasn't. The part he'd considered lesser. Not just that *those emotions* weren't there, but that part of him wasn't there.

And its absence was bloody stark.

AND I'M STILL WAITING FOR THE RAIN TO FALL

BUFFY HAD GOTTEN USED to Spike being back since she'd broken the amulet, but it was one thing to be in her life and another to be firmly in her apartment. No longer a dimension apart, able to touch and be touched, as she'd more than proven before she'd left the office. The trouble was she hadn't thought through what would happen after they got back to her place. Everything since he'd returned to her life had been lived in the abstract, a series of goals they needed to accomplish before proceeding to the next item on the checklist. But she and Spike had never been checklist people. The future was a vague entity and the past unreachable—the present was where the action was, and therefore where they both tended to apply the bulk of their energy.

And now her present involved a Spike who could press his hand to the small of her back and fill her senses with just how heavy and real his presence truly was. It was something out of a dream, a place she'd visited so frequently that reality had started to look surreal around the edges. Like it would be possible for her to open her eyes and find the last couple of hours hadn't taken place at all. Except dreams didn't tend to have the same weight as life, even when the brain was intent on its illusion. When she curled her hand around her apartment keys, she could feel the bite of metal against her skin. When she threw those keys onto the counter, the air cracked with the resulting clang. And when she turned to look at Spike, every line of his face was in focus. Nothing blurry or vague, nothing approximate or even perfect. More human. More real.

"Um," Buffy said, feeling almost unreasonably self-conscious and more than a little ridiculous because of it. "I guess we'll need to get blood. I should have thought about that before we got back."

He nodded politely, which just wiggled her out. "Would be good. Tummy's starting to rumble a bit. Feels like it's been ages since I had a proper meal."

"Well, that's what happens when you sacrifice yourself in May and then go nearly a year without eating anything."

There was an unnatural note in her voice that she couldn't identify, only that it made her sound off to her own ears. Spike's too, if the look on his face was any indication. He studied her for a moment before tilting his head, his brow furrowing with worry. "You all right, pet?"

“I guess it’s just hitting me. That it’s...” Buffy gestured at him, then herself, then the room. “You’re here. All with the...hereness that is you.”

“Been here for a minute now.”

“Not like this, you haven’t.” More gesturing. “It’s different now. I can feel you.”

Spike nodded, his eyes darkening in a way she knew all too well. “Can feel you, too. Bloody intoxicating.”

She worked her throat and nodded back at him. “Yeah, about that. I was...kinda all over you back at the office. I don’t want to presume anything—”

“Did you hear me complaining?”

“Well, with the whole you being just half of yourself, I didn’t want there to be... Like, this has all been very weird and I don’t want you to think there’s anything I’m... You don’t have to... I mean, you don’t even know how you’ll feel when you’re all one Spike again.” God, she was rambling. Rambling and turning red, if the heat in her cheeks was any indication. And looking at him was suddenly impossible because his face would be, well, *there*, along with those eyes that had always seen more of her than she’d consciously put on display. Even as she spoke, she wasn’t entirely sure what she was trying to say—or not say. Everything had just become stupidly confusing.

“You think there’s a possibility I won’t want you when we put Humpty Dumpty together again?” he asked, his voice rough with either exasperation or amusement or some combination thereof. “Seems I recall tellin’ you that you’re the one.”

“But we don’t know what the other you is experiencing,” she argued, still not looking at him. “H-he could be falling in love with someone else for all we know. Like...Fred.”

“Fred.”

“I’m sure Andrew mentioned Fred and how she and Spike—*you*—were close.”

“Buffy...” He cupped her cheek, not in a controlling look-at-me way but in a way that made it hard not to, well, look at him. And even though she knew what she would find when their eyes met, she couldn’t keep from feeling ashamed at having entertained the thought at all. “A thousand years could pass and it’d be you, you hear me? Doesn’t matter how many people there are between now and then. You’re always it.”

“But I don’t want there to be any other people,” she said, hearing the petulant note in her voice and hating it but also not knowing how to make it gone. “Because you don’t really know, do you?”

“You think it’s possible for *half* of me to fall so in love with someone else that I won’t want you the second I’m whole?”

“I’m just saying you know how you feel now, standing here. But again, you don’t know what’s happening over there. What the other you is going through

or who he's meeting or what he's feeling. A-and you won't until you and he are just the one Spike again. So yeah, maybe not with Fred, but someone else." Buffy pressed her eyes closed and wished vaguely for a Buffy-shaped hole to appear under her feet to pull her somewhere far from this conversation she'd somehow dragged them both inside. "So about you and me being... You don't have to stay here. I'm not expecting anything. I'll even help you get your own place—the Council has resources that—"

"I'll leave if you want, but if it's all the same to you, I've been wanting to kiss you since the second I could feel my skin again."

A breath whooshed out of her. "Oh."

"Tell me that surprises you."

"I... I just don't want to lose this," she said, and to her horror, her eyes started to sting. This was so not what she'd thought would happen the second they were behind that door—but then, little in Buffy's personal life ever went the way she imagined it would. And she was in too deep to stop now. "When it hit me that you were gone, that was... I've lost people, Spike. And I'm going to keep losing people. I know that. I'm prepared to die pretty much anytime, and not because I have a death wish, just because it's the life I lead. I didn't realize how much I relied on you, how much I... Well, anything, until you were gone. I celebrated the world not ending with people who had kicked me out of my own home and the person who gave me the strength to get to the other side was dead. It didn't feel like much of a victory. And what I'm saying now is it took me so long to get even remotely okay, and if there's even a little chance that I might get you just to lose you again, I'm going to be very not okay. So...please be sure before we do anything, that this is what you—"

And then he was kissing her, and she was melting, because the last time he'd kissed her had been *the last time*, and he was here now. Here in flesh and blood, his chest solid beneath her hands, his mouth cool and familiar, his taste, his smell, the way the leather of his duster felt under her fingers, all of it real and it felt good. Felt like Spike, and maybe not all of Spike but god, maybe just this could be enough. Maybe she could fill in the gaps with what she knew about his kiss, the way he moved and melted. How in seconds he'd have her hiked in his arms and balanced on the kitchen counter. Or propped against the wall, maybe, as he tore at her clothes and she tore at his, and they pushed and pulled and yanked and grasped and worked together until the last time was replaced fully by *this time* and the promise of the next. She could put everything else on hold—her worries and uncertainty, the nagging sense of incompleteness. None of it would matter.

Spike didn't perch her on the kitchen counter, though, or throw her against a wall. After long moments filled with long, aching kisses, he pulled away to regard her with dark, hungry eyes and murmured, "I'm sure, Buffy."

Her brain had stopped functioning. "You're what?"

“You said to be sure. I’m sure.” He smiled at her, a tender smile she hadn’t seen before, and ran a hand along the side of her face. “Only two things in this world I’m ever gonna be sure of. Told you as much once.”

“You told me it was just one thing,” she replied hoarsely.

“Yeah, well, looks like I needed to amend it a bit. First thing is you.” He brushed a kiss to her brow and held his lips there for a long second. “The next is that I’ll love you until I’m dust. Doesn’t matter what happens between. I’ve loved before you, but I’ve never loved anyone like I love you. It’s not the sort of thing that happens more than once. It’s you for me. So even if the other me is chatting up birds in LA, even tryin’ his hand at moving on, it’s only because he doesn’t think there’s a chance that he could be here, that the best that happened to him where you’re concerned is in the past. He’d give anything for this.”

Buffy pressed her eyes closed, trembling and hating herself. Hating that she hoped he was right, that it was true. Hating how selfish she was for wanting something she had spent years rejecting, that she still thought of as hers even if she’d never been brave enough to claim it. Hating how much she loved knowing Spike’s lips were against her skin, how much she craved him, how part of her knew that giving in would be wrong—or if not knew, at least sensed it, but wasn’t strong enough to allow those thoughts voice. That being with him when he wasn’t entirely himself was taking advantage of circumstances she’d been handed, that his yes now might not be a yes for always. But even if it wasn’t all of Spike touching her now, it was still enough of him, right? Still Spike’s hands, still Spike’s lips, Spike’s eyes and ears and nose, Spike’s tongue teasing her with flirty flicks that had her reservations melting. The fight was over, and she was entangled in him. Pulled flush against his chest, his arms around her, one hand wrapped in her hair and the other wandering, squeezing her ass, teasing her sides, slipping around to tug at the button of her jeans.

Spike pulled back then, breaking his lips from hers, his eyes dark and hungry. “Let me?” he asked and pulled again on her jeans. “Tell me I can. Please.”

The question startled her enough to throw her out of the moment, but only at first. Only until her brain kicked on and she remembered, and promptly felt foolish for not remembering from the start. Maybe that was just her brain right now, overcrowded with the wrong sort of thinky thoughts. Thoughts that didn’t dissipate when she nodded, either, or when he tore her jeans away, rather burrowed under her skin like a persistent itch, and remaining there even as he kissed her again with his wonderful Spike lips and his Spike taste, turning her so the entire apartment moved, and then finally she *was* perched atop the counter that separated the kitchen from the living room, and her legs bare and Spike between them, dragging her panties over her calves and feet, spreading her open and cursing low before licking a line up her slit with what was definitely Spike’s tongue. She remembered this, her body did, how effortlessly he was able to make her feel like the woman she so rarely got to be. How he drank her in, the

sounds he made as he tasted her, the low rumbles, the moans, the sweet sighs, the chuckles whenever he elicited the exact reaction he wanted and the steadfast determination to do it again. How his tongue teased and curled around her clit, how he'd understand her, read her, follow the cues she didn't even know she was giving him, be hard when she wanted hard and gentle when she couldn't take anything else. The almost reverent way he explored her, touched her, licked inside of her before stroking her there with his fingers.

And this felt good. So goddamn good. Almost good enough that she didn't care that the more he tasted, the more he delved, the harder her brain had to work to bridge the differences. Those small fissures between what she remembered and what she was experiencing now were growing larger, the doubts louder the more she tried to silence them, the minute differences becoming less minute and more massive.

It was Spike, all of it was Spike, but it also wasn't.

It *wasn't*.

She was surprised when she felt the sparks, then, almost certain she would have to fight her way to orgasm with all the thoughts running through her head. But even if her mind wasn't entirely in the moment, her body—starved too long for exactly what he was giving her—had no such trouble remembering its part. Spike growled and purred, following her wordless direction without fault. Filling her with his tongue, then his fingers, making the air around them come alive with the wet suctioning of him working in out of her pussy as he switched between nudging her clit and licking it directly, then finally fastening his lips around it and sucking so sweetly she could have melted. *Did* melt. Melted all over his face, arms shaking as she tried to support her weight on the countertop, pleasure mounting and mounting and then pouring over, sweeping her along for the ride. And the cry that escaped her when he slipped his fingers free of her cunt, the way she felt the loss, the emptiness, and how quickly that turned to relief when he started ripping at his belt, his jeans, the sound hard against the stillness that otherwise surrounded them.

And that was it, she realized as he tipped her head back, favored her with a look that was all heat and promise and everything she'd been missing but still didn't have. Spike was there but not, watching her but not, teasing his cock along her wet slit and making her feel but somehow not feeling him, because he wasn't breathing. He wasn't panting. He wasn't doing any of that that inexplicable gasping, gazing at her with reverence, with awe, wasn't whispering filth against her lips, telling her how good she felt, how hot she was, how much he'd missed her, missed this, missed *them*, how he'd gone to the ends of the earth to find the piece that would mean he belonged exactly where he was, where *she* was, that he loved her and loved her and god, let this never end. Let him dust if this is a dream because it'd be kinder than waking up to a reality where she wasn't with him.

He was kissing her, holding her, sinking into her with a soft groan that became a growl, his hands sure and his mouth surer, his body knowing the rhythm but not the music, finding it and her and loving her, yes, she did know that—felt it, even, in his kisses, his thrusts, the air he wasn't breathing, the words that were there regardless of whether or not they were spoken—but not the way she wanted. Not the way she loved best. Not with all of him, unabashed and uninhibited and just *hers* the way no one else ever had been.

Still, music or not, Spike was Spike. He played her with his cock the way he had with his hands and mouth, stroking her insides and setting her skin aflame. Knowing when to start teasing her clit again, the pressure that wasn't too much or not enough, chasing her back to where she'd been just moments ago. Then she was coming again, clutching him to her and whimpering her release against his chest as she spasmed and clenched and felt his answering groan, felt him spurting inside of her, shuddering the way Spike did without the words Spike would use.

They were still together for a few minutes after, Buffy willing her body to calm, the thumping of her heart to even out, normalize, knowing he could feel it—hear it—the same way he could probably hear the chaotic jumble of her thoughts. And it was stupid, she told herself, everything that she was feeling. The rush of disappointment, of loss, that hollow sensation that she hadn't experienced since those months following her resurrection, limping back to Revello Drive, Spike's semen leaking out of her and his eyes, those *love me* eyes, haunting her with every step. It wasn't fair, either, because this time had been about them, about having him back, being able to touch him and be touched. It hadn't been about using him or trying to feel something in place of nothing.

Yet here she was, buzzing still with the remnants of an orgasm, Spike still inside of her but also somehow further out of reach than he had been when dead.

“Buffy?”

She blinked, then blinked again when she realized her sinuses were starting to burn once more. And god, she couldn't do this now. It was unfair, so unfair to both of them, but him most of all. How could she look into those eyes and tell him that they'd made a mistake? That *she* had made a mistake—that being with him now just made the place in her chest where she kept him feel a crushing sort of empty?

“I, umm...” She shook her head in the hopes that it would clear everything up, but all it did was make her dizzy. “I... I should clean up.”

If Spike were himself, this was where he'd take her by the arm and ask her to look at him, tell him what was wrong, if he'd hurt her, if she needed anything. He wouldn't keep her from leaving but he'd want to know what he could do to make whatever had gone wrong go back right. The fact that he didn't, that all he did was nod and pull back until he was no longer inside of her, somehow

just made everything worse. And that wasn't fair, either, because none of this was his fault. Or hers, for that matter. He hadn't done anything wrong.

Buffy hurried around him, down the hall to her bedroom and the bathroom attached to it, feeling him still where she was slick and swollen. She slammed the door closed behind her with more force than was necessary—enough that the thing rattled in its frame—then immediately lurched toward the sink and twisted the faucet. But that was as far as flight took her. The sink, the rush of water hitting porcelain, her hands braced against the counter with enough strength she worried the material might warp. And all of it too much. Way too much. The last few days—hell, make that months—running at full-speed through her head. Everything she'd lost. Everything she missed. Everything she'd gotten back without really getting it back. The knowledge, awful and intense, that she'd probably just hurt him again, not wanting to, not meaning to, but almost certainly to keep doing it until one or both of them cracked.

She didn't know how long she stayed in there, staring at the water as it circled the drain, doing whatever she could to avoid meeting her own gaze in the mirror, before blowing out a breath and shutting the faucet off. Much as she might like, she couldn't hide forever. Couldn't wait for the synapses in her brain to fire off in the right direction, start to make sense of something she didn't understand. This confused mess she'd created without even trying. So she patted her face with shaking hands and turned back to the door.

He was sitting at the edge of the bed, his cheeks sucked in and his gaze fixed on his hands. And while he didn't look up as she stepped into the room, she felt him tense all the same. Felt the weight of the coming conversation pressing hard against the air, the heaviness and the fear as well as the resolve. The shared understanding that there was a thing they needed to address no matter how uncomfortable it was. That was them all over and always had been—not dancing around things but challenging them head on.

Maybe, then, she shouldn't have been so surprised when he just understood.

"Not the same, is it?" he asked without looking up.

Buffy licked her lips, crossed her arms. "I'm sorry."

"No need to be sorry, love."

"I think there is. I was all with the all over you back at the office."

"And I seem to remember telling you I didn't mind."

"But I should've thought through it. There was something in me that didn't... That kept throwing up the caution signs."

"And something in me that didn't wanna hear it," Spike replied, finally lifting his eyes to hers, his own that annoying balance of exposed and unreadable that he'd somehow perfected since winning his soul. Like she could imprint anything she was thinking onto him and believe he was thinking it too, but never know without asking. "I didn't, Buffy. Didn't want to think about it. It was simple to me. You're here, I'm here, and so what if I'm not *all* here? The

bits of me that matter are. And like I said, all of me loves you. Didn't seem like there was reason to wait." He paused, swallowed, and for the first time since he'd manifested into being in her home—since this wild ride had started—she saw something like doubt reflect in his eyes. "Did I hurt you?"

"What? No. No, I'm not hurt. I'm fine."

"Think we have different definitions of *fine*, in that case."

"I am, Spike, I'm fine. I was just... I expected it to be something it wasn't. I expected it to be *us*, but that's just..." She broke and looked away, as though she could find the words she wanted hiding in the corner of her bedroom. "Part of you is missing and it's a part that... It's important. Not having it makes me feel like, well, that you're not really with me. Which now that I say it out loud sounds really stupid because of course you're not really with me. Not all the way."

The silence that followed was suffocating in its weight. Deafening in its loud. For all the good and bad that they had been through together, very little of their history had been strained or awkward. Not like this was. Strained *and* awkward, and made so because she'd made it so. So much it almost felt like a breakup and though she knew that wasn't right, her heart was pounding and her blood was pumping and she could feel her muscles tensing the way they did before a fight. A make-or-break argument that usually ended up doing both.

Finally, Spike drew in a breath, the sound harsh against the quiet, and harsher still for its futility. But when she forced herself to meet his eyes again, he was all she saw. No reproach, no impatience. Just him. As much him as he could be without being all of him.

"Reckon it's like this," he said. "Comparison's probably not perfect, but the principle amounts to the same. A ways back, when I was bloody convinced there was no chance for us, I got it in my head that any Buffy was better than no Buffy. You'd told me to bugger off but that's not how my heart works. Never has been."

"You're talking about the bot, aren't you?"

"Made a Buffy who would love me the way I loved you, yeah." He grinned, though it looked more like a wince. "Only it wasn't you. Gave that wanker all the specs, all the details. Your friends, your mum, that you were the Slayer. How you fight. That you went out every night to protect the world from monsters like me. It wasn't just for shagging, whatever you might've thought. I just wanted...you. There with me. Beating me up or snogging me senseless or just calling me a pig or what all, it didn't matter. As long as it was you." His expression fell again, his eyes growing distant. "Trouble was it couldn't be you. No amount of programming could work it right—make me forget that it was a stand-in. Something I had because I couldn't have the real thing."

"Spike—"

"You took it once you found out about it, but what I never told you was I

was likely to just let its batteries run out and sod the rest. Even before Glory's minions grabbed me to take a poke at my insides, it'd lost... It didn't do what I'd hoped it'd do. It didn't make me want you less. Didn't make the pain of not having you ease at all." The look that crossed his face was haunted. "Worried about it a bit, after Glory. Willow tinkering with the sodding thing and gettin' it closer. Warren didn't know you, did he? Was just goin' off my order form, making it the way I wanted. But the way you talk? How you laugh? The little line that you get right here"—he rubbed between his brows—"when you're confused or worried, all the bits that make you you, he couldn't know. But Willow, if anyone could've made it more Buffy than robot, reckon it was her, but she didn't. I still saw the strings. And the more it wasn't you, the more I hated the bloody thing. Didn't matter how practical it was. It just reminded me of what I'd lost."

"You're not like a bot, Spike."

"No. But I'd wager it's the same principle, yeah? Close but no bloody cigar. Not the full picture. Not what you want."

"I want—"

"Buffy." He rose to his feet, looking at her directly now, his eyes warm. "It's all right. It's all right that you didn't know before."

"But I hurt you," she blurted. "I know I did. And that... I don't want to hurt you anymore. I don't want us to hurt each other. I'd like the *hurt* part of the Buffy and Spike story to be of the past, because there was so much of it and we deserve to not hurt after all the hurt, you know?"

Spike shook his head and stepped toward her. "I'm not hurt."

"You're not?"

"No. Balls, I..." He took another step, the space between them almost gone now—almost but not quite—then slid his hands into his duster pockets and favored her with a smile that was more than a wince. A smile that was actually a smile. "All that tells me is you love me. Love me the way I love you. All of it, even the rot that made you miserable."

"Made *you* miserable, you mean."

"That's why I called you the other, not so pleasant Buffy." That grin was still in place, still warm and expressive, and she didn't know how he did that. How he maintained that smile. "And why I was bloody bored with the thing. I wanted all of you, pleasant and not. I wanted *Buffy*. You wanting all of me, not bein' happy with it just being with half a man, even if that half's the pleasant half... It's why I love you. You want it to be as real as I do. Bloody need it."

Buffy blinked into his eyes, trembling, trying like hell to hold onto the large *everything* that was pressing against her insides, unwieldy and suffocating and quite frankly the sort of messy emotions she had once perfected in shoving behind a door in her mind, one she never opened. Safer that way, for her and others, because when she felt messy, things had a tendency of going kablooey.

Herself, her friendships, the world. She was the one who was supposed to always keep it together. Letting people see the mess was one of the surest ways to lose those people forever.

Except Spike had seen her at her messiest, and he was still here. Telling her he needed the mess as much as she did. That it was part of her, as much as his mess was part of him, and without it they weren't really Buffy or Spike.

"So what do we do now?" she asked hoarsely. "Except not have sex, I guess."

Spike smiled and brushed loose strands of hair away from her face. "Can sleep in the other room, if you like. Or find a place of my own, like you said. Until we—"

"No."

"No? Which part?"

"The second part. Both parts. I don't want you in another room and definitely not another apartment. I know it was my suggestion, but..." Buffy licked her lips. "We could...like that night in the house. Just sleep together. *Sleep*. Emphasis on sleep. Could we do...that?"

His smile remained, his eyes soft. "Yeah, love. We can do that."

And then he kissed her. Not a sweeping kiss, and not a lover's kiss, either. A kiss that felt like *wait*.

And that was good.

She could wait.

She had a lot of practice.

YOU'RE SCHEMING ON A THING THAT'S A MIRAGE

FUCK, BUT SHE WAS glorious.

Even if she'd never learned to throw a punch without dropping her shoulder.

"On your left, Slayer!" Spike called through a cloud of vampire dust and watched with a sort of hunger that had become his constant bloody companion as she twisted, all elegance and grace, and plunged her stake through flesh and bone. It was almost a pity for the chumps that came at her nowadays, but then she needed the action as much as he did. Best bloody way to get their jollies every night, enjoy each other physically without crossing the line Buffy had drawn between them.

He didn't mind the line. Not really. Except on those nights when he did. When the sensation of her head on his chest, her breaths against his skin, the rhythm of her heartbeat under his hands, her scent in his nose, stirred in him something deeper than longing. But still, he couldn't complain. Not when he got to climb into bed beside her every night, tuck her in to him, revel in her warmth, in her realness. No, that was all good. All brilliant. And all bloody torture.

Especially on nights like tonight, when her scent was ripe with more than just the normal fragrances that made up Buffy. When the call of her body was even stronger than it was normally, taunting him with unrelenting hints of what he could be enjoying between her heavenly legs.

On the plus side, a slayer on her monthlies was a vampire magnet, so they hadn't had to do more than stroll through the cemetery to attract enough attention to give them both a nice workout. She was a beacon, ripe and delicious, and everyone tonight was hungry. None more so than him.

Once, perhaps, Spike would have thought he'd get used to it. There had been two months of this. Two months since the witch had given him his body back, two months since he'd buried himself inside her, felt her hot and wet and pulsing around him, and then not measured up. Not been the Spike she wanted—not all the way. Missing those crucial elements that made him who he was, separated by a decision they'd made together—one that had made sense—no matter if it drove them both out of their sodding heads.

And it did. He felt her frustration as richly as though it were his own. The

fine line they continued to dance together. The fact that it had been the right decision seemed almost incidental at times, particularly when his hunger was at its zenith. When he knew he could make her feel better, make those cramps become little more than white noise with his lips and tongue. Satisfy his cravings, too, or at least give him something to make the wait for his reunification with his full self seem less endless.

It hadn't been all that long, he knew. Not really. Hardly enough time to work his appetite up into a frenzy. But it was a special kind of torture—having Buffy like this, conditionally.

There were times he wondered if all those worser impulses that had allegedly been chopped off and shipped to the other Spike hadn't crawled their way home. He didn't have any doubts about her or him, or them together, but it was hard not to feel a mite bruised at the idea that the Spike who was with her now had been lacking in the one area where he'd always excelled. Those long months when she'd used him as a patch for the living, he might not have had her heart but he'd known how to play her body just right. Make it sing. It wasn't right that that knowledge was both with him and not.

Except he knew that wasn't what it was. Not entirely, at least, and probably not even at most. It was just harder to remember that he loved that she wanted all of him, that she wasn't satisfied with just the bits she had, on nights like this. When she was hot and he was hot and her body was crying out for him...and he could do nothing about it until the end of the month.

There was that, though. They were in the final countdown. The last stretch. And the part of him that wasn't all that separate from the greedy wanker on the other side of the globe kept choking back the urge to just say *sod it* and end this miserable charade. Close enough now that he could reason they weren't going to learn anything new or groundbreaking, and if they did, wouldn't it be better to have all the pieces of himself right where they should be so he could be the truest version of the warrior?

He'd think that, then remind himself that he'd come this far. He could wait a little longer.

"Well," Buffy said after dispatching the last vampire, flushed and panting, her hair falling out of its ponytail. "That was...intense. I think everyone heard the dinner bell tonight." She met his eyes, her own bright and beautiful, before looking away in a hurry. "London gets any vampier, and I'll start thinking there might be a hellmouth here after all."

Spike chuckled in spite of himself, crossed the cemetery ground that separated them for the pleasure of dragging a dry leaf out of her hair. "Makes up for the last couple of nights, at least."

She shrugged, tucking her stake back into the waistband of her sweats. "Pretty sure Kennedy's been hitting our territory with the girls, even on their nights off. Something about how they need it more than I do."

“Little does she know, eh?”

Buffy huffed at that, raising her eyes to his. “About me or in general?”

“Take your pick, the answer’ll be the same.”

She grinned that grin that he loved so much, then rose up to brush her lips across his cheek. One of their close-but-no-bloody-cigar expressions of affection, never fully defined but understood nonetheless. Just the language they had taken to using in place of the one currently off limits. “We should probably head in,” she said. “It’s late.”

“Early for us.”

“Yeah, but we have that meeting tomorrow with Willow, remember?”

“The one she set for bloody nine in the morning.” He sighed and rolled his head back. “No respect for the undead.”

“That would be a great argument if you’d ever let the sun stop you from doing anything, even once.” She fell into step beside him, giving him a sly smirk that made it hurt, the fact that he couldn’t touch her the way he wanted. That he had to settle for those close-but-no-cigar caresses, chaste and proper the way he and Buffy had never been—not really. And part of him hated himself for having these thoughts, for resenting the fact that Buffy’s love for him was so all-encompassing that she wanted him whole or not at all. It was precious, this sort of love. Love that accepted no compromises, that couldn’t be appeased by half-measures.

And he knew he would cherish all this even more once he was properly himself, carrying the weight of all his insecurities along with his confidence. It would hit him like a sodding tsunami.

Still, didn’t make this part any easier.

“Do we have chocolate?”

Spike smiled and leaned into her, inhaling the scent of *warmth* and *blood* and *slayer*. “You ask like I don’t restock every week.”

“I don’t eat chocolate every week.”

“Strange that I need to restock so frequently then.”

“There is clearly a chocolate demon in our flat.”

He grinned as he always did whenever she demonstrated that she was assimilating into life as a Londoner. For all the protesting she did, all the claiming that she’d always be a Californian at heart, there were a lot more *flats*, and *loos*, and *lifts* in her vocabulary now, and often said with complete lack of awareness, not forced, just natural. Just Buffy adopting his hometown the way he’d adopted hers. He swore he’d even caught her muttering a *bloody hell* a couple of weeks back when a grocery bag ripped and their fresh produce went skipping merrily across the floor.

“Clearly,” he said now, and pressed a kiss to her temple just to feel the corresponding shudder that rippled through her body, like he knew it would. That was the other part of this forced distance that was torture—the knowledge,

intimate and unavoidable, when Buffy was thinking about things she oughtn't. When she had naughty dreams, when her thoughts became lewd, when she was dwelling on the sort of stuff they didn't discuss.

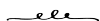
As though hearing the thought, Buffy pulled her head back to appraise him, her eyes soft and kind, and full of love—that pure, radiant love that some part of him, this part, had already gotten used to seeing. Had first noticed more than a year earlier, even if he'd been too in his bloody head to clock it then. And it was because he was used to it, because it didn't humble or awe him, that he knew he wasn't whole. Reminded him how important it was for all reasons, the least of which was physical, to be entirely Spike, not just a fraction.

He couldn't even be properly scared that he was used to Buffy's love. Just aware of it—understanding that it was there, that complacency could cost him everything. And Christ, it bothered him that this was a struggle. That he had to check himself at all. And it also bothered him that being bothered wasn't enough to solve the problem. The parts of him, the pieces wired to put thought to action, were somewhere else. Didn't feel a world away but they were.

Thank bloody god it was May. He didn't know how much longer he could do this.

A man wasn't built to be separated from himself. Especially not this long. And if nothing came of it—if they got to the end and the other Spike didn't clue in, reach out, didn't do what they were counting on him to do—well, Spike might just be forced to stake himself on principle.

Until then, all he could do was wait.



In truth, Spike had been keeping human hours for so long, it wasn't much of a struggle to convince himself to get out of bed even if the alarm clock did bleat earlier than usual.

That morning went as most all mornings had gone over the last couple of months. Buffy wandering through the space like a zombie, going through the motions of getting ready—shower, teeth, hair, makeup—as though part of her was still tucked up in bed. Then she meandered into the main part of the flat where Dawn had preset the coffee machine to brew up a bloody storm, and sometime between her second and third cup, finally woke up in full.

They hadn't said much after returning home last night. Buffy had made a bloody beeline for the place where Spike kept her emergency chocolate—the one corner of the kitchen Dawn hadn't been able to successfully pillage just yet—and tortured him with a symphony of decadent moans as she polished the thing off. Afterward, they'd fallen into what had become their nighttime routine. Scouring the news for signs of anything potentially apocalyptic, then hopping on her computer to visit the LA news sites just in case the international

reporters had missed something crucial. And then, when that inevitably proved inconclusive, taking a tour through the online demon underground Andrew had introduced them to.

“The demon under*what*?” Buffy had asked the day he’d first brought it up. They had been in one of the Council conference rooms, Andrew with his laptop plugged in to some overhead projector or what all, the screen displaying what had looked to Spike like a listing of some sort, but he didn’t go on the internet unless forced so he couldn’t say for sure. “Define the noun.”

“The Deep Demonic Catacombs of the World Wide Web,” Andrew had replied, practically vibrating his excitement. “Demons have found a way to have full conversations about all things underworld by pretending they’re all IC for their RPGs at all times.”

“You are having too many acronyms,” Buffy had retorted. “Definitions please.”

“You don’t know RPGs?” The little git had looked scandalized. “*Role playing games*? Does the name Dungeons and Dragons mean nothing to you?”

“Practically nothing.”

“Well, it should mean something! Even Giles played it back in Sunnydale.” He’d glanced from Buffy to Giles as though expecting the watcher to start extolling the game’s virtues on cue, but unlucky for him, Giles had pointedly avoided meeting his gaze and rather found something fascinating on the floor to study. “All right, people, from the top,” Andrew had said, full exasperation. “RPGs are games in which you assume the identity of a character and act as that character throughout the course of the game, with the gameplay itself dependent upon the decisions you make *as your character* within the boundaries of the world that character lives in. In the old days, we played with dice, but the internet has made RPGs global with forums and chatrooms and stuff, so there are whole websites with demon information and conversation on them. It’s kinda ingenious, actually. And any human who finds them thinks it’s just some dedicated role players. The only thing that’s happened so far that I can tell is sometimes people get mad that there’s not an OOC hangout forum.”

Buffy had glanced at Spike, one of those quick looks that said a lot without saying anything, then back again. “And OOC is?”

“Umm, out of character. Duh.” Andrew had also glanced at Spike and shaken his head in a way that suggested commiseration over a past conversation. One Spike knew damn well they’d never had. “Most RPG sites have places where people can just, you know, go to hang out as themselves. Not their characters. But the demon web doesn’t, which keeps most RPGers from hanging around, except if they’re really hardcore, which I guess would make it hard to tell them apart from demons—”

“Is there a point to all of this or are you just trying to show off how you plan to spend your weekend?” Buffy had asked.

“The point is that if something big is going down, you might find out about it here first.” Andrew had tapped his laptop screen. “Like rumors and stuff.”

“So demon gossip.”

He’d rolled his eyes. “You’re not getting it. These demons, they might not know *what’s* coming, but when something big happens, there are signs. You should see the posts from last year when we were getting ready to take on the First. And then before that, Darth Rosenberg. And before that—”

“I get it,” Buffy had snapped. By that point, she’d been wearing a scowl that screamed she was impressed against her will.

Suffice it to say, surfing the demon web had become a nightly ritual ever since.

There had been nothing the previous night, though. Or more of the same nothing that had been there ever since the noise about the Deeper Well, an incident that had left a bad taste in Spike’s mouth. Angel hadn’t asked for help so much as demanded it be provided, something to do with an ancient sarcophagus infecting one of his people and not accepting that the only one of them that had the ability to do rot about it had been out of reach at the time. The forums and the like had lit up for a good few weeks as a result but quieted down again, save for a few rumors here or there, and certainly nothing to explain why Willow was insistent that Spike and the Slayer come to the office as early as she had. Buffy had followed everything about Illyria with interest, dread and anticipation pouring off her so thick Spike could swear sometimes the flat still smelled of it. That had been the first true experience with the demon web—learning how they discussed portents, the sort of language used, the dividing line between those demons ready to throw their weight behind the Big Bad and those looking to hunker down and hope that the world kept spinning when all was said and done.

If something had come up that wasn’t yet on those forums, it was likely to be big and sudden and hard to manage. The end result was the Slayer was on edge and Spike not too far behind her, though likely for a different reason. More of what was becoming increasingly difficult to keep buried.

“Hey,” Willow said brightly as Spike followed Buffy into the makeshift conference room. Andrew and Giles were already seated at one of the two folding tables that comprised the space, both with steaming coffees set in front of them. “Thanks for coming by so early. We just thought it best to get everything in the open as soon as possible.”

Buffy exchanged a glance with Spike as they settled into their seats at the other folding table. “Everything being what?” she asked cautiously.

“The coven’s seer had a vision,” Willow said. “And to put it frankly, all hell is about to break loose. Like literal, ugly hell, and it’s gonna happen in Los Angeles. Nothing that would’ve hit any of the usual outlets yet,” she added as though sensing how the pair of them had spent the evening. “From what I can tell, there’s just been talk about Angel seeming more and more detached. But

it's enough in what we're hearing, and in how close we are to your deadline, that we—we being me and Giles—thought that it might be good to start talking extraction plan for the other Spike.”

Buffy drew in a sharp breath and her heart, which had been thumping at a pace, began to pound in earnest, making his head ring. “Like bring him here?” she asked shakily, throwing Spike another look, this one bright with both eagerness and something else. Trepidation, maybe, though bugger if he knew what she had to be nervous about.

“We know it's ahead of schedule, but we're at the point now where it makes less sense to wait out the month,” Willow went on. “I'm also... Buffy, I don't want to worry you”—she glanced at Spike almost apologetically—“or you, or anyone, but if Angel is losing his grip on his humanity, it wouldn't be unprecedented for him to lash out at the ties he has to keep him grounded, you know?”

“Meaning you think the other me's in danger of getting dusted,” Spike said bluntly. “That the long and short of it?”

“Based on the digging I've done, Angel would be highly motivated to take out Spike just to remove the competition.”

“Competition?” Buffy echoed. “I don't understand.”

Willow paused once more, exchanged a quick look with Giles, who nodded almost imperceptibly for her to go on. When she did, though, it seemed to cost her something. She inhaled deeply as though to fortify herself before nodding and soldiering forward. “Well, like I said, I've been digging. Someone had to excavate that amulet from the Hellmouth and ship it to Angel, you know? There was a reason that it resurfaced. It turns out that reason was a former Wolfram and Hart employee who was all sour-grapesy about Angel being given the keys—to the kingdom. From what I've been able to verify, his plan was to use Spike to undermine Angel's confidence in himself and his candidacy for a prophecy that is important to him.”

“A prophecy?”

Willow nodded again. “It's called the Shanshu. It talks about the vampire with a soul who plays a pivotal role in the apocalypse, though it's iffy about what side the vampire fights on. The end result is that the vampire in question, once it's all done, would *live*.”

“Yeah, you told me about this,” Buffy said slowly. “It didn't make sense then. Big fight and the vampire gets to live?”

“That's just it,” Willow replied. “What I've found out. It's not definitive or anything, but Angel believes that *live* means to become human.”

Whatever else, Spike hadn't been prepared for that—the revelation or the way it hit him. Square in the chest with the impact of a cannon ball. It was bloody amazing he managed to remain seated.

“I guess Angel was all gung-ho about this prophecy,” Willow went on at a

clip. “And has been cranky about the possibility that he might not be the subject after all. See, it doesn’t say his name specifically—he just thought it was about him because, well, before Spike went out and did the impossible, there was only the one vampire with a soul. He thought he had the market cornered.”

“Oh my god.” Buffy blinked slowly, then lifted her gaze to his, and Christ, he wasn’t sure what he was seeing there. Wasn’t sure he wanted to know, either, for once the cannon ball had fallen to the ground, all he was left with was a firm stark certainty. The knowledge, as intrinsic as any other part of his mind or body, that he wanted nothing to do with being the subject of a prophecy that turned him back into the man he’d been before stepping into that alleyway. Before Drusilla had approached him, dark and seductive and speaking in riddles. He hadn’t known what he was signing up for when he’d said yes, only that the *yes* would lead him to something better than the miserable existence he’d lived until that point. The knowledge, firm and unwavering, that everything was about to change—that he *wanted* everything to change. And he had no interest in any of it changing back.

Yet he was sitting here with a prophecy that could send him back to the place he’d been before, not in total—not even at most—but close. Closer than he’d ever wanted to be. And he didn’t want to know if Buffy was looking at him the way she was because she was just as horrified as he at the prospect or the more likely answer, that she saw the possibility of his becoming human as the ultimate absolution. Proof that he’d transcended his past crimes by shedding the skin he’d worn while committing them in full.

“There are a couple of other problems with this,” Willow went on as though she hadn’t just bloody well upended the entire sodding universe. “The first being that I don’t know how much Angel actually knows.”

That blinked the stars out of the Slayer’s eyes. She gave her head a shake and pulled her gaze from Spike’s, refocusing. “What do you mean?”

“She means that Angel might well have already fulfilled the prophecy,” Giles said, speaking for the first time since they’d entered the room. “In the course of researching the Shanshu, we have uncovered some information that... Well, Buffy, quite frankly pertains to you.”

“Me?”

Giles offered a stoic nod. “Once we discovered the prophecy existed, I thought it pertinent to do as much research as possible to see if we could determine the vampire referenced in the text.”

“And you don’t think Angel’s done that? He has a whole, like, prophecy department under his command, doesn’t he?”

“Quite, but we also don’t know how much they are sharing with him. We have been able to ascertain that once the other Spike became corporeal, he and Angel fought to cement their claim to the Shanshu, so it is something that is of interest to them both.”

“What?” Spike demanded before he could stop himself, the word harsh and bitter. “Bollocks. He wouldn’t.”

Beside him, Buffy went tense, her heart stuttering at first, then starting to pound hard enough that he felt the echo in his throat. “He wouldn’t?” she asked. “You’re sure?”

It was the softness in her voice, the earnestness, the question, that had his stomach tightening. Hell, had all of him tightening, first with resistance, then with realization. That was it—that was why. *She* was why. Of course she was. She was always why, always the reason. No matter what happened, no matter what he was or what he wanted, everything came back to Buffy. And if what Andrew had said was true, if the other Spike had decided not to hop continents to run home out of fear of how he’d be received after one hell of an exit, then it stood to reason showing up on her doorstep bathed in sunlight would give him enough courage to spread his arms and ask if she’d meant the words she’d given him on the Hellmouth. He’d have done something more than save the world—he’d have proven himself worthy, truly worthy, by becoming what Buffy valued more than anything else. By becoming human.

He’d embrace it, too. For her. He’d embrace it with both hands, hold on tight and never let go. A prize that would do all the arguing for him, that would take the question out of the equation. The perfect antidote to all that bloody doubt. And though Spike thought he should leave it, now that he understood, he also knew he couldn’t. It wasn’t fair to himself and it wasn’t fair to Buffy, either. She deserved to know the unsanitized truth, even if it hurt.

“The soul does a lot of things, pet,” he said softly, his voice even, though the rest of him was struggling to hold her gaze. “Opens your eyes, makes you see things in a way you can’t without it. But as much as it changes you, it doesn’t change everything.”

“It doesn’t make you regret becoming a vampire.”

The struggle vanished at that. Spike shot his eyes back to hers. “No.”

She nodded stoically, that impenetrable Buffy wall in place. “So why would the other you fight Angel over a prophecy that would make you human?”

“Cause it’s always about Angel, innit?”

“What?”

“Well, it is.” He lifted a shoulder. “Far as he sees, anyway. Angel’s been the sodding model since the start. The one everyone fancied, everyone loved, starting with Dru and getting worse from there. Man could destroy whatever he liked and it wouldn’t cost him anything.”

“That is extremely not true.”

“Is it? That why you took him back after that first stint in Sunnydale?” Spike shifted his attention to Giles and the unimpressed, stony set of his expression. “Why you kept him in the bloody loop even after he slaughtered the teacher? Kept thinkin’ of him as some sort of authority on all things—”

“That’s enough.”

“Yeah. Wager it is for the other Spike as well. He learns this prophecy exists and he knows what it’ll do to her”—he nodded at Buffy—“to find out that the love of her life is suddenly without a curse or a reason to not try to make an honest go of it, and it’s just another thing he’s lost by not being Angel.”

“So an idiot, in other words,” Buffy said, her voice drier than he might have expected. Certainly more so than it had been a moment ago. But then, that was her all over. Always surprising him.

“He’s operating without the half that knows the better of it,” Spike agreed. “And if I know Angel, he’s probably adding salt to the wound every chance he gets. Playin’ on all those fears and what-have-you that the bastard helped create in the first place.”

“So an idiot but one who comes by it honestly.”

At that, Spike fought back a grin. “Reckon so.”

“It might not even be up for debate,” Willow said loudly in a clear bid to reclaim control of the conversation. “That’s what I was trying to say. We *have* looked into the Shanshu to get answers—I even contacted one of the higher planes to see if there was anything, you know, higher planey that could help answer the question. And... And you know what prophecies are like, Buffy. All subject to interpretation and coming true without really coming true, like you being killed by the Master. You were killed but it didn’t take.”

“I remember that, oddly enough,” Buffy replied.

“Yeah, well, we think the Shanshu might’ve already come to pass.” Willow glanced at Giles as though for permission again, then steeled herself and continued, “The prophecy doesn’t say that the vampire with a soul will *save* the world or anything. It also doesn’t say if he’ll fight for good or evil. It doesn’t even really say *human*, just that he will live. And Angel *did* play a part in an apocalypse...after he got his soul back.”

“An apocalypse he started. Does that count?”

“Well, we don’t know. But it’s possible to read the fact that he came back as the Powers fulfilling the terms of that prophecy.” Willow paused, worked her throat. “It’s also possible that the prophecy was fulfilled *after* that. These beings in that higher plane were...well, really fascinating and scary and powerful, and one the things they were able to do was look at time stripped of magical influence. So, no wishes granted by vengeance demons, for instance, or wonky mummy hand time loops or...this thing we discovered Angel did that we didn’t know about before.”

Well, then, that sounded right juicy, except Spike knew what was coming next, if not the specifics then certainly the results. There was a reason Willow was struggling to look at the Slayer just now, a reason why she kept glancing at the watcher as though for guidance or permission. Whatever had been done involved Buffy and was likely to hurt.

One of these days, Spike wagered he would have to stake the bastard for real.

“Oh,” Buffy said, a resigned note in her voice. As though she had landed on the same information. “Actually, I think I know what this is.”

Spike glanced at her, perplexed.

“You do?” Willow asked, not bothering to hide her confusion. “I... No, I mean... I don’t think you can. It’s kinda...big.”

“Big and pertains to this Shanshu whatchamacallit?” Buffy replied, nonchalant.

“The prophecy, yeah. About—”

“About the vampire with a soul playing a part in the apocalypse and then turning human.” She nodded, her expression stoic. “Look, I know you think this is a big Buffy-breaking bomb, but unless you’re talking about something other than the demon that turned Angel human for a few hours, then sorry to disappoint. I am all with the informed.”

In spite of himself, Spike felt his jaw go slack. “What?”

“What?” Willow echoed shakily. “I... You knew about this?”

“Again, sorry to steal your thunder. But yeah. I knew.”

“How long?”

“Not long. Just since we lost Sunnydale.”

“Good lord,” Giles said, his voice thick. “How... You never said anything.”

“Well, what was there to say? ‘Hey, guess who’s homeless and has a few new memories to add onto the trauma pile?’” She snickered, though the sound came out harder than Spike would wager she’d intended, more bitter. To her credit, she seemed to realize as much at once and straightened as though to regain her composure. “It didn’t seem important.”

“How could it not be important that Angel was human?”

“Because he wasn’t anymore.”

“But he *had been*, Buffy. Did that mean nothing to you?”

At that, Buffy went a steely sort of still—a still anyone who knew her at all would understand meant danger and have them backing up to reclaim the territory they’d stolen by crossing that particular line. When she spoke next, her words matched her eyes, hard and unforgiving. “Of course it meant something to me. It meant one of Spike’s last memories before he sacrificed himself was of me kissing my ex. Someone I held onto for a stupid long time because I thought that he would choose me if given the chance. Like you said, Giles, that he’d left for my own good but not because he didn’t love me—because he loved me so much, he wanted me to have a chance at a real normal life. That day he rewound? I was there for it. Did your alternate plane buddy tell you that?”

Neither Willow nor Giles replied, but they did exchange a telling sort of look.

“It was after he’d come back to Sunnydale to spy on me because his friend had had a vision,” Buffy went on. “I made some excuse to go to LA to see him to chew him out for leaving and then coming back all stalkery, which I still don’t

appreciate because it was the Angel brand of fair. He makes all the calls, never mind what anyone else says, and gets to act like he's the one who's all mature and clear-headed about things. That is until he learns I'm in a new relationship or thinks I might have feelings for someone else—then he gets all huffy and acts like the reason we're not together is because *I* decided we shouldn't be."

Willow was frowning again. "Uhh, Buffy?"

"Right, sorry. The point. The demon attacked when I was there. We went hunting it together, and that's when the blood got all mingly, I guess, and he became human. And for a few hours, it was great. We kissed, we fucked, and then for the second time, I woke up in Angel's bed by myself to learn he was off trying to be a hero. And like someone who was just getting used to having regular-person strength after two hundred years of being a vampire, he got himself hurt." Her voice grew harder the longer she spoke. "So naturally, Angel decides that he can't be a human because being a human means being weak, and that means putting himself in danger and maybe getting me killed, so he goes to some big-shot power being and gets them to rewind the day. All without saying a word of this to me, of course, because that might mean thinking about it for two seconds. No, I don't learn until it's too late—until we have a minute left together, one I spend sobbing, begging him to undo it and promising I'll remember it forever. Which, of course, I didn't, but that's the way he wanted it."

Spike shifted, forcing himself to keep his hands folded and in his own bloody lap. She was vibrating by this point, fairly shaking with anger—with probably more than anger, though he didn't want to consider it. He might not have the insecurities his lesser half did, the jealousy or the doubt, but he did have ears and eyes and a heart that broke when she broke, and even if she'd patched herself together, what she was saying now, what she was sharing, were the scars left over from another wound Angel had inflicted. One her mate had, what, thought to just dump on her in a stuffy office building without care or ceremony?

He knew her friends were her family—were what had set her apart from all the other slayers who had ever lived—but Christ, there were times he'd wondered just how they had managed to keep her alive as long as they had with the amount of care the lot of them regarded her with. Buffy had had more considerate enemies. He should know. He'd been one once.

"And you've known all this since Sunnydale?" Willow asked a moment later, still visibly shaken.

Buffy licked her lips and flicked her gaze to Spike, but only for a second, as though needing to confirm that he wasn't going anywhere. "Yeah. And again, I didn't say anything because it was of the past, and in the grand scheme, not all that important. Like what could you have done? That happened four years ago, and for all intents and purposes, didn't *actually* happen. Angel made sure of that."

“At the least, we might have deduced the means by which you remember a day you didn’t live,” Giles replied, his tone cautious but containing enough edge that Spike wagered his girl was in for a full-out lecture down the line. “Magic that powerful, in the wrong hands—”

“It wasn’t magic anyone was going to find.”

“And how do you know?”

“Because I am pretty sure it was the amulet. Angel said it had cleansing powers.” Buffy wiggled, not enough for most people to clock, but enough that Spike understood just how uncomfortable the conversation was making her. “I was in the blast radius when it went off, more so than you guys, anyway. I think it *cleansed* me, and any magical interference or whatever that I had experienced got whooshed away like Sunnydale. Like I also remember the injections you gave me, Giles,” she added. “I knew those had happened, but I have the memory now. Sitting in the library, staring at crystals, the way it felt when the needle broke my skin?”

Spike whipped his head to Giles, a growl consuming his chest, sharp enough to hurt, as though his insides were raw. “You did that to her?”

Giles straightened though didn’t look particularly apologetic. “All that knowledge about slayers, and you haven’t heard of the Cruciamentum?”

“Of course I have. Just never reckoned you’d be callous enough to put her through that, close as you two were back in the day. My bloody mistake.”

“Back in the day?” Giles repeated, his eyes narrowing.

“You know what I’m talking about, Rupert. We already had this conversation.”

“Guys, let’s not,” Buffy said in a soft, however firm, voice, one she punctuated with a meaningful look. “It happened, it’s over, it’s in the past. And it’s not the only thing. I also had—*have*—memories of what it was like before Dawn. Just side-by-side, there with the memories the monks gave me. It took a while but I worked through it.”

“Good lord, Buffy,” Giles said, sounding faintly horrified. “That’s...entire years of your life.”

“Fifteen of them.”

“But—”

“But nothing. It happened. I dealt. I’m okay.”

“Those memories living alongside your current memories—”

“Is confusing but survivable. Can we get back to what we’re here to talk about? The entire reason you brought us here is you think Angel is tunnel-visioned on this Shanshu thing. Are we thinking he’s so tunnel-visioned he might try to take out the competition?”

For a moment, no one said anything, just exchanged more of those looks that were as good as confessions. Finally, Willow cleared her throat. “The former Wolfram and Hart employee I mentioned, the one who dug the amulet out of

the Hellmouth in the first place... Like I said, he was hoping to mess with Angel *and* the senior partners by bringing Spike into the mix. And he's been caught and stuff, and I don't know what happened to him after he was caught, but regardless of what his intentions were or if the other Spike wants the Shanshu or not, Angel still has this hanging over him. The possibility that he might not get this prophecy that he's been chasing the last few years. And now that we know about that, too, it just seems like the smart thing to do would be get the other Spike to safety before Angel makes any more bad decisions."

Buffy gave another little wiggle but otherwise didn't betray anything. "You think he's getting desperate. I mean, he has to be. Cordelia's gone. Fred is...destroyed. Losing the prophecy—"

"Losing the prophecy would mean losing you," Spike said, his voice low, though not so low as to keep from startling her. "Think that'd be more than he can stand."

"I'm not his to lose."

"The way he looks at it, you are. Bloody hell, love, you always have been." He held her gaze when she turned to look at him, unwavering, not daring her to deny it—daring her to accept it. "Think these two are right. If Angel reckons I'm standing between him and getting what he wants, he's either gonna try and take me out or force the issue."

"By what?"

"By instigating the apocalypse," Giles said bluntly.

She looked like she'd been punched in the lungs. "You really think he would do that?"

"Not in a manner more befitting his soulless counterpart, no. I don't see that. But our sources do indicate he has started making overtures to known members of the Circle of the Black Thorn."

"The what of the huh? Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

"It's a secret society in—"

"You know what? No. Forget I asked. I have too many names and evil organizations to keep square and I don't think my brain can take more overload." She glanced between Giles and Willow, to Andrew still poised over his laptop, to Spike once more, and he saw something harden behind her eyes. Could feel the atmosphere change, almost, so much he was surprised. "I think I got the gist. In the Angel way of looking at the world, he takes the fight to the senior partners and forces their hand, which then triggers the apocalypse. No more waiting game, no more guessing who's the special winner of the swan song thingamabob. Just Angel convincing himself he's doing the right thing and remaining in control of the way the pieces fall until the end. So consider me convinced. We need to get the other Spike out of the blast zone before anything goes kaboom. And then all of us need to figure out what the hell we're going to do to get ahead of this thing, because I swear to god, I am not going to let

him get close to pulling the apocalypse trigger again. I'll kill him first. In the permanent kind of way."

"Hence why we're here," Willow said hurriedly. "Extraction plans."

"Right," Spike said, rising to his feet. He'd been still long enough. "Except it's likely that any type of *extraction* would sound the bloody alarm, yeah? The pair of you know as much about what Angel's doing now because you've got eyes and ears in all sorts of interesting places, isn't that right? Gonna reckon his resources are a mite bulkier than yours."

"Hey," Willow said, crossing her arms. "I think we've done all right."

"Yeah, pet, *all right*. But you're workin' out of an office building you rent on the cheap and most of your slayers are scattered. Got Faith and your girl working with the lot here but that's the extent, right?" He didn't wait. "Just saying that whatever you have on Angel, you better bloody believe he'll have more, probably enough to cover the entire sodding globe, given the power at his fingertips. And especially since that one"—he pointed at Andrew without looking at him—"went out of his way to crow about how the Slayer doesn't trust him anymore."

"Hey," Andrew squawked. "I was badass, okay? My ass was *so* bad. A-and considering that little trip is the entire reason you're here, I think a little gratitude would go a long way."

Spike rolled his eyes. "It's not about gratitude, you nit. It's about what Angel'll expect. Honestly, he might already know about me." He met Buffy's gaze. "About us. Might be sitting on that with the other me under his thumb, determined to keep our parts separate."

The color drained from her face. "You never said anything. You never once told me to worry about Angel having people here reporting back to him."

"Thought you knew already. Thought all of you knew. Not trusting the berk as you do." Spike dragged a hand down his face, meeting her eyes again. "And it's just a guess. Angel can let things stew when he puts his mind to it, but he's not good at walking away if you throw the bloody gauntlet. Seems the best way to suss out what he knows is to go fishing."

Giles cleared his throat. "Meaning?"

"Meaning we drop a lure and see if Angel bites," Buffy said, firmer now as though she was regaining her footing. And she was—he could tell she was. Knew when the doubts hardened into resolve, into action. "And if not him, then maybe the other Spike. Get him to come to us rather than the other way around. That way nothing gets back to Angel to make him think we're on to him—if Spike comes to us, things will just happen the way they happen."

"And what do you suggest to get Spike to come to you?" Giles asked. "It hasn't been a priority of his since he rejoined the mortal coil."

"Oi," Spike barked, but Buffy held up a hand and gave him the sort of look that said, *what, he's right, isn't he?* Though without the recrimination he'd

gotten used to fielding over the last few months. Slayer was all business and determined to keep it that way.

“I could call him,” she suggested, turning back to her watcher. “Tell him Andrew spilled the beans and I want to see him.”

“I still believe it is ill-advised to reach out to this other Spike directly,” Giles said, making Spike’s chest twist a bit because he knew the man was again right. “If Angel is keeping such a close eye on him, there is no reason to believe he hasn’t gone to extreme measures to monitor his communication, particularly since Spike was previously operating under a false assumption presented to him by one of Angel’s enemies. Given the, ah, antagonistic nature of their relationship, it is not outside of the realm of possibility that Spike might be approached by another of Angel’s enemies. Should Buffy attempt to establish contact, it might defeat the whole purpose.”

“So...we’re back to luring Spike to hop on a plane even though he hasn’t shown any indication that finding me is on his to-do list since becoming solid.” Buffy sighed and sat back in her seat, dropping her head into her waiting hand. “Any suggestions on the table now? I really don’t want to wait any longer than we have already.”

“Nor do I,” Giles agreed, and nodded at Willow, “or any of us, but acting rashly could make things considerably worse. We need to keep our wits about us.”

“So the point of this meeting was for you to tell me a bunch of stuff I already knew, that we need to get the other Spike over here but have no idea how to do it, and just wait it out?” She sighed and turned her gaze to Spike. “Bureaucracy sucks.”

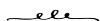
“Actually,” Andrew said, his voice hitting the air at a pitch that couldn’t help but grate the ears, “I think I might have an idea.”

Well, would wonders never cease?

“Indeed?” Rupert somehow managed to look skeptical and impressed at the same time. “By all means, then. Let’s hear it.”

And bugger all if the second Andrew started blabbing, the words that came out were anything but nonsense.

A sign of the end-times if there ever was one.



It didn’t take much to set up, all told. And by the time they had everything in place, Spike knew they had made the right call—if not for the odds of a success, then for what the Roman air did for Buffy’s disposition. The tension that had been weighing her down, the same even he hadn’t entirely clocked for as gradual as it had been, seemed to roll off her the second they stepped off the plane Rupert had chartered. Sometimes that was all it took—a change

in scenery. And being the man who got to be there when the Slayer took in sights that had previously just existed for her as two-dimensional images was a privilege he wouldn't soon forget. Much like everything else where Buffy was concerned.

Andrew's plan had been rather straightforward and, somehow, bloody brilliant. There was a Wolfram and Hart branch in Rome, he'd said. If Angel was tracking Buffy's movements, odds were that nothing had been reported to him in some time because, well, she hadn't moved. She went to work, she patrolled, she came home, and they surfed the demon web then watched the telly until it was time to retreat to the bedroom and prepare to start the cycle from scratch. And even if Angel's crew had spotted Spike with her, chances were good they wouldn't think anything of it, since Spike was in Los Angeles. Maybe the Slayer had just gotten herself a life-size emotional support boyfriend who happened to mimic Spike's style enough to blend. The fact that he wasn't entirely Spike didn't hurt matters, either, as it wasn't like he was going out raising hell on his lonesome, popping up in pubs or really making any of the noise he was notorious for making wherever he landed. The sort of noise he *had* been making in LA in abundance.

So they moved to Rome, found themselves a nice little flat—a sublet that came looking right cozy, furniture included—and settled in. Started a new routine, one that involved going out rather than parking it in front of the telly each night. It was such a small thing, an obvious thing, but somehow one that hadn't occurred to either of them while they'd been living the charade in London. Just the simple act of engaging with the nightlife, visiting clubs, going to shows, plays, bloody tourist attractions, Buffy shoving some pink frilly drink under his nose so he could take a sample of the liquid sugar that got her tipsy and then making that adorable face when he returned the favor with some proper hooch. But the dancing most of all—how she'd pull him off his barstool and tug him into a throng of people just so she could smile up at him through her eyelashes and move against him to the beat of whatever was blasting through the speakers at any given time. Like everything else, it was small, but somehow all the more remarkable for it.

“Why haven't we done this before?” she'd asked the first night, grinning at him the way she hadn't in weeks. Making him feel like maybe the time that had elapsed between Willow working her mojo to make him a real boy again and that moment, right then, had all happened only in his head. It was just him and her again, no larger world out there to consider, no pieces of himself to put to rights, and Buffy regarding him with a full blast of her love. The love this version of Spike wasn't fool enough to doubt.

And he'd reckoned he could blame that if what he did next was a mite forward, though he'd thought it at least as safe as pulling him onto a dancefloor just so she could do that rolly motion with her hips. Spike had lowered his head,

inhaled a lungful of Buffy, skimmed his cheek along hers as his lips neared her ear. “What’s that, then?”

He hadn’t imagined her reaction, either. Not the sharp intake of breath or the way her heart began to rabbit.

“Dance,” she’d replied, linking her hands behind his neck. “We never danced.”

“Now, now, you know better than that.”

“I mean a real dance, Spike. Not fighting.”

“Those dances felt real enough to me.”

“Are you saying you’d rather I punch you right now? Because that could be arranged.”

He’d chuckled and pulled her closer, feeling lighter than he had in he didn’t even bloody know, just lighter. Maybe it had been good for him too, this Roman adventure. At the very least, it was doing something—not just waiting for an arbitrary countdown to hit its magic number. And he knew the reason behind it, understood it was smart to not cut off what could be valuable avenues of information on someone she didn’t trust, but knowing that had done nothing to make the time itself more bearable.

This was better. Even if nothing came out of it, if Angel didn’t take the bait, the simple act of doing was enough.

Of course, it also made the act of Angel taking the bait even bloody sweeter.

It happened on their third week. They were strolling hand-in-hand by the Colosseum—Buffy was taken by it, this thing from her history books and telly come to life, and often found reasons to steer them down this street just so she could get another glimpse of how it was there among the shops and the restaurants. A piece of an old world dropped in the middle of the modern one. And as much as she liked looking at it, he liked looking at her looking at it. The childlike wonder in her eyes combined with the warrior’s experience, the parts of her that were exhausted and jaded merging with the parts that were still so young, so close to the age she’d been when magic had been *magic* and not what it had become. All it did was cement his need to show her more, give her more, of the world she had sacrificed herself to preserve, no matter how long it took to get there. For her to be free to seize a little of the ordinary she’d always claimed to crave, try it on for size, and reach the inevitable conclusion.

They’d have their chance, he hoped. Assuming neither of them did anything fool enough to get themselves killed between now and when he was one with himself again.

Spike didn’t realize his own mind had wandered until Buffy pulled him back, squeezing his hand twice in quick succession and putting him instantly on alert. They hadn’t established a code or anything, but he knew that was what it was without asking. Knew what she was telling him for reasons that had bugger all to do with preternatural awareness or his heightened predator senses. They

were being followed.

She met his eyes, and though she didn't speak aloud, he heard her anyway. *Follow my lead.*

Always, he thought back, and fell into pace beside her again as she turned and pointed at a small gelato shop across the street. "Buy me something sweet to eat?"

"Guess I'd better," he replied, smirking. "Not like you can eat yourself. Though if you ever get a hankering to try..."

Buffy rolled her eyes and play-slapped at his chest. "That was bad. Like even for you, that was bad."

"Still got you to blush, didn't it?"

She snickered, squeezed his hand again, the meaning different now, though he didn't know how until they'd negotiated their way through traffic and back to the walkway. Buffy suddenly drew up short, going rigid in that way she did whenever she sensed a threat nearby. "Did you see that?" she asked after a moment.

"Something catch your eye?"

"In the alley." Buffy slid her gaze to his and nodded. "Pre-treat workout?"

"I'm yours to command."

She nodded again meaningfully, then reached to retrieve the stake she'd slid into her back pocket. Spike made a show of doing the same, moving deliberately but with practiced inattention. They were putting on a show now and he had to act his part. The dotting companion whose job was simply to follow her down the alley as she chased the bogeyman, all while watching her for his next cues.

The alley was on the larger side, located in one of the higher populated tourist destinations. Buffy played her role well, every inch of her firmed so she formed the very picture of the Slayer on the hunt. If Spike hadn't known better, if his own senses hadn't alerted him to the presence of a third entering the alley, he might have fallen for the show as easily as their new chum. Instead, he trailed her down toward where some local had set out their rubbish bin and watched as she performed looking around the place, cursing and kicking against exterior walls with enough force that someone especially thick might be fooled into thinking she'd found someone to wrestle with. And not for nothing, but the Slayer was a brilliant actor. Knew just how to contort her body to provide the illusion of a fight without giving anything away, the sounds to make, the hard grunts that carried the natural rhythm of an actual tussle. How to throw herself into and against things, when to curse, when to gasp, when to turn to gauge her surroundings and implore her companion for help.

Only of course it was just a part of the play. Staging to lure the chap in. Spike rushed in to start making a mess at her side, though being sure to keep her eyes in his periphery all the while, as that would be where he found his cue.

"It's—ahh." Buffy grunted, doing her best to keep her back to their ap-

proaching stalker. She rocked theatrically from one foot to the next, whipped her head this way and that, doing a brilliant job of creating the sort of frenetic energy that bred confusion. Then, spinning like a bloody ballerina, she gave Spike the nod he'd been waiting for—a nod that wasn't a nod, really, or wouldn't be damn near impossible to clock for someone who didn't know her as well as he did. Or who couldn't follow every move she made with the same level of attention. But that was just fine—it was for him and him alone.

Spike exploded into motion, whirling around and seizing the bloke who had been creeping ever nearer by the scruff of the neck, then thrust him face-first into the brick wall at his right. At the same time, Buffy ceased with the acrobatics, breathing hard and her cheeks flush from exertion, but otherwise just as she had been before she'd put on this spectacle.

“Hope you enjoyed the show,” Spike told Buffy's admirer as he seized him by the shoulders to spin him around. “She doesn't perform for just anyone.”

There was a sizeable goose-egg already forming on the man's forehead where it had been slammed into the wall, but he was blinking eyes that were alert enough to inform Spike that no lasting damage had been done. Hell, he hadn't even lost consciousness—or enough of his equilibrium not to realize that he'd waltzed directly into a trap, or by whom. He flicked those too-alert eyes between Spike and the Slayer, harried but still assessing, then raised a hand to explore the swelling place on his noggin.

“Believe me, you'll live,” Buffy said cheerily enough, hands on hips. “If he wanted to kill you, you'd know from the being dead.”

The man blinked blearily. He was a young bloke, shaggy brown hair, and a bloody soul patch that made Spike hate him on principle. “What happened?” he asked, his accent American, his tone a sort of affected slow that did not match the amount of energy behind his eyes, or make Spike think this git had ever once considered a career in acting. “I think... Did you see what hit me? I think I might've taken a wrong turn.”

“A wrong turn?” The pep in Buffy's voice had fallen away, replaced by the calm, confident warrior, and despite himself, Spike felt an electric tingle race down his spine. “Get me confused with the *other* girl you're following?”

“I... I...” The man dropped his hand, but not the act. It was still too late. “I don't know what you're talking about,” he told Buffy, his voice shaking. “Following? I was just going back to my hotel.”

“Which hotel would that be?”

He blinked, opened his mouth, closed it. “I don't remember.”

“You don't?”

The tail's eyes narrowed, the act dropping. “Word to the wise—you want to interrogate someone, maybe do it before you throw them headfirst into a wall.”

“Hey, look at you, all spunky. I think you're gonna be just fine.” Buffy offered a sweet smile and took a step forward. “Which is good, because I need you to

get a message to someone for me.”

“A message?”

“Yeah. Angel. You know Angel, right? He’s the one who sent you here?”

The man blinked, the blip of shrewdness that had been in his eyes a second ago gone again. “I don’t know any Angel.”

Buffy favored him with an exceedingly patient look. “Tell Angel he’s gotten sloppy with power, outsourcing his stalking. It’s sad, really.”

“Pathetic,” Spike chimed in, grinning. This was the part he’d been looking forward to the most—the hook that would get his other self off his sorry arse in a bloody big hurry. It was risky, they both knew, but the sort of risk that felt appropriate to take. As long as the stateside Spike followed the bait, they could handle what else decided to show. “Should also tell him to mind his own territory, mate. He might be the head honcho of that little law firm, but on this side of the planet, I call the shots. You get me?”

The little Angel lackey gave an urgent, pitiful nod.

“See, I don’t think you can,” Spike replied. “You haven’t even asked who I am yet.”

“You’re Spike,” he blurted, and just like that, they were done with pretense. Even better. Now everyone was speaking the same language. “That vampire that Angel thinks is working for him. I don’t know how you got here, but—”

Spike would admit the next part was a mite showy, but he was also more than all right with that. Sometimes it paid to remind people just exactly what they were dealing with, never mind who. A flash of vampire speed, a demonstration of vampire strength, and Angel’s lackey suddenly became a lot less chatty and a lot more terrified. Exactly the way he ought to be when staring down someone who could snap his neck and take a nice, long drink before anyone, even the Slayer, could do a sodding thing about it.

“There’s where you’re wrong,” Spike snarled, curling his hands into the fabric of the lackey’s shirt and lifting him a good few inches off the pavement. “You understand? I’m not *Spike*. Spike is in Los Angeles, a good little tin soldier. I’m a demon of a different color, and that’s what you’ll tell him, understand? You’ll tell him you did your job and noticed that the girl was attracting the wrong kind of attention.”

“Fuck off,” the man rasped, clawing at the Spike’s wrists, little good that it did. “You don’t scare me.”

“Would you like me to?”

“Or better yet...” Buffy appeared behind the little lackey, seized one of his flailing arms, then bent it back until the man wasn’t just rasping anymore, but yelling, and she kept right on bending. “You were telling me this needs to look realistic, weren’t you?” she asked Spike. “Otherwise Angel would never fall for it.”

He flashed her a grin that felt downright feral. He hadn’t said anything of the

sort. “That’s right.”

“Then this ought to do it.” Buffy gave a brutal yank and the air split with the crack of snapping bone. “I can keep going,” she told the bloke in a neutral sort of tone that somehow rose above the screams wrenching free of his mouth. “I can do this all night. You want to walk again? You’ll find us scary enough to do what we tell you.”

God, she was incredible. Beyond incredible, point of fact. A force of bloody nature unto herself, and it seemed their new friend had finally gotten the message, for he was suddenly nodding hard enough to make the bones in his neck creak. They didn’t have much time now—some nearby Samaritan was bound to have dialed for the authorities—but they didn’t need time. They needed understanding, and Spike thought they might have it at last.

“Tell Angel the Immortal is sniffing around the Slayer,” Spike muttered into the man’s ear. “The *Immortal*. You get that?”

“The Immortal,” the man sputtered, still nodding. “Yes, the Immortal.”

“And who is the Immortal?”

“Whoever you want him to be,” the man replied.

“Wrong,” Buffy intoned, and took hold of his free, non-broken arm in a way that damn near had the git pissing himself.

“You,” he said, gazing at Spike with wide, terrified eyes. In the distance came the wail of sirens, and Spike could feel the alley crowding—not with people, but with eyes. Locals peeking through windows, hiding behind curtains, and doing more to help the story spread than anything else could. “You’re the Immortal.”

Spike offered a toothy grin. “You’re bloody right, I am,” he said, and that was the last the poor sod heard before Buffy’s foot smashed into the back of his head, and the lights went out behind his eyes.

“Too much?” Buffy asked, panting and, Spike could tell, teetering near the edge of panic as she lowered the lackey to the ground. He didn’t blame her—it had been quite the rush, and not as coordinated as they’d wagered it’d be, despite all their planning. Once the adrenaline began to crash, she’d be in a bloody tailspin.

“He’s breathing fine, love. Reckon he’ll live.”

She nodded, still shaky but in the way that preceded her taking charge all over again. “And Spike? The other Spike?”

“Suspect we’ll know if that paid off soon enough. But right now, pet, we better—”

“Yeah,” she agreed, brushing sweaty strands of hair from her face. “Make with the getaway.”

And wait, but she didn’t say that part. Didn’t need to. It was there between them—the knowledge of what came next. But that was fine, too. It was still *doing*, and Spike was ready to do. She was too.

One way or another, they were heading toward a reckoning. And personally,

he couldn't wait.

THERE IS ONE LOVE I SHOULD NEVER HAVE CROSSED

SPIKE HAD SWORN THE Immortal would be a decent lure owing to some grudge that would never be fully satisfied. A grudge that *he* didn't feel at all at present, but his other self definitely would, and strongly enough it wouldn't be difficult to convince him to hop a plane and travel to Italy. Granted, they ran the risk of Angel tagging along, because that was just the way he was—he might outsource his stalking, but when it came to riding in for the supposed rescue, he'd want to do that in person. And probably fast because, well, Spike said so and on matters regarding him and Angel, Buffy was inclined to listen.

Which meant they had little time to make the set-up look authentic.

“Won't you being here make your other you's vampire senses go haywire?” Andrew asked Spike upon opening the door to the flat currently staged as Buffy's and Dawn's. “Or Angel's? I thought vampires had the noses of, like, bloodhounds.”

“Bloodhounds, really?” Buffy asked, trying and failing to keep the laughter out of her voice.

“Well, yeah. Because of the blood thing.” Andrew sighed theatrically and turned back to Spike, who remained on the other side of the threshold. “Do I need to invite you in or something? I thought that only worked on real *haciendas*.”

“No invite needed,” Spike confirmed, tipping as far forward as Buffy assumed he could get without actually walking through the doorway. “Just trying to feel the place out, is all. See if I can picture the Slayer cuddling up here with anyone. Seems a bit...”

“Boring?”

He paused and threw her a knowing grin. “Was gonna say looks like your old home.”

“The one in Sunnydale?” She blinked and gave the place another once over, trying to see it through fresh eyes. It was definitely cozier than anything she'd attempted to do with the London apartment, with warm colors and accents, not to mention some very Joyce-like artwork on the walls. But that had been the point—make this flat look lived-in. Like somewhere Buffy would call home, settle, have nested, be happy. All things she hadn't actually done since leaving

the Hellmouth, despite the comfortable routines she'd fallen into over the last few weeks. It had very much felt like a *life on pause* kind of thing, at least where her personal life was concerned. All her focus had been fixed on getting to the deadline she and Spike had set, however arbitrary that seemed now, and doing what she could to prepare both herself and the growing slayer army for what came next.

But life in personal stasis wasn't actually life. It was just existing. And now, standing in the middle of an apartment that had been rented, furnished, and staged all for the sake of fooling any non-Spike person who might be traveling with him, Buffy realized she was kind of sick of personal stasis.

"Yeah," she said at last. "It does look like home. Or Mom's version of home. I guess that's what I think a grown-up place looks like. Fancy art and lamps and stuff." She considered the space for another beat, drawing her lower lip between her teeth. "Nothing like what I've done."

That was apparently all it took for Spike to decide to cross the threshold. The next thing she knew, he was at her side, running a comforting hand along her arm and favoring her with a soft, affectionate smile. "Home's supposed to look however you want it to look."

"Thanks, dear. Great non-answer." But she found herself smiling regardless, leaning into him to brush a kiss across his cheek. Doing her best not to react when he tensed, or when he melted into it. They hadn't talked about it since she'd decided that sex wasn't right without all of him, but she knew, could feel, how their limited contact was weighing on him, mostly because it was weighing on her too. Really, until the moratorium on sex had been decreed, she hadn't realized how often she casually touched Spike, how natural it was for her to reach for him. And she could be wrong, but she didn't think that was something she'd learned after their relationship had turned intimate—it had just always been there. Like her skin cells were magnetically attracted to his or something.

"Reckon once everything is settled, we can worry about how we'd like to do up our flat."

She blinked up at him, her heart skipping. "We?"

"Well, you kickin' me to the curb?"

"No, dummy, it's just... I hadn't thought about it at all, actually." Not about the logistics of their living arrangement after his halves were reunited or the apartment itself, if she were being truthful, and not because she hadn't wanted to, just that it hadn't occurred to her. Symptomatic of nothing in her life being all that permanent these days. None of the places she'd landed had ever felt like anything more than a glorified hotel room, more likely to be packed up and left behind at a moment's notice than anything that would last.

"If you're hankering for distance after all this is behind us, best tell me now. Can start looking at places—"

"I don't want distance. When I say I haven't thought about it, I really

haven't. I've been very much in-the-now girl." Buffy pulled a face at him. "Plus, it'd be really weird to go from not dating and living together to dating and not living together, don't you think?"

"You two aren't dating?" Andrew blurted, his eyes saucer-sized. "How are you not dating? You're always together!"

"We're not-dating dating," she clarified before Spike could intervene. "On hold dating until he's all Spike again."

"Oh mama, that puts *mucho* pressure on this little operation, then." Andrew released a nervous titter, his brow suddenly very shiny. "I so do not want to be the reason you two don't get back together for realies. And...how is that gonna work? Making him one vampire instead of two. You know, since Willow isn't here and Spike is probably on his way. Did I miss a memo?"

Spike glanced at Buffy, who was ready, reaching into her pocket and pulling out the shattered remains of the amulet. There had been a lot of discussion about this bit of magic—everything from Willow herself working it to some chum of hers that she trusted, and more variations of the same suggestions she'd made when all this had been new. The time that had lapsed since then had allowed Willow to consider it a bit more, study the magic imbued in the amulet, in the metal of the chain that had held the thing together and kept Spike from dusting as the sun had beat down on him. Her conclusion was that the amulet itself was the best, safest way to get the Spikes whole again—use the same magic that had split them, now shattered thanks to Buffy, to bring them back together. All they'd need to do was loop the thing around both their necks, say a chant, and the spell would reverse.

Willow also thought it best that Buffy be the one to do the actual chanting, since she was the one who had been there, holding his hand, when the initial magic had started to work. Recreate those circumstances as best they could to make sure everything went smoothly. And Buffy was all for that, no matter how much it intimidated her. Call her selfish, but reuniting with Spike wasn't something she wanted to share with anyone. It was for her and her alone.

"Oh, neat," Andrew surmised once he'd been brought up to speed. "Like...bookends. It's so romantic. Symmetrical." He studied them for a moment that stretched on just a hair too long to be comfortable, then clapped his hands and turned to give the fake apartment what looked like a much more intense review. "But we're really not worried about other Spike noticing that the place smells like, well, him?"

"Don't wager he'd jump to the conclusion that there's another version of himself running around," Spike replied dryly as Buffy tucked the broken amulet back into her pocket.

"And it's not like it matters if he manages to shake Angel before he gets here," Buffy added, trying to ignore the dubious look Spike threw her. He was very much of the opinion that Angel would tag along—something about "not

letting the Slayer get too far off his hook” if he could help it. “I’m just saying, if it is *just* Spike that shows up, then there’s really no need to worry about what the air smells like.”

“But there’s no bloody chance of that.”

“Pessimist.”

“I know the wanker a fair bit better than you, pet.”

“Hence why we are going to meet with the Immortal to get our cover story straight.” Buffy turned back to Andrew, who was giving her full-on puppy eyes. “You did good,” she said, and the transformation was instant. He not only relaxed but started to preen a little. “As for the smell thing, we’re not going to worry about it. There’s only so much of this we can control. If Angel does show, he’ll hopefully be with Spike and therefore won’t wonder where the Spike smell came from.”

“Wouldn’t hurt to see if the Immortal could swing by and stink up the place, too,” Spike added, nudging Buffy’s arm. “Speaking of which, think we’re gonna be late if we don’t light out now.”

“Since when do you worry about punctuality?” she replied, even if she had just verified the same courtesy of the wall clock lying on the couch—the one Andrew had decided against hanging anywhere after being informed that Buffy usually relied on the microwave to tell her what time it was. “But yeah, we should motor.”

“As I was saying, Slayer.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She turned, seizing Spike’s hand to tug him after her. “Andrew, you good?”

“Oh yes,” he called after her in a voice full of practiced optimism. “I will give the performance of a lifetime in the name of *amore*. Even with, you know, all the added pressure of making sure your star-crossed romance gets back on track.”

“And hopefully a mite less star-crossed,” Spike murmured, making her snicker.

“Good,” she said in parting to Andrew just before she and Spike reached the end of the hall. “Once I know how many vampire exes to expect, I’ll let you know.”

Spike shook his head, squeezing her hand as they turned toward the building entrance. “We already know how many.”

“Yeah, yeah. A girl can hope.”

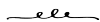
“Just don’t want you setting yourself up for disappointment, love. When has anything ever been easy for us?”

“Hence the hoping.”

Spike huffed but didn’t respond, either deciding it wasn’t worth it to argue or that perhaps it was better to let her hold onto her optimism, even if Buffy knew he was most likely right. They weren’t the sort of people who often caught those kinds of breaks, and when they did, they almost never came without

strings.

Truly, one little deviation from the norm didn't seem like such a big ask.



But of course, nothing was ever that easy.

“Dammit.” Buffy snapped her cell phone closed and tried not to smash it into the café table, but it was a close call.

“Bad news?” Spike asked in a tone that was too knowing, too smug for his own good as he eyed her over the fancy coffee he'd ordered to blend in with the other patrons.

Buffy shook her head, threw him a scowl, then forced herself to refocus on the man—or creature, or whatever—sitting across the table, studying her with the same intensity she imagined a really enthusiastic mortician might aim at a fresh cadaver. She hadn't had a clear picture in mind when it came to what the legendary “Immortal” might look like, save for the scant references Giles had been able to uncover in his reading and Spike's less-than-complimentary description, but somehow the Immortal managed to both surprise and not. Like, not shocking: he had gorgeous eyes with long eyelashes, miles of wavy ebony hair, one of those chin clefts that she'd only ever noticed in cartoons, and smelled some sort of amazing. Shocking: he thought sleazy come-ons that had peaked sometime in the late nineteenth century were effective on modern women. Or that she was flattered by the way he undressed her with his eyes, cooed over every little sound she made, and did obscene things to her hand with his mouth instead of just shaking it like a normal person.

This was the guy who had evidently gotten both Darla and Drusilla eating out of his... Well, Buffy didn't want to think too much about the places on his body they might have touched with their own mouths. Or worse. Though Drusilla's nuttiness had never been more apparent to her than it was now.

“I'd tell you, but you already know,” she finally said to Spike, who grinned and winked at her in a way that was at least earned. Way more than she could say for Cassanova over there, who she unfortunately needed to favor with her undivided. “So it's both of them,” she told him, resettling. “The other Spike and Angel. Not ideal but also not a big surprise.”

The Immortal—and what kind of stupid name was that anyway?—inclined his head, a sly smirk spreading across his lips. “I am not surprised. They are creatures of, ah, passion, are they not? Especially in pursuit of one as lovely as yourself.”

“Will you do it?” Buffy asked flatly, her patience approaching the danger zone. “I know we didn't give you a ton of time to prepare, and there's really nothing in this for you—”

“I would hardly call you nothing, *tesoro*.”

“Well, *I* am not for you. Or anyone. Except the people I choose.” She was starting to wish Spike had invented someone. At the very least, a truly fictional boyfriend would be a lot less annoying than the one they had recruited, though likely not as effective. The speed at which both Spike’s other half and Angel had dropped everything to travel across the globe was not lost on her—the bad blood here ran deep. “I need you to be clear on this—the whole *this isn’t real* thing. We’re not dating.”

The Immortal shifted his gaze from her to Spike. “You two are not?”

“No, we are. I mean, yes, Spike and I are a thing. But...” She sighed, trying and failing to find the right combination of words. “It’s complicated, okay?”

“I would call being split in half a little more than complicated, *cara*.”

So, he *had* been paying attention. Maybe they were actually getting somewhere. “But you’re okay, if asked, telling people that we’re together? You and me, that is. I don’t think it’ll last more than a couple of days, but I know a couple of days can still be inconvenient. Just until we’re able to get the Spikes back as one.”

The Immortal was still studying Spike, his eyes narrow, his brow furrowed. “And this is satisfactory to you?”

“What’s that, mate?”

“The William in my memory was not a man who enjoyed sharing his women.”

“I cannot stress how much sharing of me will not be happening,” Buffy practically snarled through her teeth. “It’s all—”

He waved a hand. She wondered if he’d be that dismissive if she seized it and snapped his wrist. “I mean no insult,” he replied. “Simply a matter of truth, yes? Even with subterfuge as the objective. He is...how you say?...territorial. The vampiress Drusilla used to boast of this often. How her William would punish her for her misdeeds, and how that was part of the joy in committing them. My impression of such a man was that a discussion like this was one he would not tolerate.”

Buffy slid her gaze to Spike, who shrugged. “Things change,” he said. “Men change. *People* change.”

“Ahh,” the Immortal replied. “But are you people? Are you *men*?”

“Not keen on providing a demonstration. Reckon you’ll have to take my word for it.”

“And that is a true shame.” The Immortal grinned again, his eyes dancing, and shifted his attention to Buffy once more. “I am impressed, Signorina Summers. And intrigued. Perhaps we might have the opportunity to collaborate in the future on matters more...pleasurable than this.”

“You don’t even remotely know how to keep it in your pants, do you?”

“I am hardly to blame if my pants are not up to the challenge.”

If these lines really worked on anyone, honestly, the Immortal had earned

every bit of his reputation. Or people needed to develop better standards. Or both. Either way, Buffy was done with this conversation. She'd just needed to confirm that he would act as her alibi, and he'd indicated he was willing to play ball. They had a couple of vampire-sized fish to fry now, and the clock was running against them.

Buffy plastered on her PR smile and rose to her feet. "Thank you for humoring us, Mr. Immortal—"

"Please..." The Immortal also stood, seizing her hand with a flourish so smooth she couldn't even be mad. "Call me *Anton*."

"Anton?" Spike echoed at whatever the opposite of a whisper was. "I've known you for more than a sodding century. How's it you never told me your name is Anton?"

"How is it you have never asked?" the Immortal—*Anton*, apparently—retorted.

"I damn well have."

"Alas, I must not have heard. Pity." Anton squeezed Buffy's hand again as he slid his gaze back to her, an oily smile spreading across his lips. "It has been a pleasure, *amore mio*. Should you ever find yourself in need of *stimulating* companionship, please do call upon me. I am but your most humble, most obedient servant."

Yeah, the sort she needed to scrub off in the shower, though hopefully he saw none of those thoughts on her face. Demonic Lothario that he was, one of the lessons she'd definitely learned over the last year was to avoid burning bridges if at all possible, even ones that led places she'd rather not visit. There was a lot more to being a slayer these days than there had been in Sunnydale, and like it or not, she was the reason.

"Well, that was the closest you can come to torture without having any fun," Spike said once they were well away from the café. "Almost forgot how much I loathe the wanker."

Buffy snorted her appreciation, though made sure to look over her shoulder first to make sure no one sensitive was within earshot. "He agreed to help us, so let's focus on the good and not the skeezy."

"He aims to collect a favor down the line, Slayer. Likely one that'll repay him in kind."

"I'm not going to put out, if that's what you're getting at."

"Course not. Won't stop me from hoping he pushes his luck enough that you have no choice but to take off his head." Spike glanced at her, grinning. "Got a plan, then? Or are we just out for a stroll?"

That was a perfectly good question with no ready answer. It still hadn't quite hit her, that the moment was here and things were happening. Even after all the planning, the waiting, the stretch of time that hadn't been long but had also somehow been forever, it seemed impossible wrapping her brain around

the reality that the other Spike was somewhere nearby. And Buffy was used to impossible, used to thinking on the fly and coming up with last minute strokes of genius that invariably saved the day. But it had been a long time since the stakes had been personal. Since she'd been asked to gamble with the life of someone she loved.

And maybe that was all in her head, too. The stakes, the gambling—maybe even the read she'd had on Angel these last few months was inaccurate. Maybe his actions had been perfectly rational, and the careful distance she'd insisted on completely unnecessary. Maybe a lot of things—and that was precisely the problem. She didn't know. And while she didn't have facts, she had to work with assumptions. The assumption that Angel had deliberately prevented Spike from reaching out to her—either directly or indirectly. The assumption that he'd come to Rome because he'd also fallen for the trap she and Spike had set together and was, for whatever reason, determined to head Spike off from making contact. And then the larger assumption that the rumblings from her people in LA had nothing to do with Angel, and she'd wasted a lot of time and resources chasing a dead end. Or worse, that she'd kept Spike in two places rather than one when they could have had the last few weeks together.

That was the thing with maybes—once they started, everything was possible, sometimes even probable. But only one thing was true.

"I'll call Andrew," Buffy said at last, forcing herself out of her thoughts. "Just make sure that he's ready to sell the story about me and the Immortal." And there was another thing—worrying that Andrew wouldn't be able to convince anyone that the sky was blue, much less that Buffy had been swept up in a torrid affair. Especially if selling the story meant lying to Spike's face. Lying *for* Spike, apparently, being a thing he was very willing to do.

"What do you feature we do in the meantime?" Spike asked.

"Where would the Immortal take me if we were going on an actual date?"

"Probably to a shag pad or what all."

She rolled her eyes. "Okay, let's pretend that I'm not the sort of girl who just goes to a guy's *shag pad*."

"Right, but he's not *some guy*, is he, Slayer? In this story, he's your steady fella."

"And any *steady fella* of mine knows it takes more than sex to keep me entertained."

Spike looked her over, smirking in a way he hardly seemed to do anymore—before or after going all splitsville—and seeing it there on his face, unguarded, familiar, and entirely confident, made her normally very sturdy legs go a little weak. The more subdued Spike was one she'd slowly adjusted to, and this version even more so, but there were moments when the bits of him she thought he might be trying to rein in slipped out anyway.

And it made her miss him the way she shouldn't be able to miss someone who

was standing right in front of her. But welcome to the never-ending paradox that was her life.

“Shame, that,” he said at last. “There go my plans for once I’m whole again.”

“I said *more* than sex. Not that there would be no sex.” Buffy’s cheeks went warm, and she glanced away before she could betray more of herself. This entire topic seemed dangerous considering what they were and, more accurately, what they *weren’t* doing. “Like food. Food is good. I like movies, and I’m trying to get into books, too. Poetry.”

“Can help you there.”

Yeah, she might have a fantasy or two that revolved around Spike and poetry. Namely Spike reading poetry *to her*, either dressed as a stuffy English professor—but not stuffy like Giles, because eww—or while peeling away layers of clothes and whispering verses into her skin. Or best of all worlds, the stuffy English professor doing the peeling while he became progressively less stuffy, though never losing the glasses. For whatever reason, Spike needed to be wearing glasses in this fantasy. It was very important for the aesthetic.

“Or dancing,” she said quickly, knowing if she let her thoughts linger, her body would start to give Spike the sort of signs that were just unfair. “I like dancing. And we recently discovered we’re good at it.”

“Just discovered?”

“You know what I mean.”

“You’re hell on a man’s ego, pet.”

“Your ego can use a little hell every now and then.”

“Suppose it could. So, dancing. Any particular club you fancy?” When she didn’t immediately follow, Spike inclined his head. “Reckon that one is the best bet. Lots of people, competing scents and the like. Better our chances of getting the other me away from Angel long enough to make us whole again.”

“And there’s no way the other you shows up without Angel.”

“Slayer, he came along for the ride. Not gonna show up just to let someone else get to the girl first.”

Yeah, that made sense. Like, really annoying sense. Angel truly was the Dawson to her Joey. Which she’d have to put the kibosh on in a big way once this current stretch of *everything* was behind them. Even if she and Spike didn’t work out long term, the days of Buffy saving a piece of herself for Angel were way with the gone. Had been ever since the cleansing power of the amulet had cleansed the rose-colored hue right off her memories about their relationship. It was hard to come back from knowing the man you’d believed would’ve done anything to be with you had, in fact, chosen anything *but* to be with you when the opportunity had arisen. Never mind that he was, for whatever reason, fixated on the thought of winning his humanity all over again.

But those were thoughts for other days. Right now, she had to decide how best to lure a pair of exes into a place where she could snag a particular one of

those exes for a quick and clean reunification ritual. So Buffy let out a breath, grounded herself, then pressed herself up against the Spike at her side, batting her eyes. “Let’s do a place we haven’t been yet. Brand new place.”

“Think I can swing that.”

“Then take me dancing, Mr. Immortal.”

If he was surprised by her being extra touchy-feely, he didn’t show it. Rather, Spike smirked down at her. “Long as you promise to never call me that again.”

“Done.”

“And that once this is over and everything’s set to rights, we do it for real. Proper date and all.”

Buffy nodded, not prepared for the way her chest tightened. God, the finish line was so close now, and the *somedays* and *maybes* she’d been subsisting on were almost ready to be cashed in. Soon he *would* be able to take her out on dates—not ploys to lure out stalkers or staged events for the benefit of exes. They could hold hands without it being weird, do normal coupley things as they tried on an actual relationship. Also the unspoken but very real fear of that relationship—not of Spike himself but of him and her trying on something they had never done before, and realizing that after all the heartache and pain, they didn’t know how to be happy together. Didn’t know how to be two people in love outside of their identities as slayer and vampire.

And that thought, that *possibility*, scared the crap out of her. Spike was the person who knew her best in the world, who saw her, understood her inside and out—hell, understood her in ways she just barely understood herself. If she couldn’t make something work with him, after everything they had already been through together, she didn’t think it was possible with anyone. And moreover, she didn’t *want* it to be possible with just anyone. She wanted it to be him.

At this point, she honestly couldn’t imagine knowing Spike was out in the world somewhere but not with her. It was tantamount to never seeing Dawn again. A vital piece of herself, a piece that helped her understand who she was, who she had been, and who she wanted to be.

But that was more than she could dump on Spike—especially a not-whole Spike—right now. And who knows? Maybe the fears were just stupid mind whispers. Yes, every relationship she’d had before had failed, but the one with him had never been honest and had been cut off before they could discover what they could be.

“Didn’t think this was a stumper,” Spike said, drawing her back to the present, his tone light but his eyes worried. “You don’t fancy a proper date when all’s said and done?”

“No, I do. I just...” Buffy inhaled and glanced down, annoyed with herself. “It’s just a lot to think about. I very much want you to take me dancing.”

“Dancing’s a lot to think about?”

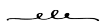
“The whole you and me thing is. In a good way.”

He didn’t look convinced but also didn’t belabor the point, either sensing it wasn’t the right time or knowing that prodding probably would do neither of them any favors. Instead, he nodded, offered a slight, not entirely sincere smile, and took her hand.

“We’d best be off then. Time to put on a show for any lookie-loos.”

“First, Andrew. He needs to know where to send them.” And she needed to know what to tell him. “Where are you taking me?”

Spike smirked again, curled an arm around her shoulder and pulled her into him. “Someplace you’ll feel right at home.”



It wasn’t exactly the Bronze, but he hadn’t been wrong—the club did ping high on the nostalgia meter. Loud but not so loud she couldn’t hear her own thoughts above the music, thrumming with people in various stages of inebriation and just enough non-Spike vampires to make her slayer-dar extra tingly. Buffy did her best to distract herself on the dance floor, falling into sync with the man she’d somehow only recently started dancing with in earnest, but she was too distracted. Kept looking in the direction of the entrance, waiting and hoping and dreading and needing to see the mirror of her date walk through.

“It’ll happen,” Spike would promise her every time more than her eyes started to wander, as though he felt her thoughts as well as he could feel everything else. Now, he pressed a hand to the small of her back, drawing her closer to him, to the rhythm he was trying to help her lose herself inside. “Long as you’re the bait, he’ll show. Moth to a flame, that one.”

Buffy forced a grin, succumbing to the music with what she knew was obviously fake enthusiasm but, hey, she wasn’t performing for him. Or this him. “And you’d know, huh?”

“Better than anyone.”

As it turned out, she didn’t need to keep vigilant on the door to know when the moment had arrived. The part of her that was perpetually attuned to him, that had become so second nature that she didn’t register it much at all anymore, was suddenly more than just *present*. It was blazing. She hadn’t realized until that moment just how muted her special *Spike’s nearby* senses had been—there with their familiar tickles but *less* in every sense of the word. Being close to him before had been like flirting with a live wire, her instincts pulling her toward him, and her heart pulling her in another direction, except there at the end. In those last months, she had surrendered to the inevitability of his gravity, let herself fall, and fall, and fall until there was nothing to do but brace for impact. And somehow, it hadn’t occurred to her that the physical sensation of being in his presence hadn’t felt the same since he’d been freed from the amulet.

Now that she was feeling it, though, *god*, she never wanted to not feel it again. For the first time since Sunnydale had fallen, she felt close to home.

“Circling around to the bar,” her Spike said—the one in front of her. “Might be the time to move, love.”

“Move?”

“Any second now, the other me’s gonna sense you nearby. I’ll see if I can distract Angel long enough for you to say your piece.”

He was gone before she nodded, before his words even registered, moving with that preternatural grace that looked both good and a little *too* good on him. Spike was a lot of things, and yes, one of those things was definitely *suave*, but not an effortless sort of suave, more practiced and perfected. Buffy sucked in a breath, tried to ignore how hard her heart was hammering, and after a few seconds of standing motionless on the dance floor like some kind of moron, remembered to be the moth he’d mentioned. Spike—the other Spike—would know something was up if he found her just rigid among the masses, and she couldn’t afford for him to stop acting and start thinking. There was no telling how Angel would react to discovering this had all been an elaborate set-up to reunite someone he hadn’t even realized was split in two, or even worse, if he actually had worked all that out and had been intent on keeping the Spikes from becoming one again. Which were all very strange thoughts to live in her head but when you’d realized you might never have known someone who had been in your life for years, anything was possible.

The best she could do was play her role without anyone suspecting it was a role, so Buffy threw herself into dancing like no one was watching. Never mind that her dance partner had moseyed off elsewhere; she had taken herself on plenty of dates and knew all the moves when the music was right. The hardest part was to keep in motion, refrain from turning her head toward the sensation of Spike’s nearing orbit, and *god*, that was so strange—feeling him but a different part of him. Then, yes, understanding he was closing in on her. Almost on top of her.

And then another sensation tickled at her neck—another set of senses alerting her to *vampire* and *familiar* at the same time, and Buffy’s stomach about turned.

“Oh, yeah, here it comes,” Angel was saying. “The part where you run off alone and play the big hero so Buffy’ll take you back. Well, newsflash, Blondie Bear. Never gonna happen.”

Blondie Bear? Wasn’t that what Harmony used to call him?

Then Spike was talking. The other Spike, close enough to hear, and it was real. This strange double life she’d been living the past few weeks was real, for it *was* him—his voice, his words, the reassuring rattle of his presence. Only it wasn’t the Spike who had just left her side. Somehow, even years of living in this world—the one where things like this not only happened but happened on a

daily basis—had not prepared her for just how wiggy it was to hear the man she'd come here with speak about her as though they hadn't seen each other in months.

"Look," that Spike drawled, "I know I don't have a shot with her, all right? Probably never did, but I still care about her, and I'm not gonna let her end up with a jerk like the Immortal. Or you."

"Hey, ours is a forever love."

Nor had she been prepared for how badly she'd want to punch Angel in the stupid throat the next time she saw him. Aside from the fact that he was ruining the plan, there was everything else. All the things he'd held back from her—all the things he'd let her believe—suddenly rushing past the hurt and bitterness, hardening into the sort of anger that would make her explode if she had to hold it in too long. Still, she somehow managed to keep her back to them, focus instead on her thundering heart and the hope that the other Spike, *her* Spike for lack of a better term, had something in the works to keep these two idiots separated for more than ten seconds. Otherwise it was all for naught.

The Spike at her back was scoffing. "I had a relationship with her, too."

"Okay," Angel shot back, "sleeping together is not a relationship."

Buffy had to bite down on the inside of her cheek to keep from screaming. How dare he?

"It is if you do it enough times," Spike retorted.

And at that, she nearly lost the hold she had on herself. Nearly stumbled over her own feet, which she was focused on keeping in motion, the beat of the music something she felt in the abstract but thankfully could surrender to muscle memory. Except she couldn't have predicted that—words that came from a voice that sounded like Spike's, spat with the right amount of attitude and derision, but hit her like a weapon when she knew she wasn't the target.

That wasn't the way Spike talked about her—about *them*. It never had been, and right or wrong, it made her feel...cheap. Minimalized. Their relationship distilled to the parts that she was most ashamed of rather than the thing they had built last year.

She knew it wasn't entirely Spike—just half of Spike. Still, that didn't make the sting any less painful.

"Spike," Angel said.

"What?" Spike replied. They were both distant, blissfully unaware of the storm waging between her ears.

"The head."

"I thought you had it."

And that was it, the most she could hold back. Buffy whirled around in time to see a small wrinkly demon clutching what looked like a bowling ball bag to his chest and hurrying through the throng. There was a scuffle, and familiar faces appeared in the corner of her eye—faces that couldn't catch her looking

at them unless she wanted this entire night to go even more off the rails than it had. Then, out of her periphery, she caught a glimpse of brilliant platinum from near the bar—her Spike, the one she was going home with tonight—and that was enough to inspire her back to action. In a flash, she had her back to Angel and the other Spike again, her heart thundering in her ears and against her ribcage with enough force to hurt.

She had to get out of here. It was too late to salvage their plan. And she knew that, felt it down to her bones, yet it still took deliberate will to convince her legs to move. To tear herself away from the vibrant *something* that stirred in her just at being near the other version of her vampire—feeling their separate halves, somehow distinct and full but both undeniably Spike—knowing that she was leaving that behind. That their time wasn't now, no matter how much she wanted it to be.

It was fine. She was fine. She had survived this long and could survive longer.

But god, she was tired of just surviving.

She was ready to live.



In the following days, Buffy resolved to remind herself the entire plan had been a longshot. That it wasn't a surprise nothing had gone the way they'd wanted, that trying to predict Angel was a crapshoot on a good day, never mind when he felt he was in competition with anyone. That they had done their best, and that was all that mattered—the rest would be resolved one way or another.

Still, it was a bitter pill to swallow, coming to her fake apartment that she'd let herself think might be the stage of a genuine reunion. Spike in full, not in fragments. Spike with his hard edges, his bite, his snark, and yeah, the insecurities too. Maybe it was wrong to miss something she knew caused him pain, but the Spike in her life was a little too confident, cocksure, all the bravado and none of the soft belly he was acting to protect. The parts of him that he needed her to understand, the way he understood the fragile parts of her.

Not that she didn't love the Spike who walked into their hotel room that night, wary and apologetic after following his other half all around Rome. She did. She just missed being on even footing with him—missed what it felt like to be complementary halves rather than whatever they were now.

"What's this about cookies?" Spike asked as he let himself into the room. She had just gotten off the phone with Andrew, who had confirmed a final appearance had been made by Angel and the other Spike, one in which he'd wished them well, told them that Buffy loved them both ("Get it?" he'd asked giddily. "You *both*. This Spike and the other Spike! You love them both because together, they are one!") then left them gawking after him as he escorted two very out-of-his-league women out on what she could only assume was a very

fake date.

“What?” Buffy asked dully, staring blankly at the television—more specifically, the cooking show she honestly couldn’t remember having settled on. Or maybe she hadn’t. Maybe she had officially become her mother and just switched on anything for background noise to fool herself into thinking she wasn’t alone. Easier to deal with the cacophony in her head when it wasn’t set against an endless, echoing silence.

“Cookies,” Spike said again, closing the door. “Heard Angel bitching about how he was supposed to wait for you to bake and the Immortal’s enjoying his cookie dough or some rot.”

Buffy shook her head, pulled her gaze off the rather mesmerizing swirls being made in, well, cookie dough, oddly enough, as the on-screen baker people did the whisky thing. “When was this?”

“When the pair of them swung by the flat the last time to see if they could catch you.” A smirk quirked his lips. “Think Angel might’ve actually shed a tear.”

“Andrew didn’t mention that when I talked to him. That you were there.” She and Spike had decided to cover different ground after the fiasco at the club, with him sticking as close to his other half as he could. Risky, yes, but less so with a more reserved, cautious Spike making judgment calls.

“Decided to circle back once they fell for the bomb in the bag,” he said, shedding his duster and tossing it to the armchair.

“The what in the huh?”

“Too long to explain. Short story is the other wanker’s gonna be bloody tickled to learn the real coat didn’t go up in the explosion.”

God, her head was pounding too hard to follow what he was saying. “English, please.”

“The coat, love. My coat.”

Buffy frowned and glanced at the duster, the familiar creases and texture of soft leather that he wore as a second skin, that she had wrapped her hands around more times than she could begin to add up. “How does that work?” she asked, the ache behind her eyes intensifying rather than doing the decent thing and cutting her a break. “You have a duster and he has a duster—are they both the real thing or neither?”

“Answer’s probably yes.”

“Yes?”

“Both are real and neither are real.”

“That makes no sense.”

Spike settled beside her on the bed, started prying his boots off his feet. “More sense than Angel getting weepy over cookie dough. Care to explain?”

Buffy was still frowning at the duster, thinking about the scuffs and strain she’d been responsible for adding to the leather over the years. How her fingers

had eventually known certain parts of it by feel alone, found grooves and patches that were *hers*, and that it was that coat—that specific coat—on the shoulders of that specific vampire who was stripping his jeans down his legs, and how those same legs were in other jeans, attached to another vampire who was also *this* vampire, probably somewhere over the Atlantic by now, flying farther from her after having been so close. How *she* had been so close to having this part with its mind fuckery behind her. How she'd hoped she'd get to press Spike—whole, complete Spike—against the mattress they were sitting on together, and even if they didn't have sex, feel a measure of peace just in knowing that all of him had come home.

Instead, he was looking at her, waiting for her to explain cookie dough while she waited for him to remember the rules about being naked together—in that they couldn't—and pull out the boxer briefs she'd bought for him that, no matter how often she saw him in them, never ever looked right. Not even close to right, and definitely not as right as the duster, of which there were two, and the other was maybe destroyed or maybe traveling back to the US.

"I want this to be over," Buffy blurted, not meaning to, not even registering her lips were moving until the words were out. Until she had already started to crumble, fall into the space that had no end, and he was there to catch her, of course he was, but he also wasn't. For the arms that came around her weren't unique. The chest waiting to be her pillow wasn't the only chest of its kind. The voice that filled her ears had a double, and that had been fine so long as the end had been in sight. So long as they'd had a plan.

She didn't know what to do now that the plan had failed.

"It will be, love," Spike was saying into her hair. "Soon. We'll fix it. I promise we'll fix it."

They would. She knew they would. She understood.

Except there was something waiting on the other side of the fix. Uncertainty, doubt, all the things Spike had died with, all the things that had split him down the middle, given her this version and the one who was on his way back to LA with Angel because he didn't believe what she'd told him.

The doubt she missed would be waiting for her at the other end of this. And she'd have to fight all over again to get him to believe her. And that had been easier to accept, to swallow, when the fight was supposed to start tonight.

She didn't know how much more waiting she had in her.

SLASH AND BURN, RETURN, LISTEN TO YOURSELF CHURN

IT WAS HARDER FOR her. She was used to her plans working out. Perhaps not wholesale, but the ones that were important—even the ones that she pieced together at the last minute—had a tendency to come off hitchless. The day won, the bad guy defeated, the objective met. Really, whatever she put her mind to was almost always bound to work out in her favor. She was just stubborn enough, resourceful enough, strong enough to see it through.

The fact that they walked back into the London flat a little less together than intended... Yeah, as itchy as he was to be his whole self again, Spike knew he hadn't really lost anything. He hadn't gained anything back yet, either, but they weren't worse off than they had been before. Just moved the date back to where it had been from the start. Time would keep marching forward and eventually—sooner rather than later, most like—there would be a sodding reckoning. Angel's plans, if they existed, would be unearthed, and the other half of Spike would be brought home. Made to realize just how daft he'd been to have said the things he'd spewed in Rome. The things Buffy had been near enough to hear, too.

"He doesn't believe we were more than sex," she'd told him that first night, once he'd managed to coax her to speak. "That our relationship was just what happened after I was resurrected."

"Reckon he was just trying to placate Angelus, love."

"Well, why? The last person I said *I love you* to was *you*. Doesn't that mean anything?"

"Of course it does." He'd smoothed her hair back from her eyes, reveled in the warm hum of her skin beneath his fingers—reveled and resented alike for reasons that made him feel no better than the other wanker wearing his face, even if he knew it wasn't as simple as all that. That being with her, holding her, was worth more than the entirety of their torrid affair, for it was honest and real. A relationship built on something greater than just a handful of soft moments scattered between the bruises they'd left on one another.

At the same time, though, the wanting her part had no end, the desire to love her with his hands and mouth, express himself best by saying nothing at all. To kiss her and touch her and push her onto the mattress, distract her from her

sadness for hours, if she'd let him. The soul hadn't been enough to temper that part of him, the part that sought to physically comfort, and neither had being split down the middle.

"But you didn't hear it. The way he said it... I've never heard you talk about me like that."

"Buffy—"

"And I know it's not all of him because *you're* right here, but it..." She'd sniffed and pulled back, regarded him with her wet, shining eyes that made his tired old soul want to weep. "I know what Andrew said, that you...the other Spike thought letting me know he was back would be...cheap or whatever. But this was different. The guy at that club didn't sound like a guy who loves me. It didn't sound like *you* at all."

He hadn't said anything at first, not knowing where to begin. What he could say, even, that she didn't already know or that he hadn't already said before. He'd understood her hurt, her confusion, mostly because the largest part of him *didn't* understand the decisions the other version of himself had made beyond a broad academic sense. That he could know Buffy existed in the world and he wouldn't seek her out, regardless of whatever had come before, was so far beyond him it felt like something more likely to come up in a Jules Verne novel than reality.

And yeah, he got that the wanker was afraid, but fear was surmountable. Fear was what gave him strength, kept him alive against all odds, empowered him to charge into fights with impossible stakes and claw his way to the other side. Fear had traveled with him from Sunnydale to Uganda and back again, and despite how it had shaped him, shaken him, it hadn't stopped him from pulling on the old Spike costume. That he could have done that—could have hurt her the way he'd hurt her and found the courage to walk back into that home while pretending nothing significant had changed—should have made any challenge to follow not only easy, but almost insultingly so. What was a phone call when you'd already conquered the hardest thing you'd ever do?

The most he could hope was that he would understand in time. That the things that weren't clear to him now would be clear once he was reunited with all his faculties. That he could explain himself then, understand the bits he didn't.

"What if he's moved on after all?" she'd whispered, voice so soft he'd had to strain to hear it, vampire ears or no. "What if that's the reason?"

"Bollocks."

"You can't know—"

"I can and do. We've talked about this. I know myself, Buffy."

She hadn't replied, and he'd known why. It had been rather bold of him to say he knew himself in one area while being completely baffled in another, but Spike trusted that was true. There were certain things about himself that made

bugger all sense to him even when he was all one man, and other things that were bloody law. Infallible despite contradictions, boldly true even when all evidence suggested otherwise. Buffy was his gospel, his religion, the one unchanging thing about the entity that was William Pratt, no matter how many times he was cracked, split, or broken. Each and every fragment of him would be hers. There was no other existence as far as he was concerned, and certainly none that he wanted any part of. All pieces of Spike, no matter how many, would always be hers whether or not she loved him.

But she did love him. That was the crucial piece the other part of him was missing—the thing that he took with him to bed every night, the thing he had waiting for him at the end of this journey, no matter how long it took to get where they were headed. The other Spike didn't have that. He had the memory, had likely carried every moment with him since coming out of that amulet, his own private treasure, his space that was his and his alone, but it was tangled in the belief that life could never be sweeter than it had been in those seconds before he'd died. That Buffy's love was something he'd gotten in return for being a hero, even though there had to be a part of him that knew better. A part that understood that if all she'd felt was friendship or gratitude, there were a thousand other things she could have said to him in that moment that still would've been the bloody perfect send-off.

All he could do was hope that things were as clear as they were right now once he was on the other side, however long it took to get there.

Which, as it happened, turned out to be not so long.

The call came on their third night back from Rome, just as Buffy had been about to head out to do a patrol of the nearest cemetery. Alone, she'd said, needing time to decompress, think, and it was one of those nights when thinking would be easier without him around confusing her thoughts. He'd understood that too, even if it smarted a bit, and volunteered to cover territory on the far side of town. He'd even swallowed back the flare of annoyance at the hesitation in her eyes, knowing it was the product of worry she didn't need to voice, that it came from an honest, if not insulting place. He could take care of himself just fine, didn't need her looking over his shoulder or whatever skills his other half possessed to put demons in the ground. Whatever he wasn't saying must have been broadcast across his face, though, for Buffy had at once looked apologetic, opened her mouth to undoubtedly launch into an explanation he didn't need. But she hadn't gotten further than that before the stillness had shattered with the loud ring of the phone.

Buffy had blinked at him, and he'd shrugged in answer. No one he could think of would call just now unless there was an apocalypse around the corner. There had been nothing meaningful waiting for them when they'd gotten back, either, from Rupert or any of the slayers they worked with on a daily basis, and Rupert was the sort of bloke who preferred breaking bad news in person

rather than over the phone. Their number was also more than unlisted—some protection put in place by the Council or whatever they were calling it these days. If someone was ringing her, it had to mean something.

And it did. For the second she scooped up the phone, *his* voice was on the other end.

“Buffy.”

Buffy froze. So did Spike. Hell, so did the molecules in the sodding air. It seemed the whole world was holding its breath just then. Finally, she worked her throat and refocused, shaking off surprise the way a soldier would, and reacclimating to the new paradigm.

“Angel.”

“Before you say anything, just... I know you don’t trust me. Your man Andrew was very clear on that point, and while I wish we could have had a conversation about it, I get it. Working with Wolfram and Hart... I don’t know that I would’ve trusted me, either.”

Spike somehow managed to suppress a snicker, but only just. For her part, Buffy furrowed her brow and breathed out. “Okay,” she said slowly. A pause, then, “Andrew said you were in Rome recently. Looking for me.”

“Yeah. I was worried.”

“Worried.”

“I know about you and the Immortal.”

At that, the tension in her shoulders went slack, and the confusion in her eyes cleared up. “Is that why you’re calling?” she asked, terse. “Because seriously, Angel, I can really do without you pulling the jealous ex crap every time you hear I’m dating someone.”

“I didn’t... That wasn’t what that was. And what do you mean, *every time*? You’re the one who told me Spike wasn’t your boyfriend, remember? And the soldier jumped me out of nowhere—”

“Is this really why you called? ’Cause as much fun as it is, I have other things—”

“No,” Angel said in a rush. “No, it’s... You’re free to date whoever you want.”

“Gee, thanks for that.”

“But you should know the Immortal—”

“If you have a point, now would be the time to reach it. Before my patience runs out.”

“Something is going to happen in the next couple of days,” he said without missing a beat. “I mean, *I’m* doing something, and I don’t know what’s going to happen, but it could be... There could be global repercussions. And I thought you should know.”

“Global repercussions?” Buffy locked eyes with Spike as though to make sure he was hearing what she heard. “That’s nice and vague.”

“And now I think you know what I mean.”

“At one point, I might have agreed with you.” But it was there on her face—the annoyance that was hardening into a veteran warrior’s awareness. “Unless you’re trying to tell me that you’re doing something that will lead to the apocalypse.”

A beat. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know.”

“No, I don’t. That’s why I’m calling.”

Her eyes darkened, and her hand tightened around the phone. “You’re calling to give me a heads-up that you may or may not be doing something that leads to an apocalypse, *and* you’re giving me attitude?”

“Look, I didn’t need to call at all. I thought it was the right thing to do in the event the worst happens.”

Oh, yeah, brilliant move, Angelus. Get high and mighty with the girl, she’ll be certain to listen then. Spike sucked in his cheeks and glanced down, fighting back more than a snicker this time.

“The right thing to do,” Buffy echoed. “Really.”

“Well, yes. If there is an apocalypse, it seemed like a good idea to make sure someone with an army at their disposal was informed so they could lend a hand, if they happened to have the time to spare.”

She didn’t respond at first—not in a way Angel would be able to see, at least—but Spike was a scholar of her silences and needed no help interpreting this one. Her patience had run out, stretched to its thinnest, ready to snap altogether if Angel insisted on pushing. And he would insist, because that was what Angel did. It was what he always did.

“I’m not going to take morality lessons from someone who is intentionally poking the apocalypse bear,” she said at last. “Did it ever occur to you that *this* is exactly what we thought might happen? Historically, you in proximity to power equals badness for pretty much everyone.”

“I am working to destroy it,” he retorted, and maybe his tone wasn’t full whine, but there was enough there Spike had to keep himself from rolling his eyes. “That’s the entire reason we said yes to this deal—it was an opportunity to change the system from the inside.”

“And clearly it’s going very well if you’re ready to end the world.”

“We’re not playing by their rules, Buffy. That’s the point.”

“I’m sure that’ll be very comforting to the people who may or may not die in your maybe apocalypse.”

“Are you going to help or not?”

She blew out a long breath, her jaw so tight Spike could hear the creak of bone when she parted her lips. “We’ll help,” she ground out. “Do you know what to expect or should we just plan on winging it?”

“They— My team is going to confront me tomorrow, I’m guessing.”

“You’re guessing? And confront you about what?”

“I’ve made decisions and encouraged certain rumors to help sell the idea that Wolfram and Hart got its wish. That I’m...corrupt. It would only work if my own people thought I’d lost my way. They needed to believe it as much as Wolfram and Hart.”

“So you’ve been convincing,” Buffy surmised dryly. “Well, at least you got to put a bunch of practical experience to good use.”

Angel sighed now, but apparently decided it wasn’t worth arguing the point, rather pushed ahead. “I know these people. If they think I’ve switched sides, they won’t let that slide. They’ll come at me, probably try to kill me. Wes will, at least, given what I’ve let him believe about Fred. When they do that, I’m bringing them in. Letting them know we’re taking the fight to Wolfram and Hart. There are a couple more things—tests I’ll need to pass—before we’re ready to move, but it’ll happen fast. When it does, I imagine the retaliation will be fast, too.”

“Ergo slayers.”

“Slayers, magic, whatever you can spare. They won’t pull any punches, and neither should we.”

Buffy fell quiet again, her brow furrowing that way it did when she was trying to put pieces together, visualizing the battlefield from half a bloody globe away. “Okay. Give me two days to get my people together. Can you do that?”

“I can try. Depends on how quickly things move here.” There was a pause. “Are you... There’s something else you need to know, if you do come.”

She inhaled sharply at that, fixed her gaze on Spike’s once more, the steady thumps of her heart exploding into an all-out race.

“Of course there is,” she replied with that slayer steel of hers, her tone giving nothing away. “What?”

If Angel heard her thundering pulse through the line, he played it bloody cool. “It’s... Spike is here. He’s alive. Or as alive as a vampire can get. The point is he’s back. And he has been for a while.”

There had only been a handful of times Spike had gotten to witness something like this—a true bloody bombshell, the sort of thing that would alter a whole person’s world in any other circumstance, lobbed at someone who had already recovered from the blast. Who had, in fact, been living with the aftermath for months, sitting on it as quietly as everyone else, just waiting for the day that knowledge became public. He watched as Buffy pressed her lips together and her eyes fluttered shut, her brow wrinkling and her expression growing pained, and he understood. Of course he understood. Felt it too, a bit, the bittersweet acceptance that they had arrived at a crossroads at last. A hurdle crossed—perhaps even the largest one. No more pretending as far as that was concerned.

But it wasn’t a small thing, arriving at the end. Neither was recognizing it. Few people did.

“Spike is *there?*” she asked, her voice shaking. And while it wasn’t shaking for the reason Angel would guess, Spike knew the sentiment behind it was the same. The culmination swelling. “Spike is *there?*”

“He is,” Angel replied with his usual stoicism.

“I...” Buffy opened her eyes again, met Spike’s. “How?”

“We don’t know that, actually. Well, there are theories. Someone, an old enemy, tried to take credit for it, but I’m not sure how much I trust that information. We’re still looking into it.”

“Still?” The question scratched at the air with the sort of pain that was impossible to fake. “What do you mean *still?* How long has he been there?”

“A while.”

“Angel—”

“I didn’t want you to be thrown off guard when you arrive. That’s why I’m telling you.”

“You don’t want me *off guard?* How magnanimous of you.” She swallowed, blinking eyes that were growing waterier by the second. “How long is a *while?* Tell me.”

A beat. “I think it was something like two weeks after you left LA. Right after my team took over operations at Wolfram and Hart.”

“Two weeks.” Buffy blinked and tore her gaze from Spike’s. “Two weeks. And you’re just telling me now.”

“I’m telling you when you need to know.”

“I didn’t realize you were in charge of deciding when I get to know someone I love is alive.”

“Love?” Angel spoke as though he had a bad taste in his mouth. “You *love* Spike? Last we talked, you were cookie dough and he was in your heart. Now you’re dating the Immortal and you *love* Spike?”

This time when the urge came, Spike didn’t fight it, rather let himself snicker. He’d never gotten Buffy to explain what the cookie dough nonsense was about, but apparently the reports from Rome hadn’t been an exaggeration. The wanker was truly in knots over bloody baked goods. Or unbaked goods, or whatever the case.

“Of course I love Spike!” Buffy shouted. “Have you always been this dense or is this something that’s happened since you signed up to work for evil?”

“I—”

“He saved the world, Angel.”

“So have I! Just as many times as he has.”

“I can’t believe you. Are you seriously trying to compete with him? Now? After you tell me that you’ve been keeping him a secret for nearly a year?”

“Hey, I didn’t *keep* him anything,” Angel retorted hotly. “He had every opportunity to tell you himself. We even had a stupid send-off for him once he became corporeal, and the big idiot turned up the next day, making excuses,

and that was *his* choice. So maybe if you want to be mad at someone, be mad at him.”

“I have enough anger to go around. You can share.”

“It’s not my fault that this is the way you’re finding out, and you know it. Ever consider that you’re just mad at yourself?”

The way Buffy’s face closed down, Spike wagered his oblivious grandsire would be lucky to survive this next apocalypse without being staked as a result of friendly fire. It would certainly serve him right.

“Mad at myself?” she replied in a low, dangerous tone that anyone with a lick of sense would know better than to prod.

But no one had ever accused Angel of having a lick of sense. At least not with a straight face. “You’re telling me now that you *love* Spike. You ever tell him that? Because the guy who’s been here since last spring certainly doesn’t think so. He’s convinced he doesn’t have a shot with you.”

“And I’m sure you’ve been very helpful in trying to talk him out of that.”

“What do you want from me? I’m not the one who spent the last few days in Sunnydale giving the two of us mixed messages. You kissed me and told me to wait for you.”

“I kissed you because I’m an idiot,” Buffy snapped, her fingers tightening around the receiver. “I kissed you because I have some stupid Pavlovian response to seeing you, and you swooped in and—”

“I did not swoop! There was no swooping! And Pavlovian, really?”

“Well gee, Angel, it turns out I might have some intimacy issues when it comes to falling in love with vampires with souls. I can’t imagine why that would be, can you?”

“Okay, so it’s my fault you kissed me.”

“A lot of things are your fault, yes, but that’s entirely on me. I was a dummy.” Buffy broke off, shaking her head and closing her eyes again and seeming to shut down on herself. “I was a stupid, stupid dummy. But you knew that, too. I have this crystal-clear memory of *telling* you that to your face when we got to LA. You remember, we were in the courtyard, and you caught me crying, and you wanted to know why. And what did I say? What did I tell you?”

Silence filled the line the second she stopped speaking—the sort of silence that did plenty of talking on its own. And Spike felt himself tighten all over, though not on his own behalf. Despite everything, all the talks and decisions they’d made in the time since he’d come spilling out of the amulet, Buffy hadn’t shared much of what had happened in the immediate aftermath of Sunnydale’s fall. Just that she’d gotten to Los Angeles on a school bus brimming with newly switched-on slayers, the immediate adrenaline high of having won the day long worn off and the rest of her reflecting on the long stretch of *what now?* at her feet. No time to rest, no time to regroup, no time to bloody breathe without people demanding more of her. What the next step was, how they were going

to scrape together and begin again, what any of it meant. If she and Angel had traded words, she hadn't mentioned. Maybe it had been too raw, the *cleansing* effects of the amulet still burning through her, along with the knowledge she'd had by then, the memory of the perfect day she'd spent with a human version of Angel, knowing he'd given up that and her and everything that had come after.

"You told me that you'd lost him," Angel said at last, sounding defeated. A rare thing, truly, and one Spike felt he would have enjoyed much more if he'd been whole with his lesser parts. "That Spike always left and came back, but he wouldn't this time, and it was the first time you would want him to."

"Close enough," she murmured, her voice low as though she didn't want Spike to overhear but also resigned, knowing he would anyway. Then she regained her fire. "But here I am, using my brilliant powers of deduction to conclude that you opted *not* to tell him any of this. The part where I was crying, heartbroken, or anything that would have remotely encouraged him to give me a call and let me know he wasn't dead anymore."

Another silence, this one somehow even thicker than the one before, but it didn't stretch as long.

"You're right."

Buffy blinked, glanced at Spike as though to verify he'd heard it too. "I'm what?"

"You're right," Angel said again. "It was... I was holding on. Maybe not to you, but..."

"The idea of me?" she ventured.

"That sounds so tacky."

"But true?"

He sighed. "Yeah. True."

"You don't love me anymore," Buffy said baldly, not a question and not even an accusation. Just a fact she was putting out there.

"No, I *do* love you," Angel argued. "But it's not... It's not what it was. I love you the way I loved Fred. We lost her, you know. Fred. We tried like hell to save her, but the cost was too great. She never would have forgiven us, even if we had gone through with it." He went silent for a moment, then sighed. "She was a part of me, same as you. But we were never... It wasn't like that with us."

Buffy's expression had gone blank again, almost frighteningly so. "I see."

"Do you?"

"You love me but you aren't in love with me, yet you're jealous enough that it kept you from telling me that someone *I* love is back. You're jealous enough to lecture me about who I choose to date."

"I'm trying to be honest here."

"And I'm *honestly* trying to understand," she retorted. But then she looked up, caught Spike's eyes, and that seemed to snap her back to herself, or at least out of the angry place where she'd landed. She held his gaze, the tension in her

face slowly fading, before she shook her head and refocused. “You know what? Never mind.”

“Never mind what?” Angel asked, because he was nothing if not painfully slow.

“Never mind all of it. I don’t really have any right being mad at you when I... When I kissed you last year and gave Spike every reason to think whatever I told him in the end was only a platitude.” She tipped her head back, blinking at the ceiling. “I shouldn’t have done that, Angel. And neither should you. We aren’t people who should greet each other with kisses. It’s like... It’s like stepping back. *Going back.*”

“Comfortable,” he added.

“When were we ever comfortable?”

“Not us, but the familiar. That’s what’s comfortable. We know what to expect with each other. Someone else is unfamiliar. New chance for pain—pain that might be worse than what has come before.” He paused with a sharp intake, as though the thought of someone being capable of causing Buffy even more pain than he had was offensive. Hell, it probably was, and probably for more than one reason. “Even things that hurt,” he continued a moment later, “if they hurt in a familiar way, can feel easier than letting something new take a swing.”

There were times that Angel could be strangely insightful. Spike wagered this was one of those—either that, or his own penchant for rejecting whatever the wanker had to say was stuffed in another body. But it sounded right, aligned with the conclusions he’d drawn himself, even if he hadn’t gone to the effort of putting them in words. There had been the familiar hurt last year, too, the same that had informed every decision he’d made—and scared him near out of his wits when he’d realized how close he and Buffy had become. A sort of close he’d never had with anyone and therefore had craved and feared in equal measure. Something that good couldn’t possibly last, and losing it would almost certainly destroy him.

Buffy looked back at Spike, and he saw it there, too. The shared experience that was falling in love all over again, and how utterly terrifying that had been. “Yeah,” she said thickly. “I think I know what you mean.”

“And Buffy, for what it’s worth...” There was a heavy beat, one in which Spike could practically hear the gears in Angel’s head eating at the thoughts he was trying to force through. Crush them until they were something palatable enough to trust with his mouth.

“What?” Buffy prompted.

“I...” More silence. More grinding. And despite however much Spike might resent his grandsire, resent him enough to call that resentment hate on most days, he understood then that whatever was happening on the other line was the result of something earnest. That Angel, for better or worse, was actually trying. Something that didn’t come naturally to him.

Ultimately, though, it proved to be too much—perhaps too big a concession, a step too far in letting her go entirely. Angel was a lot of things, but he wasn't magnanimous. Not unless there was a convenient sword around for him to fall on in the process, ensure that everyone remembered what a noble sacrifice he'd made.

"Never mind," he said in a hurry, as though the quicker he spoke, the faster she would forget.

And hell, Spike couldn't even be disappointed. Not after being almost begrudgingly impressed.

He couldn't say the same for Buffy, though. The way her face fell, she hadn't yet completely exorcised the part of her that held out hope Angel could surprise her. Even after all this time. It was almost beautiful in its purity, that inherent need to believe in others, even when they continued to let her down, and she'd held onto some beliefs about Angel longer than most.

"Okay," she said. "If that's all—"

"Buffy—"

"Thanks for letting me know about... About all this. And try not to end the world before we get there." She slammed the phone onto the receiver ahead of his reply, and the dull hum that came with phone lines fell into a stark quiet.

Then she met Spike's eyes again, her own full of steely resolve. "You ready to be one man again?"

"Like you wouldn't believe."

"Even if it means me kicking your ass?"

"You know the answer to that, love."

She nodded as he'd expected her to, her expression that perfect blend of hardened warrior and heartbroken survivor. Of the fears he knew she would be carrying with her into battle and beyond, that the end was in sight and one way or another, the life they had been playing at living these last few weeks had finally reached a head.

"I love you," she said. "You'll remember that, won't you? When it's over and you're entirely you again? Whatever... Whatever's been happening with the other you—"

"Buffy—"

"I just need to know that you'll know."

"I'll know," he promised, and though he meant it, he couldn't deny her fear was contagious. Things were so clear from where he stood—crisp and defined, not a question or a shred of sodding doubt. The sort of clarity he'd chased all his bloody life, never dreaming he'd ever actually have it. And sweet as it was, he also knew it was an illusion. Something afforded to him by the very nature of not being wholly himself.

He didn't know what would happen when the perfect clarity was gone. He didn't know who that man was—the one who knew he was loved by Buffy.

But hell if he wasn't eager to find out.

IT FEELS LIKE YEARS SINCE IT'S BEEN HERE

SEVERAL APOCALYPSES AGO, BUFFY and Giles had sat in a training room that no longer existed, reflecting on how often the world had tried to end on them. She couldn't remember what the number had been then; she didn't know what it was now, either, only that if she wasn't in the double digits, she would be soon. Somehow, the end of the world had become an event she regarded with the same dull awareness as Halloween or Christmas. A fact of the calendar year, unavoidable even if you weren't particularly in the holiday mood. Just another thing to see through to the end, for better or worse, and weren't they lucky that so far it had always been for better.

The details Angel had provided regarding his upcoming war were on the scant side, though Buffy didn't realize how much until Giles tore into the New Council Headquarters, breathless with the announcement that one of the seers in the Devon coven had had another vision. A vision involving a strange symbol that, to Buffy's chagrin, Dawn had insisted would make a great tattoo. They had already been at defcon whatever-number-was-apocalypse-con, and while decrypting the symbol hadn't been high on the to-do list, Buffy found herself appreciating the library of knowledge the old Council had left behind for the very first time, if only because it gave her an idea of what sort of hell they could expect when their wheels touched down in Los Angeles.

For as much as she had committed to learning about Angel's evil law firm, there was still a whole lot Buffy didn't understand. Prior to going boom, the Council had also had a very dedicated and intense interest in Wolfram and Hart, which made sense to her in an academic way but not a practical way, given that nothing Giles had uncovered indicated that anyone had ever tried to do anything about them. No need to worry about this reserve of endless evil that kept bringing the world to the verge of collapse just to feed on the misery of everyone who had to live in it. The verge was what mattered to them, so they wouldn't go beyond that—wouldn't risk upsetting the applecart, as it were.

That had made zero sense at first, but only at first. Only until the context was shaded in. Wolfram and Hart was larger than just one world, one reality, one existence, and survived on the exploitation of the people in each of the worlds it occupied. Misery, heartbreak, grief, rage, jealousy, despair, and so

many other intangible traits were the needed ingredients to keep the Senior Partners empowered, and they'd diversified their portfolio of pain across all of existence. Remove one world and it jeopardized the entire system.

Except Angel was planning to do just that. The symbol in the vision was the mark of something called the Circle of the Black Thorn, and as the Council's handy-dandy reserve of literature explained, the Circle of the Black Thorn represented the Senior Partners' physical presence in this particular plane of existence. They cut deals, arranged sacrifices, performed rituals, and moved people like chess pieces to serve the interests of their incorporeal masters. Angel's plan was to essentially eradicate this circle's existence, cut the head off the hydra knowing full well how many new heads would sprout in retribution, and therein force Wolfram and Hart to the end they wanted to dance around.

So Angel was triggering the apocalypse. The Senior Partners needed the earth to survive? Well, fuck the six some-odd billion people who lived here, then, 'cause the Powers' Champion had decided his *raison d'être* was to inconvenience the Senior Partners no matter the cost.

"What happens when the Circle is taken out?" Buffy had asked Giles, trying and probably not succeeding to keep her truly crippling fear out of her voice. Angel had done some sketchy things in the past—a lot of them to her—but any goodwill she'd felt after maybe their first mostly honest conversation ever had died a quick death the more she learned about his plan.

"I imagine the response will be swift and devastating," Giles had replied, not looking at her, rather at the glasses he'd been polishing within an inch of their life. "Absent a stabilizing force here on Earth, the Senior Partners will be both furious and in a panic, and those are two very dangerous extremes. Given time, cooler heads may prevail, but the immediate aftermath will be retribution."

"So world go kablooney."

"Teach Angel a lesson, I daresay."

"Well, he's a slow learner. He'll probably die before it has a chance to leave a mark." And with him Spike, who had somehow signed onto this mother of all stupid ideas, either because he was separated from the part of himself that knew it was a stupid idea or because he didn't have a huge stake in what happened to him. Buffy hadn't wanted to explore that too much out of fear of the answer, and she still didn't. "How do we fight?"

Giles hadn't responded immediately. In fact, he'd been quiet enough that she'd wondered if that in itself was the answer. No sense fighting when the world was definitely, unequivocally, one thousand percent in danger of actually ending this time. Maybe if they had snatched the other Spike up when they'd had the chance rather than playing chicken with themselves and each other, they would have been able to swoop in and put a stop to the madness. Or whatever else for *woulda, coulda, shoulda*, hindsight being a bitch of a thing that had never done anyone actual good except make them feel like shit.

But then he had responded, and whatever else was wrong between them, honesty wasn't a part of it. At least not honesty like this—honesty where the world was on the line. "With everything we have," he said solemnly. "And I do mean everything."

So *everything* was what she looked to gather. Everyone even distantly associated with the New Council was pulled off assignment or out of parallel dimensions and ushered, quickly, to home base for the quickest of all debriefs in her professional history of world saveage. The good thing about the accelerated timeline was it put a lid on in-fighting—the bad was coming, and they were the line between it and the rest of the world. The sooner everyone got on the same page, the quicker they could mount up and head out. Even the suggestion that someone take out Angel before he could make his move against Wolfram and Hart died a quick death rather than devolving into the more familiar screaming matches, for how in the world were they to get close enough to Angel to kill him? And who knew what additional protection he had in place for just such an eventuality? Hell, he'd started the entire conversation with Buffy by confidently announcing that his own team was going to try to subdue him.

"This isn't something we stop," was the bottom line, as she told her girls before their plane touched down in Los Angeles. One of their planes, actually. There were too many slayers to cram onto one flight, never mind Willow's magic friends and whoever else Giles had recruited. Some, she'd been told, were relying on less human means of travel, and that was just fine with her so long as everyone landed where they could do the most damage. "It's something we fight. We only stop when we win. When we're the only ones left."

In terms of big pre-game speeches, it wasn't among her most inspiring but, as Spike told her once she'd buckled in for landing, more optimistic than the one she'd given before the fight with Glory.

"I don't remember that one," she replied. It was perfectly true. Everything prior to her hundred-and-forty-seven-day dirt nap had that grainy quality she associated with really old films. Sepia without the special effect tinting. The most she could summon about the fight itself was the utter panic, the horror of failure, the part of her mourning her sister because it seemed foregone, impossible, like she'd already lost.

"You threatened to off anyone who got between you and the Bit," Spike said, lacing their fingers together. "You were bloody breathtaking."

"And bloody bloodthirsty."

"Had a reason. The best reason." He sighed and rolled his head back, then turned a bit to catch her eye. "For killing or dying alike."

"Are you going to say love?"

"Am I so predictable?"

"No." Buffy offered a soft grin, flexing her fingers in his, thinking maybe the next time they did this, it would be for real. All of him and not just half of

him, sitting with all of her. The plan right now was to call Angel the second they deplaned to see if she could wheedle out the other Spike's exact location, even if she wasn't convinced that was the right move. On one hand, two Spikes on the battlefield meant two warriors of Spike's caliber. On the other, it also meant double the worry. Double the chance that at the end of it, even if she was still standing, he might not be. Losing one would cost her both. Cost her everything. And she'd already given everything. Several times over, in fact.

And this would always be the case—the decision she'd be forced to make, standing on one end of the battlefield and hoping like hell she made it to the other side without having to sacrifice a piece of herself.

Spike understood that better than most. No, better than anyone. He always had. Which was why she wasn't all that surprised when he had an answer at the ready.

"After," he said simply. "We do it after."

"You're sure?"

"Much as I can be. If all of hell's gonna come chasing us down, it makes sense to have two of us out there rather than one."

"And if the good fighting skill was split between the two of you like everything else?"

"You have any complaints in what you've seen me do, love? This'd be the time to mention it."

No, she didn't, but it wasn't *this* Spike she was thinking about. This Spike was one who had been with her ever since his body had been restored, who had proven more than once that being severed in half hadn't done anything to hold him back when it came to killing things. He had the moves, the skill, the strength, everything that had made him her left-hand man back in Sunnydale, the best and truly only person she trusted wholeheartedly to fight at her side.

"He beat Angel," Spike said, startling her out of her thoughts. When she met his eyes, he was looking at her with that sense of grim understanding she knew so well. The same that made her feel, at times, as though he had some X-ray view of her no one else had ever noticed. "That's what Andrew said, at least."

"He... He beat Angel?"

"The other me," he clarified, even though she'd already known that. "Right after he got his skin back. There was some noise about that Shanshu, and he and Angel bloody duked it out over the right to be the special prophecy boy. I, or he, walloped him but good."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because that's something that I've never managed before."

"You..." She blinked, not wanting to be indelicate but also shocked for reasons she couldn't really explain. At some point over the last few years, despite his penchant for getting knocked out or tossed around or whatever, Buffy had ranked Spike above Angel in her mental assessment of the strongest fighters

she knew. He was the only one who consistently kept pace with her, who was always *there* to protect her back while she pushed forward. For as long as Angel had been a daily fixture in her life, he hadn't spent a ton of time fighting at her side. Hell, they hadn't even patrolled together all that much as a couple, save a few times when patrolling had been less about killing vampires than making out with them.

Thankfully, Spike understood without her needing to put her surprise into words, and with a solemn, self-aware smile that somehow still managed to take her off guard. "Don't think much mattered to me in the old days," he said. "Dru, of course, but I was young too. Barely a twinkle in my mum's eye compared to Angelus then. I didn't have patience when I went after him before—just relying on blood, hotheaded and desperate to prove myself. If the other me kicked his righteous arse, I wouldn't worry about him getting to the finish line. He managed by himself what I never did."

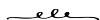
Buffy nodded, her nerves not entirely fading but enough that she felt she might be able to get some sleep between now and the end of the world. That whatever the Senior Partners threw at her—at Angel, for presuming to jump-start an apocalypse without their say-so—was something she could not only navigate, but survive, with the two halves of her vampire at her side. And then, finally, be given the gift of moving out of the stasis she'd been in since Sunnydale, and push onto a new frontier of this thing called her life.

She hoped.

And hoped.

And hoped some more.

And maybe before this was over, she'd get desperate enough to pray.



He kissed her before the world ended. In an alley near the hotel Angel used to call home, rain beating down in torrents, the roar of the coming storm in the distance. They had an army at their back and the apocalypse at their front, and before either could blink, Spike twisted her to face him and kissed her.

Not just any kiss, either. They had been so careful around each other since that one time—the lines clearly drawn, never to be approached, much less crossed. Granted, the lines themselves were of the squiggly variety, in that they definitely existed but seemed to loop in weird places that both she and Spike just understood without needing further examination or clarification. And this was over a loop. It was his hands in her hair, his lips in motion, his tongue stroking and licking and his flavor in her mouth rather than just teasing her in a so-close-yet-so-far kinda way. Everything inside of her melting and unlocking, making her forget that the lines mattered, that they were there at all, or anything she'd said to him or herself over the last few weeks to justify their existence.

There weren't two Spikes anymore, just the one holding her, kissing her, loving her.

The one saying goodbye.

Finally, he broke apart from her, panting in that Spike way, his brow pressed to hers, his eyes closed. And that was when she understood, without wanting to, that it *was* goodbye. One way or another, they would never be together like this again. One part bittersweet, one part terrifying, but both parts them.

Somehow, she managed to scrape together enough wind in her lungs to laugh. "Maybe we should have been doing this the entire time after all."

He groaned, his lips twitching, but not committing to a full smile. "Now you tell me."

"Spike—"

"Wouldn't have worked anyway. You want all of me, I want all of you. No bloody half measures." He pulled back then, not a lot, just enough for the amorphous shape his face had taken to even out, become Spike again. The version of Spike absent the things that drove her insane but made her love him too. Made his crazy complement her crazy, made them something that worked despite all odds. "I love you, Buffy."

"I love—"

He shook his head, pressed a finger to her lips. "Tell me when I'm really me again, yeah? Give me something to look forward to." He kissed her again before she could reply, less intense this time, less *Spike*, but still somehow all of him too. "I'll see you on the other side."

And that was it. He was gone, and she couldn't think about him anymore—him or the *after* they had waiting. It was time to save the world again.

The fight itself was a breed apart from the apocalypses of her past. More like, as Giles would tell her sometime after, what might have happened to the world had Buffy not thrown herself off the tower once Dawn started to bleed. The ground quaking with a stampede of monsters both known and unknown, the air vibrating with the weight of their screams and cries, some so foreign to this world the sound alone made her head throb. And as she always did, Buffy detached—accessed that singular part of herself that she had perfected and honed until she was a weapon incarnate. All other thoughts shoved somewhere deep where she could worry about them later, her focus on the enemy in front of her, the ones circling her, the ones trying to attack her from her blind spots. Surrendering to the instinct in a way she could never adequately explain to the potentials who had become slayers or the girls she was fighting alongside or the watcher who had been with her from the beginning or even herself. Just a bone-deep knowledge that told her when to duck, when to turn, when to reach for her weapon, when to throw her weight in a certain way, when to roll, when it was better to take the hit than try to deflect, how much strength she should put behind her punch, when to use her height to her advantage, when

she needed to compensate, and a thousand, a thousand-thousand other little things that existed only when she was inside the moment and not out of it. The fundamentals of Buffy scaled back in favor of those crucial skills that helped ensure she was the one who walked away.

All this meant, in the heat of the fight itself, her awareness of anyone outside of her periphery was sketchy at best. It wasn't until after the roaring came to a close that she learned about the plan Willow and her coven had devised—the one that involved her sister. And since it had all worked out and Dawn was technically an adult these days, Buffy found it hard justifying her instinctive anger beyond the whole *we had no idea what might have happened* thing, which, while true, had hardly stopped them from performing similar feats in the past.

Still, it was her sister. The only remaining family she had left that really mattered. So the fact that no one had bothered to run the idea past her at all was definitely going to be a point of discussion in the future, once the dust had settled and they had established whatever their new version of normal was going to look like. Until then, Buffy would have to appease herself with the memory of Angel's face in the aftermath. How one second he'd been in mid-swing, face pulled into a grimace and blood trickling down his brow, and the next, just tumbling over into empty space, the demon he'd been aiming at just gone. Poof. There and then not.

And not only that demon, but all of them. The pounding cacophony of roars and screams and everything else meeting a sudden, deafening quiet, the echoes reverberating off building fronts and alley walls, but unmistakably dying at the same time, absent the voices that had spawned them. The only thing left was the debris of an aborted apocalypse, bits of wreckage and whatnot scattered across wet pavement, all else drowned out by the continuing downpour.

It was blind luck that Angel had been so close when it happened. That she'd gotten to see him fumble at all.

He looked up almost immediately, eyes meeting hers for the first time in nearly a year. Odd how so much could have changed then—even more than she'd thought when she'd last seen him. Raw and aching from the wounds of Sunnydale's final great battle, trying to parse the memories of a day she hadn't actually lived balanced with the loss of the man she had actually loved.

Then her thoughts went to Spike, her vampire, cleaved in two pieces, and the after she was fighting for, with all its uncertainty and complication, the questions for which she needed answers no matter how much she dreaded getting them. Spike, who was not beside her, whose beacon of a platinum skull she'd caught in flashes here and there throughout the battle but hadn't seen in what suddenly felt like a long time. Too long. Buffy turned away from Angel with a gasp, not knowing just yet that the fight was over, just that she had a moment that was hers and not the world's, and one she intended to use to search for the people she loved. She caught sight of Dawn almost immediately, on

her knees and panting beside a slaphappy Willow, who seemed caught between drunken euphoria and full out exhaustion. Then there was Andrew, once more looking shocked at his own inexplicable continued existence, and Faith, covered in gore but still breathing. And then more following—face after face she recognized, all except the one she needed to see the most.

That was until she felt him. That reassuring tingle, that tremor her body knew as *Spike*, crested over her like a wave, and Buffy let herself get swept up in the undertow, relief so intense the air she was dragging into her lungs started to burn. She whirled again just in time to be crushed against his chest as he lifted her off the pavement, spun her around laughing and crying in equal measure. And she didn't know which one of them it was and it didn't matter, because if one was alive, both of them were. Both of them had made it to the other side, and the wait was over at last.

At last.

"I see you two had a chance to make up," Angel noted from somewhere nearby, grounding her firmly back in the moment. "Good."

It wasn't a very convincing *good*, but that didn't matter because Buffy didn't need to be convinced. She just needed this, the sensation of Spike's arms around her, the rumble of his chest as he cackled his pure Spike delight, the knowledge or certainty or whatever that tonight, at last, she would sleep for real. Sleep as she hadn't since the nights leading up to Sunnydale's last apocalypse. For the moment, though, Buffy squeezed Spike's shoulders to signal it was time to stop celebrating and start uniting and fell in love all over again when he didn't need more direction before touching her feet back to the ground.

That much told her which Spike was breathing her in, and if she'd had any doubt, catching his eyes—the softness there, absent the misgiving—would have been enough to quell it.

"Ready, darling?" Spike asked, all warmth and giddiness and life.

The question was beyond rhetorical, but she answered him anyway. "So ready," she said, then, with her arm looped through her vampire's, turned to the resigned Angel at her back. "We need to find Spike."

She wasn't surprised at the look her statement earned. She *was* surprised at how hard it made her want to giggle. Must be the post-fight euphoria kicking in.

"Are you trying to be cute?" Angel asked at last, his tone making it clear how little he valued cuteness. Which, really, made clear how poorly matched they'd been from the start because Buffy? Cute as a button.

As though hearing the thought, Spike tugged her to him and brushed a kiss across her temple. "No *trying* about it, Angelus. But that's not what you meant, is it?"

"It's a long story but no, I am dead serious," Buffy said. "We need to find him. Angel, when was the last time you saw him that wasn't, well, right now?"

You were with him before the fight began, right? I think I might've seen him a couple of times but I couldn't be sure in all the rain."

"I think we need to get you to a doctor."

"Forgive the lady, she's a mite overexcited, skipping the important bits," Spike said cheerfully. "Forgot to tell you that there are two of us."

"Two of you," Angel echoed, speaking like he wasn't following. Which he wasn't. Something that Buffy couldn't help but find uproariously funny.

Thankfully, Spike—the Spike she'd been living with for months—was there to explain while she succumbed to a giggle fit.

"That's right. Know that amulet your lawyer mates were so keen to pawn off on you last year? Turns out there was a catch and the thing was meant to split you down the middle, keep your soul away from the big chair and turn it over to your more personable side instead. Only since yours truly wore it instead, it worked a bit wonky." Spike turned a radiating smile to Buffy, and even through her laughter, she saw it—the relief, the excitement, the joy. The fight was over and every inch of her was sore and achy, but all of that was secondary to the rush. Just as quickly, he refocused on Angel, still bright and beaming in a way that she'd rarely gotten to see, if ever. "Long story short, mate, the me's that been spendin' so much time with you as of late is missing some ingredients. Namely, the ones that are mine, and vice versa."

"What?"

But Buffy wasn't listening anymore—or not as much. She also wasn't laughing, and didn't know why until it came again, a breeze that whispered across her wet, dirty face, stirred her hair and pushed tears back from her cheeks. And there was something else in it, a feeling or a knowledge or a sense, and before she could poke at it, she was moving. Soft, unsure strides then hard, sprinting ones echoed by Spike at her heels, for either he had sensed it too or just knew the way she did. Somewhere behind her, Angel was calling after her, yelling her name as though that were enough to stop her, and if he followed she didn't know or care, for her entire world had narrowed to one beat, one sensation, one instinct, and even though she didn't know where she was going, she turned at the street's end anyway, the beat in her chest stronger, telling her this was the right direction.

And it was. She knew it before she saw him, understanding cementing somewhere in her primal lizard brain—the part separate from whatever parsed thoughts and emotions into logical consciousness. There was an overturned cab up ahead, one of its tires nothing but scraps of rubber, and from under it was a flash of platinum white too bright to miss, even with most of the streetlights shattered and the businesses that comprised the gutted buildings and surrounding storefronts. A flash of platinum attached to a head she knew, a face she knew, as it and the rest of him struggled first out from under the car, then to his feet.

“Spike!” Buffy shouted, hard enough her throat ached. And then she was crying again, not realizing it until she was upon him, not understanding it for crap because there was no reason she should feel like she hadn’t seen him in a year or more, but also understanding it too well because in all the ways that mattered, she hadn’t.

Spike, the other Spike, whipped his head in her direction so fast that she heard the tinkle of spare bits of glass as they shook free of his hair and hit the pavement. His eyes were wide and blue, so blue she could fall into them, and there might have been a Spike at her back but now there was one at her front, and he caught her as she careened into him, sounds that were neither laughter nor sobs tearing from her lips, his arms around her, his body shaking, and he *was* sobbing. Barking hard, guttural cries into her hair as his knees hit concrete, as *they* hit concrete, together at last.

“I’m sorry,” he sputtered into her ear, taking her by the arms and pulling back just enough to catch her gaze, for her to see the wonder in his. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry I was a coward. A bloody, stupid coward. But I was gonna stop, Slayer. I promise. If I lived through this, I was gonna find you. Even if you were with the sodding Immortal, I couldn’t...” His eyes flickered, catching on something over her shoulder, and when his brow furrowed, confusion flooding his face, she had a good idea what that something was.

Buffy cupped his cheek to drag him back to her. Call her selfish but she wanted just a few more seconds of this. The Spike she hadn’t seen since the Hellmouth, insecure and fearful and stupid as he might be. It was a wonderful, terrible familiar—all the parts she’d been living without, that were hers to keep and protect. She’d missed it so much more than even she’d realized, and while she was hungry, desperate to have him whole, she needed just a little more of this. The bits of Spike she’d lost and been without.

“Did I kick it?” he asked, blinking and shifting his gaze to the Spike she knew stood behind her now. “Am I dead?”

She couldn’t find her voice so shook her head instead.

But it didn’t matter. He wasn’t listening, the full of his focus on his other half. “Be smarter than I was, mate,” Spike said. “Be braver. Let her tell you. Let her—”

“Spike?” Buffy reached into her pocket for the thing she had carried with her to Rome and never gotten to use, the last thing she’d given him before he died, and held his gaze as she looped it over his head. “Shut up.”

“Listen to the lady,” the other Spike advised, hurrying up so he was also within loop-range. And it was now, her heart in her throat, pounding so hard she was certain it would burst free, bone, muscle, skin and what else be damned. The Spike she’d been living with and the Spike she’d lost standing side-by-side, one dazed and the other determined, somehow both mirrors and opposites, the remains of the amulet she’d shattered what felt like a lifetime ago hanging

around their necks. If anything were to go wrong, this was the moment it would happen. Beyond the apocalypses past and those to come, never mind the one she had just survived, what came next would shape her tomorrow in ways that terrified and exhilarated in equal measure.

“See you on the other side, love,” her London Spike told her softly, smiling. “It’s all right.”

Buffy jolted, her eyes burning. “Remember. You’ll remember?”

“Every word.”

If the other Spike had questions—and she was sure he did—she didn’t give him a chance to do more than look between them, confused, before stepping back and murmuring the chant Willow had told her ought to do the trick. Not quite as simple as the one that had reunited the Xanders what felt like forever ago, but almost. And the second the words were out, the amulet’s chain began to glow. Soft at first then a retina-searing bright, the space where the gem had once been catching sudden, brilliant fire, a familiar fire, and her hand was burning and the Spikes were shifting, the lines that separated them going hazy, then transparent, then disappearing altogether. If asked to describe it, she didn’t think she could—it was just a blink, a flash and flare, an instant of *not right*, and then totally right. Spike no longer standing beside himself, but alone in front of her, his chest heaving, rain monsooning down his face, the shattered amulet hanging around his neck, and he was looking at her with utter singularity. That way she knew and didn’t know because she hadn’t seen it in a year.

And there was more. So much more—so much she saw there, in eyes that were warm but also full. Not just full, still filling, for unlike before, there weren’t just hours to reconcile but full months. Nearly a year of separated living. Of being half himself and half not, of fractured experiences divided between continents, thoughts thought and emotions emoted and everything that might have changed that neither she nor the Spike she’d been with could have prepared for.

And it would come. All of it would come, the debris from this moment and all the other explosions that made up their lives, both apart and together, the things they needed to confront and sort through and decide. For now, though, there was just this one. Spike regarding her with eyes that were his and his alone, seeing her, and being the one man in all the world who understood what he was looking at. Understood her on levels she didn’t understand, herself.

At last, he smiled, soft and tragic, raised his hand to her cheek. “I’m home,” he said, and he was kissing her before she could gasp or sigh or even breathe, kissing her, pulling her into him, cupping her face, his lips in motion, capturing the words that spilled from hers—words without shape or thought, words that she wouldn’t trust herself to voice anyway, an eruption of all the things she worked to keep pushed down.

If he was home, then she was too. The most she'd felt since standing on the edge of a crater, the war won but a piece of her lost, she'd thought forever. Except their forever was not other people's forever. Thank god.

YOU'RE THE ONE WHO TRIED TO HURT ME WITH GOODBYE

"I DON'T UNDERSTAND."

"I know you don't," Buffy said, doing her best to hold onto the dying scraps of her patience, even if she was officially past the point where she cared whether Angel understood or not. As far as she was concerned, the job was finished and he hadn't so much as dropped a *thank you* yet for the massive saving of his ass. He hadn't even acknowledged the feat of interdimensional wizardry Willow and Dawn had pulled off to spare Los Angeles the carnage of an apocalypse. No, all Angel was concerned about was the curious case of the two Spikes and where he fit in. He apparently couldn't pull on his big boy pants and wait, so much so that he'd practically dragged her and Spike here, to his empty hotel, intent to interrogate.

Ugh, Buffy should have just trusted Dawn was okay and vamoosed the second the Spikes had merged. But no, no, she couldn't do that because *of course* she couldn't do that, and Spike couldn't either, so they'd trekked back through the battlefield to make sure the glimpse Buffy had gotten in the immediate aftermath could be trusted. What they'd found had been the same slaphappy version of her sister she'd seen before—slaphappy and loud—and all too eager to share the finer points of her transcendent experience at a volume not fit for human ears, much less supernatural ones.

"It was so cool, Buffy!" Dawn had insisted, slurring her words and looking around, glassy-eyed and enthusiastic in a way that Buffy really hoped did not portend to the sort of phone calls she'd receive once her sister went off to college. "Willow just unlocked some part of me and I felt this...all this power. It was everywhere. It was *in me*. Then the demons whooshed through and the door closed and that was in me, too. Not the door but the power to close it. It felt so easy. I bet it *is* easy. Enough to do the next time things get—"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Buffy had cautioned, trying to keep her tone light amidst her misgivings. The last thing she needed was for Dawn to start chasing magic. "It was a pull-cord-in-case-of-emergency situation. We don't need—"

"I knooooow," Dawn had replied in a tone that betrayed she was every bit still a teenager, however much she'd grown in the last two years. After all, teenager

staring down senior year was still a teenager. “But I *can* do it. We figured it out that I *can*. That’s huge. That’s more than huge. That...makes me special. More than just being the Slayer’s sister, you know? I am the *Key*.”

“A little louder. I don’t think they heard you three counties over.”

“Oh, stop being such a buzzkill and think about the potential. What if we never have to fight another apocalypse? Just presto, give Dawn a turn and see ya, sucker, enjoy your new dimension!”

Buffy’s distinct lack of a poker face had earned her an eyeroll and another nickname, one less flattering than buzzkill, and she knew she’d have to circle back at some point—help ensure that Dawn understood what *mitigating circumstances* and *lots of testing* meant insofar as her future as a potential unstoppable weapon was concerned. But hey, even Buffy could admit that right now should be less about the worry for the future and more about the immediacy of the present. Storm clouds would gather and rain on the parade with or without her help. If it turned out Dawn was right, well, that would certainly reshape the way wars were fought, and that was a whole lot of something.

But she hadn’t gotten that far, either in thinking or in parade-raining, for kinda-drunk Dawn had finally registered Spike’s presence and started squealing all over again, throwing herself in his arms to both welcome him home and beat against his chest at having stayed away, which had led to an Abbot and Costello skit about how he hadn’t stayed away, even if he had, and who’s on first? And Dawn’s good mood had been giddy enough she’d dissolved into giggles that Buffy was certain no one else in the world could pull from her if they tried.

“I missed you, dillweed,” she’d said when she’d stepped back, her eyes shining—still with the enthusiasm of before but also more than that. The telltale signs that she was riding an emotional high to all available extremes. “The real you. Stepford Spike was nice but a little too...Stepford.”

Spike had chuckled, and it had all looked good—natural, normal—though there had been something in his smile that Buffy hadn’t quite believed. And she understood that, too. If she had been suddenly reunited with the other half of herself following a year spent in two different bodies, it’d be a little bit before she’d be up to joke about it. But it was Dawn, and Spike wasn’t about to make his discomfort her problem, because that was the man he was.

And god, Buffy would have given just about anything to have gotten a few minutes alone with the man he was before she had to deal with Angel. She didn’t need a ton of time, just enough to reassure herself that he was up for whatever was about to happen. That he could stomach an inquisition with his head spinning and his realities merging and all else doing who-even-knows what.

But time and tide waited for no man, and neither did Angel. She figured she was lucky enough to have gotten as long as she did with him just glaring from the sidelines, watching as she talked with the people she needed to talk to. Dawn,

of course, and Willow, then Giles and Andrew just to make sure everything was stable on this side of the portal that had been opened. Not that there was a way to determine that, at least not yet, but at this point, Buffy would happily take as good until given a reason to reevaluate. Finally, after she figured she'd put it off as long as she could manage, she'd sighed and approached Angel with all the enthusiasm of the condemned facing their executioner.

"Where do we want to do this?" she'd asked Angel, blinking dully into his eyes and willing him to get how *now* was not a good time.

"The hotel," he'd replied. "My hotel."

"Your hotel."

"It was mine, yes. Before."

"Before you moved in with Evil LLC. Got it."

Spike, as ever at her left, had snickered his appreciation but otherwise not said anything.

"It's close," Angel had argued with narrowed, judgmental eyes. "I don't think this will take long."

"Long by whose standards? You're, like, three hundred. Your short is my long."

He'd sighed then, a long-suffering kind of sigh, like he was tired of expecting more from her only to be met with disappointment. Too bad she couldn't relate to that at all.

"You owe me that much," Angel had said instead. "And I'd really rather do this somewhere where we can be guaranteed a little privacy. The Hyperion, my hotel, is the best bet."

The privacy comment had the added benefit of being mostly true. Or at least, Buffy wasn't really in the mood to have a public conversation with her ex-boyfriend about everything that had been going on these last few months. She didn't see him taking any of what she had to say all that well. So she'd nodded and followed him through the debris of the battlefield and away from the rubberneckers, Spike remaining stalwart at her side.

That had gotten her this far. To the lobby of the hotel, to an explanation nearly a year in the making, starting once more with the amulet. Angel had received the extreme Cliff's Notes version earlier but wanted a play-by-play from the top. How the amulet had been crafted specifically for him with the aim of separating him and his soul forever. How Spike's soul was not the same as Angel's—the division less straightforward, more room for creative interpretation by magical standards—and had reacted by splitting him into two beings that were both Spike and neither fully Spike. And finally, how one Spike had stayed with Angel this last year while the other, the one chock-full of the characteristics Wolfram and Hart found less valuable, had been with Buffy since Andrew's return trip. It was that point Angel seemed unable to move past and kept revisiting as though repetition would help the words make sense.

Buffy decided she'd name her new headache after him. It was only fair.

"I mean it," Angel was saying in his most pompous voice. "This is beyond... You're telling me that Spike, the Spike who was a pain in my ass all year, wasn't entirely *Spike*?"

"Standing right here, mate," Spike drawled, his arms crossed and a slight smirk on his lips. He hadn't said much during the explanation, just reclined against what had been a hotel check-in desk in a former life and listened. "And it turns out my ears are still working fine. Anything I can help clear up?"

"I don't know how to make this simpler," Buffy replied, trying for patience she was pretty sure had passed its sell-by date by years at this point. One of the things she hadn't banked on while she and Spike had been planning the reunion ritual was just how she would feel being in Angel's presence again, now that a year had passed and she'd had time to sit with the reality of what she had learned in the wake of the amulet's cleansing powers. It was one thing to talk about him in the abstract or even talk *to* him on the phone. Seeing him hadn't thrown her off her game much at all, either, as she'd been razor-focused on the fight ahead. But that razor focus was gone now, relaxed for the interim between apocalypses, and she found being in close quarters with Angel, practically vibrating with information she'd spent the last year either living with or gathering, an exercise in self-control.

There was a lot to lay on him. Like everything she'd learned last May and hadn't had the energy to process, much less pursue. For instance, the day Angel had spent as a human before taking it back, erasing her memories of their time together. Erasing everything. Setting the clock back to zero.

At the time, Buffy's answer had been to ignore it. She'd been too raw from the fight, from losing Spike, to begin to address the sudden new memories taking up space in her mind, and every time she'd found herself wandering close to that path, she'd put up a detour, taken the mental scenic route. Fixating on what Angel had taken from her in the middle of mourning the loss of the man she loved had felt disloyal in the worst way, especially in the context of how Spike had died. Of what he'd seen just before he'd died, and how that had informed his final thoughts.

And in a strange way, not thinking about what she'd learned had been the key to accepting it. Just absorbing into herself the knowledge that at one point, Angel had issued the ultimate death knell in their relationship. The sort that was impossible to walk back or rationalize as anything other than him definitively choosing something over her, which in itself hadn't taken much to reconcile, though it had definitely reframed how she thought about their clandestine reunion over Caleb's corpse in ways that made neither of them look good. Angel chasing her for scraps he'd already rejected, and Buffy unknowingly reaching for the last man who had truly crushed her. Even worse, she'd reached out of fear of being crushed all over again by someone who had the power to do more

than crush. For that was what it had been in the end—what she'd shared with Spike, the way he'd seen her and understood her, singular and distinct. In direct contrast to her other relationships, actually, for both Angel and Riley had told her they *didn't* understand her. This thing that should have been a fundamental basic remaining perpetually out of reach for the men who had claimed to love her, the men she'd tried to share everything with, but transparent to the one she'd done her best to keep at a distance.

No, by the time Buffy had been ready to confront the significance of those stolen memories, she hadn't been too interested in the post-mortem. Hadn't had the will to get worked up over the fact that even more decisions had been wrested from her, her future decided by people who wanted her to stand on her own but only in a way they could endorse. Betrayal and disappointment such a part of her routine she couldn't muster up outrage, couldn't muster up much of anything, so instead, she'd just rolled with the punches.

It made standing here, with the apocalypse behind them and nothing in front of them except the consequences of their own bad decisions, both terrifying and liberating. For the first time since he'd come into her life, Buffy couldn't give a fuck what Angel thought. His opinion didn't matter to her. She doubted it ever would again.

And she couldn't help but notice how much smaller he looked as a result. Less like the man of her dreams and more like another guy in a long line of disappointments.

"Okay," Angel was saying now, finally like he might move from the overdrawn disbelief onto something more solid. "So...this entire time...the Spike with me has been—what, like the bad Spike?"

Spike crossed his arms and snickered. "Did plenty good for you, didn't I?"

"Depends on how you're defining *good*," Angel retorted, not at all sounding like a bitter child. "You were petulant and irresponsible—"

"So says you."

"And you got in my way more times than I want to think about."

"Also saved your ungrateful arse more than once," Spike shot back, somewhere between annoyed and calm. "And why don't you let the lady know what's really bothering you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Been all high and mighty this last year claiming you know me better than anyone. Think we've proven that's a load of bunk, haven't we?" He hesitated, tilted his head. "Or is it that splitting me down the middle did bloody rot to change the fact that I have what it takes to be a champion?"

Angel didn't reply, which Buffy took as another way of saying *yes*. She also didn't miss the way his mouth twitched, or the flare in his eyes, short-lived as it was. And maybe she'd never been the best at reading his face—maybe she'd once tried to resort to literal telepathy to get a sense of everything he made a point

not to tell her—but that look, that flare or flicker, paired with that twitch, was stunningly easy to understand.

He was jealous.

The thought barely had time to hit, much less sink in, before Angel rallied, whipped his attention back to her. “Can we talk about how you let one of your people steal from me? After that song and dance you did about not trusting me, you allowed Andrew to take Wolfram and Hart property without our knowledge or—”

“Excuse me, *allowed*? It’s not like he ran it by me.”

“Well, he obviously felt empowered to do it, otherwise he wouldn’t have looked.”

“Are you serious right now?”

“Do I look serious?”

“You look like a serious asshole. But fine, yes, let’s focus on petty theft because that is definitely the big takeaway from what I just told you,” Buffy retorted, her skin warming in that special way it did when she was trying to keep her temper in check. “Really. Please lecture me on the ethics of stealing from an evil law firm.”

His nostrils flared as though they had a right to be angry, too. “Because it doesn’t count if the person you steal it from—”

“Is bending over backwards being a giant hypocrite because we learned something he didn’t?” She let the sentiment breathe a moment, did her best not to glance in Spike’s direction, as she had the distinct feeling he was enjoying this the way only Spike—truly, wholly, entirely Spike—would. “Angel, you started an *apocalypse* going to war with these people. Are you really going to stand there and yell at me about the fact that we took something that, by the way, you gave to *me* in the first place? Something I don’t remember ever giving back? All because you learned they had bad intentions in giving it to you?”

“That isn’t the point.”

“Well, maybe it should be! Again with the whole *starting an apocalypse* thing!”

“I didn’t start an apocalypse. That wasn’t what I was doing.”

“No, you just knowingly decided to take action that had a ninety-nine-point-whatever percent chance of triggering an apocalyptic event.”

“That’s not—” Angel broke off, his jaw tight with impatience that she wouldn’t have said was familiar, but so was Angel not getting it—not getting her. Or more specifically, not getting her the way he wanted her to be rather than the way she was. At length, he turned his glare back on her and settled into another familiar Angelism that somehow had not made the sepia-toned cut her memories had put together once upon a heartbreak. “You don’t know these people the way I do, Buffy. Control is what matters to them. The apocalypse was always coming, and they were always going to be behind it. The only way

to beat them was to take back that control, make them think they didn't have it anymore. That's what we did."

"Then by all means, it makes a ton of sense to be angry that we took something from you and learned more about it than you did."

He rolled his eyes. "You're the one who brought it up. I was just—"

"Being a big baby?"

"You are impossible when you get like this."

"Think you'll find she's impossible most of the time, mate," Spike said cheerily, forcing her to look at him now, take in the bold, happy grin spread across his face. "Kinda like you, point of fact, only hers is in a way that works. She's not busy holding people to standards she thinks are beneath her."

"Oh, shut up," Angel said. "Aren't you supposed to be whole now? Less a pain in the ass?"

"I never agreed to that." Though Spike flicked his gaze to Buffy once more, and she saw him—the one who had been with her these last few months—shining through. Whatever he was doing now was for his own entertainment. "You're just sore that the lady's right. She was right last year, and she was right not to trust you this year. Suppose you missed the part where the wankers who gave you that amulet meant for your less cuddly self to be the one making the calls. Everything this lot's done since you came back from Sunnyhell with your soul intact has been a sodding contingency, playing you while you thought you were playing them. And that's all this comes down to, innit? Being the one with the biggest uglies. Bollocks of brass. Being so bloody sure you're the one she lo—"

But then he stopped abruptly, something happening behind his eyes, and before either she or Angel could prepare themselves, Spike released a hard, booming laugh, lighting his face anew. Making Buffy realize just how infrequent it had been to see him anything close to happy.

"Bloody hell," Spike said, still tittering, then turned and looked at her again. "The Immortal. *I* was the sodding Immortal?"

"You were what?" Angel demanded.

"In Rome," Spike replied, keeping his gaze on her. "She wasn't with the Immortal, she was with me. Just a game we played knowing it'd get my interest."

"You just now remembered that?" Buffy asked, bemused.

"Bit noisy up here, pet. Everything's sorting itself out. Clashing and the like." He was still grinning, though, both at her and when he returned his attention to Angel—who, in contrast, was *not* grinning. Rather, he was frowning and blinking rapidly the same way Xander did when charged to do math in his head, the numbers not numbering in a way he could visualize.

Buffy was ready when Angel finally gave up and looked at her, his expression grim, almost betrayed. "You weren't with the Immortal in Rome?" he asked. "That was...Spike?"

“Sure, let’s focus on more things that are beside the point.”

“I think so, yes. That report didn’t come from just anywhere.”

“What report?”

“The report that you were with *the Immortal* in Rome. You planted it, didn’t you?”

“No,” Buffy retorted. “There would have been nothing to plant if your people hadn’t been tracking me in the first place. Yet another thing I should be kicking your ass for but am not. Spike and I had been talking about when would be the best time to make their halves whole again, and we decided the easiest bet was bringing the Spike that was with you to us. We figured the Immortal would get his attention and he’d come running. And look how right we were.”

“So I wouldn’t know what was going on,” Angel repeated, the martyr once more. “Because you couldn’t trust me. Funny how that worked out—you not trusting *me* and justifying it by doing a bunch of stuff behind my back. Remind me again, what’s the definition of irony?”

“You being outraged that you weren’t looped in on things that didn’t concern you seems like a good contender,” Buffy replied in a tone chock full of fake cheer. “Especially when, oh right, you were having me followed!”

“I was looking out for you.”

“In Angel’s very special definition of *looking out*. You’re mad at me for not letting you in on something when you’ve spent the entirety of our relationship, ever since we met, not letting me in on most things. I’m sorry the kettle can’t take it, but that is hardly my problem.”

“I’ve only *ever* wanted to make sure you were safe.”

“Pardon me while I laugh my ass off. I’m not safe, Angel. I’m *never* safe. Right now? Even with two ancient, bad-ass vampires who have professed their love for me on multiple occasions—”

“Hardly ancient, love,” Spike protested.

“—I am nowhere near *safe*. The Slayer doesn’t have that luxury. Not when she’s the one and only and not when she’s the leader. Not even when she’s just a lonely peon in a sea of other peons. Danger is my life. It’s my default. You telling me you want to make sure I’m safe... You’re telling me you wish I wasn’t exactly what I am.” Buffy paused, catching herself, sensing what would come next if she wasn’t careful. “And I get it. Sometimes, especially when you knew me, I wished that, too. I wanted not to be burdened by my slayerness. I wanted to be normal. But I’ve had the chance, Angel. More than once. Without the Slayer, I wouldn’t be me. This Buffy. And I like this Buffy. It might’ve taken me forever to get there, but I *did* get there. And I think that’s probably at least a little of why we would never work.”

She doubted he would have been less surprised by a punch to the face, the way his eyes went wide, his jaw slack. How he looked at her as though he’d never seen her.

“We would...never work?”

Buffy forced herself to hold her breath, to not jump in with more of the anger she knew she was owed, at least not while he was asking something in earnest. Whatever edge had been in his voice before had gone—he seemed genuinely hurt, and even more confused. So, after counting to ten and throwing Spike another look, she nodded and met her ex’s wounded puppy eyes to spell out the truth they both already knew. “I’m not someone who needs saving.”

“I never said you were,” Angel shot back, fiery.

“No, but that’s the way you wanted it. That’s the way you believed it should be.”

“Where in the world are you getting that?”

“From you, you jackass,” Buffy spat, firing up again on all cylinders. “You told me that you wanted to protect me from the moment you saw me, which was when I was called. That my heart would get bruised or torn or whatever you said then and that you wanted to protect it. Great job at that, by the way.”

“That is not the same as claiming you need saving. Nowhere near it.”

“Then what about leaving me for my own good? Saving me from a future that I might actually want? Protecting me from the bad decision that was *making* a decision?” She crossed her arms and demonstrated that he was not the only one with emotive, flarey nostrils. “Or how about the time that you hunted a demon that turned you human? And how you couldn’t stand the thought of not being able to protect me so much that you rewound the day and proceeded to stay out of my life until after I’d already died again. How about that?”

There had been precious few instances over the course of her relationship with Angel that she had managed to completely shock him. Sure, she’d pulled it off just a moment ago, but there was shock and there was whatever *this* was, and Buffy was sure this time took the proverbial cake. He stood there, staring at her, mouth agape, then closed, then agape again, as though he could will a response into existence if he mimed the moves enough times.

Finally, though, he managed to choke out a word. And that word was, “How?”

“Maybe when someone gives you something that has cleansing powers, you should ask what all it will cleanse.”

He offered a slow blink. “The amulet.”

“Yeah.”

“So...since Spike...”

“Yeah.”

“And you didn’t tell me.”

Buffy shrugged. “Didn’t seem like there was much to say. You’d made your decision without me. I made that decision without you.”

“Buffy—”

“It was, though, the thing that really made me see how much of us was that.

Why we would never work. Because that is how you like me best.”

“I don’t—”

“As someone you can make grand gestures to, take all the hits, make all the sacrifices, all so you can rescue me, save me from whatever you think I need to be saved from, even if it’s myself.” She released a steady breath. “But that’s not me, Angel. If it ever was, it stopped being me a long time ago, and I don’t think I would’ve been happy letting it be me forever, even if I had been given the choice. It just turns out I wasn’t.”

She stopped talking but the air remained heavy, charged and staticky, and loud. The sort of silence she associated best with Angel—the sort packed full.

“I did it to save you,” he finally said. “The Oracles told me—”

“I was gonna die. Yeah, I remember this conversation, actually. Don’t need to hit the highlights reel. Funny how I still died anyway.”

He stared with more of that unerring stillness. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“Maybe that it was never about saving my life, but the *idea* of saving my life. Keeping me your damsel,” she replied, her heart skipping but the rest of her a combination of charged and strangely calm. While she had done her best not to think about it this last year, the few times she *had* imagined having this conversation with Angel hadn’t been anything less than her screaming at him words that he probably thought she was too shy to know, let alone use. And there was some of that—the burning indignation, the righteousness and anger and everything else—but mostly it was just... He needed to know. And she needed to be the reason he knew. He needed to understand that she understood, and whatever role he’d hoped she might play in his future was no longer an option. “You could send me back to Sunnydale, tell yourself you’d made this big sacrifice and done it for me. And then after I died anyway, I was still a damsel. Just one that you hadn’t been able to save this time, and that was okay. You had still made the hard choices. You were still the main tragedy of my life, the person who couldn’t be with me no matter what, who had given up everything so that I could have everything, and we both lost anyway. And then when I was back, it was the same thing. You wanting to save me, this time from hell.”

“Yes, and doesn’t that just make me an awful person,” Angel said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I don’t know where this is coming from—”

“You never even asked, though.”

“Asked what?”

“If I was actually in hell.”

At that, he frowned, and she could see she had thrown him off balance—a true victory, as this wasn’t something that Buffy remembered happening all that often. Angel’s control was one of those things he kept a firm grip on, and for good reason. What happened when he lost it could end the world. If there was any doubt, Exhibit A was just outside these walls, getting ready for tourists to

start rubbernecking.

“You *were* in hell,” Angel said with the conviction of someone reciting gospel. “Willow called Cordelia and said that they had rescued you from some hell dimension. We talked about this.”

“No, *you* talked. More than I have seen you talk in one sitting, actually. Told me about how hard it had been, the centuries you spent being tortured after you tried to end the world. That you understood. That you could help me. That if I needed anything, you could be reached with a phone call.” Buffy sucked in her cheeks and looked away, some of the calm ebbing in favor of resentment she thought she’d left buried in Sunnydale along with the rest of her former life, but no, there it was, alive and well and very eager to be acknowledged. She hadn’t let herself think about her last meeting with Angel prior to the showdown with the First all that much because of the way she’d felt after. How she’d gone hoping, believing she would be seen or understood, that she could drop the façade she felt compelled to carry for her friends and Dawn, the veneer of gratitude, the pretense of not being furious and lost and desperate to feel anything other than furious and lost and desperate. Some part of her had thought she could, had thought she’d show up at the diner he’d selected—the place that was neither Sunnydale nor Los Angeles—and see Angel, and everything would go quiet in her head, provide the sort of peace she’d only experienced when around Spike, only this peace wouldn’t leave her confused and frustrated. It was expected peace; safe in ways Spike could never be.

But no. The first thing Angel had done, upon seeing her, hadn’t provided her the sense that he could be a source of strength or comfort, or anything that would have allowed her to do what she’d done unwittingly in the presence of her once mortal enemy. It had been a gentle yes with a nod, a soft smile and an awkward hug, as well as what she’d assumed he’d meant as a disarming remark about how they mirrored each other. Both dying to prevent an apocalypse. Both coming back. Except, of course, with the whole added context that his death had been to prevent the apocalypse that he himself had started, and that wasn’t why he’d died at all; it hadn’t been a decision on his part, rather hers, because that was the way it always was, right? She had been cosmically selected to carry the burden of those choices, with the added benefit of getting zero say in the choices that would make her existence of servitude even the tiniest bit better. No, in those decisions, Buffy was sidelined completely, assured by the people trying to manage her life that they knew better, that she needed this, not that, that this path was better than this other one, that if she stumbled she would fall, and their job was to keep her from taking the steps that would lead to a stumble.

All Angel had done in that moment was reinforce how little she could share with him. How exactly did you tell the guy you had sent to hell that no, actually, you had been in heaven? That the centuries of torture and the like had been

centuries—maybe, she'd never really worked that out—of pure bliss, comfort and warmth, separate from everything Angel had been so desperate to cling to when he'd been sucked into Acatla's whirlwind. There was no way he could understand heaven. Angel's existence had been harsh and violent, absent anything even remotely like the place she had lost. But he would have tried. God, she'd known he would try, because he always did. Instill some wisdom, give her the nudge he thought she needed, all while safely maintaining the distance he had implemented during one of those decisions she hadn't been a part of making, capable of leaving her and her problems in the rearview before he headed back to the life he'd chosen instead of making one with her. And now, she knew, also instead of doing anything to help prevent the thing that had killed her in the first place. Not so much as a heads-up or a check-in, or whatever the hell he'd thought he was doing, saving her from, when he'd made yet another decision that had been for him while claiming it was for her.

"You're not making any sense," Angel said, luring her back to the present. "What did I do then that was so awful?"

Well, all other secrets were out now. Might as well share this one too. Get everything in the open, for once. "Nothing," Buffy replied. "You did nothing."

"That's what I thought."

"Yeah, you just thought that nothing was what I needed."

"And now we're back to not making any sense."

"I sat across from you, thinking you were the person who loved me most in the world. The person who would understand sacrifice, hard choices, better than anyone else could. I sat there thinking this should feel...like something it didn't." She wet her lips, again all too aware of Spike's gaze on her but grateful that was all he was offering at the moment. This much needed to be her. "I was never in hell. I was in heaven."

There was a pause. "You were where?" he choked out.

"In heaven. Or some heavenly dimension. I wasn't in hell."

"Willow said—"

At that, Spike snorted. Loudly. He didn't do more than snort but the sound was enough to embolden and ground her in ways she doubted she could ever fully describe. Like having a running external track of her thoughts and experiences that she didn't need to assume responsibility for but could utilize all the same.

"Willow was wrong," Buffy replied simply. "She and the others... They didn't know. And maybe they didn't want to know. But I was never in hell."

"And you didn't tell me."

"You didn't ask."

"I didn't think I *needed* to ask, Buffy. Why wouldn't you tell me that?"

"Because what's the point?"

"What's the *point*?"

“Yes, Angel, what’s the point? How would it have changed anything?” she shot back. “What would you have done? Dropped everything and rushed to Sunnydale to help me get through something I *still* barely understand? Apologized for not being there when I needed you? For not acting when you could have? Or would you have just said you were sorry, the same way everyone else did when they found out, for whatever good *sorry* does?”

“I guess we’ll never know.”

Buffy stopped short, closed her mouth. “No. We won’t.”

“That’s not my fault.”

“That I didn’t feel I could trust you enough to tell you something that deeply painful and believe you’d understand it?” She worked her throat. “Maybe it’s not your fault. But it’s also not *not* your fault. I needed to be something other than okay until I could be okay, and you’ve only ever been interested in watching me break, not watching me broken.”

Again, Spike snickered, stepping forward this time. “Nothing new under the sodding sun.”

Angel threw him a glower. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Just that, mate. What the lady said. You get your kicks in making the mess. Once it’s there, it loses its appeal. Happened with Dru. Happened with her.” He nodded at Buffy. “Hell, happened with me just recently. I’d like to think if I’d been a whole man I would’ve seen the sodding strings, but who can say? Old habits, and the like.”

“Was any of that supposed to make sense?”

“You had me convinced she didn’t love me. That it’d be a mistake to go after her. Took a lot of bloody joy in that too. What was it you said? Buffy would never love me because I wasn’t you?”

“Was that before or after you banged Harmony in one of the offices? I have trouble remembering.”

“Okay,” Buffy said, throwing up her hands and stepping between them. “I think that’s enough.”

“Hadn’t told her about that, had you?” Angel said, not looking away from Spike. “How the second you got your skin back, you grabbed your ex squeeze for a quickie after *months* of professing undying love and loyalty to Buffy. That’s how you treated her.”

Spike threw her a panicked look that hurt more than the words themselves did, but Buffy didn’t have time to dwell. There was a time and place to process what she’d just learned and now was neither—she wasn’t about to give Angel the satisfaction of winning, especially when winning came at her expense. “I said, that’s enough,” she repeated, pleased with how calm and measured she sounded. “We’re done here.”

“I still have questions.”

“I’m sure you do, but that is officially not my problem. I’ve told you every-

thing you need to know.”

“Buffy—”

“No. This time, this one time, Angel, you’re going to let me be the one to walk away.” Buffy held his gaze, willing herself not to blink. This much was important—there might be more in the coming days, probably there would be, but after everything the last year had wrought, the pain, the revelations, the parts of her that were brittle and the rest of her that had to make up for it, she needed to be allowed one victory. It might be small and meaningless but it was what she had to claim in order to get through whatever tomorrow brought.

To feel, at last, like she had some say over the terms of this particular relationship. Even if it was over.

Finally, Angel offered an imperious nod, his face hard and the rest of him granite. “So go then.”

Buffy swallowed, then turned to Spike, did her best not to react at what she saw waiting in his eyes. “And you?”

“What about me?”

“Are you staying here or...?”

“Suppose that depends,” he replied.

“On what?”

“If you want to be alone or not.”

Buffy held his gaze, held the weight of every second she’d spent trying to get where she was standing right now, the fear and the trepidation, the promises made and broken, the dread of what came next and the knowledge that it had to come regardless. Where their journeys had led them and where there was to go from where they’d landed, and if what came next was something they would explore together.

“I can still be alone with you here,” she said, and tried not to cry when he smiled.

AND ALL I CAN BREATHE IS YOUR LIFE

GET TO BE A certain age and the concept of *firsts* goes out the bloody window. Everything is a variation of a theme; what was experienced before will be experienced again, and for the most part, that's how you like it. Sure, Spike had spent the bulk of his existence crashing through life and leaving the debris behind, someone else's mess to tend to, but even the chaos came with a vague sense of order. He'd understood consequences, the cause and effect. And while his judgment wasn't always spot-on—hardly ever, actually—he had little trouble following the inevitability of where the pieces landed once they stopped falling. It might not be an immediate thing, but eventually, the cogs in his brain would turn in the right direction, and everything would make a sort of obvious sense.

There were no *firsts* for creatures like him. Or there wouldn't be, if not for Buffy Summers. But Buffy Summers was the embodiment of *firsts*, taking him for turns before he'd realized the nature of the game. Hell, Spike had endured more *firsts* in the last few years than most men could squeeze into a lifetime, and tonight was no different. Only instead of adjusting to the fullness of a soul, the pain, the fire that had seemed contained within his chest, it was his head that was threatening to split. His very loud, very crowded head, and that should have been impossible because this was how he'd lived most of his life, wasn't it? With all of him stuffed in one place rather than scattered about the continents.

He knew it would eventually all even out. The bits that didn't seem to fit would lock back the way they belonged as though the division had never been, the memories that were now at odds would reconcile. He would adjust to being a man who had once been two men in the most literal sense, someone who had both stood at Buffy's side in Rome and only gotten a glimpse of her from afar, all the while battling down jealousy and heartache and doing his bloody best to pretend like whatever he and Angel found would be incidental. That he hadn't cracked at the thought of her moving on with a creature of the night, after everything they had been through. After all they'd shared.

And of course that was just the tip of the sodding iceberg. The balance of those memories with the version that had been with her. The dual sensation of returning to life, or unlife, as it were. Two different stints as spooks with incredibly different outcomes, the utter loss and pain he'd experienced at

Angel's behest counterbalanced with the knowledge, the certainty, that Buffy had mourned him, that Buffy *loved* him, that every doubt he'd suffered had been vindicated a thousand times over. Not only that, the revelation that Buffy wasn't happy with just any Spike—she wanted the real deal. The one who made her miserable as well as the one who was...well, a mite too polished for his liking, but still the respectable sort of bloke who might be able to do right by her.

More than the other version, the one whose skin he felt most at home inside. The fuckup, the tosser, the sodding coward who had succumbed to his lesser instincts, fear and resentment and a lot more besides, stewing for the last year about the snog he'd seen rather than reflecting on everything that had come before and after. All balls and bluster when he'd been a ghost, that confidence fading the second the option of running to her had been on the table. If Buffy didn't stake him for that alone, she truly must love him. More so than he deserved.

Spike didn't say anything as she led him back along a stretch of sidewalk that was familiar but not, that one part of him had traversed before, and recently, while at her side. Upstairs was where they'd had their last heart-to-heart, Buffy imploring him to reassure her that whatever happened in the fight, whatever came next, he wouldn't forget the things he'd known to be true. He wouldn't look at her and doubt, either her conviction or himself. He would know, and he wouldn't let himself forget, regardless of what had come before. All that mattered was the now.

It said something that the version that had lived with her all this time felt more distant to him than the one who had gone into this battle at Angel's side. He knew it did, and he hated it. Especially as he had lived those memories, too. They were as real as anything his LA self had gotten up to over the last year, the parts that he had thought and reconciled and understood, he'd believed, reassured her with words that hadn't been empty promises but actual sodding convictions.

Spike drew in a breath, tasting air that smelled like him, that served as more confirmation that the conflicting timelines in his head did in fact coexist, and let it out as she closed the door to the room. Let him wander in space both known and foreign.

Buffy wasn't talking. Hadn't said a word since they'd left the Hyperion, and for the first time, he wondered at that. If she was experiencing the same bout of unreality that he was, trying to fit together an existence they had shared but had still somehow not been them. The *them* that they were as he understood them. As he wanted them to be.

She turned back to him, her arms going around herself in a way that couldn't help but tug at his heart. She looked small, all of a sudden, his Slayer, and he knew it was because of him. It was a bitter bloody pill to swallow.

"Do I want to know?" she asked after a moment, her gaze on the floor.

“Know what?”

“Anything that’s going on in your head right now. Do I want to know?”

He could lie. Probably should. But that was the trouble with people like them, people who knew each other inside and out. Lies were transparent and had the ability to hurt so much more because of it. “Bit messy,” he said instead. “Feels...full in here.” Might as well jump into the thick of things—no sense dancing around the truth.

She didn’t reply right away, rather nodded, still not looking up. “I remember that. With Dawn. And not Dawn. Remembering those years both ways. But the day with Angel was worse because it was two different days—one where I stayed and one where I went home fast. The Dawn memories, it wasn’t split like that, where I was in two places. I was in the same place, doing the same stuff. She was either there or she wasn’t.”

Right. She’d been here before. They kept mirroring each other without trying. “That’s it, yeah. Being split.”

“And for me, it was just a day,” she said. “Not impossible to wrap my head around but...I’m guessing it’s... For you...”

“A year.” Well, more like a handful of months, but still, he reckoned he’d earned himself a bit of dramatic license. Living in a head that managed to be both shocked and utterly unsurprised at how the last twenty-four hours had unfolded. Reconciling the part of him that had gone into that fight believing fully it would be his last, his mind twisted and his heart sick with all the decisions he had and hadn’t made, living side-by-side with the part that had said goodbye to her knowing full bloody well he’d see her again. That it would be different, difficult, but it would come. There would be an after, and she’d make sure of it. The part that had known standing here with her was an inevitability, but one he couldn’t prepare for, because he wasn’t the man who had understood it. Only he also was.

Spike sighed and glanced down at himself. At the duster that had been his second skin for going on thirty years, a piece of his identity as much as anything else, and even that hadn’t been unique. He’d come out of the amulet twice, wearing it both times. Then he snickered and plucked at one of the sleeves. “Guess there’s a silver lining,” he muttered.

“What?” When he looked up, Buffy had lifted her head and was staring at him with a mixture of uncertainty and hope he had trouble swallowing.

“Coat got blasted to bloody kingdom come in Rome. Only I guess it didn’t, really.” He’d known that, too. Remembered saying as much to her when they’d come together to lick their wounds. His duster had survived, and not because the tailors at Wankers and Hart had pulled a spare out of the closet—but because what made the duster his prize had been stretched between two versions. This one, the one currently draped around his shoulders, felt more like him. More like home. Not a compromise he’d made out of a lack of options.

And shouldn't that have clued him in? Shouldn't *any* of this last year have clued him in? Maybe not the full—the obvious answer that of course something was wrong with Spike and the wrong thing was that he was split down the middle—but that like Buffy before him, the return to this world from the cold, dead quiet hadn't been without its hiccups. She'd gotten herself an interdimensional sunburn, and he'd wasted a year being too afraid of his own sodding shadow to do what was natural to him. What every instinct screamed at him to do, loudly, every day, every moment he was awake and even deeper into his dreams. If he'd just scraped up the nerve to risk his heart again, he could've been living the last a whole man. Not the fragmented ponce he'd let himself remain.

“Spike—”

“It's just barmy, is all,” he said before he could stop himself. “How did we decide it?”

“Decide what?”

“The plan—the brilliant sodding plan. The one you were with, he was the smart one, right? The one who had it all figured. And he let you decide to keep us living like this, stretched out on opposite sides of the world.”

Something in Buffy's eyes had dimmed. “The one I was with was you.”

“You really believe that?”

“Yes, because he was. *You* were. Because I saw you, and you remember it. You were there.”

“I was also here.”

“I know.”

“And we, the pair of us, decided that was for the best? What'd we gain, do you reckon? What good came out of it?” Spike broke off with a harsh, bitter laugh. “Don't answer. I already know. All the bloody intel we got, care of the half of me that was dutifully taking notes, all on the hope that if Angel ever pushed it to the brink, I'd be less of a tosser and find the stones to do what I should've done the second I came out of that amulet.”

He turned away before he could see the words land, his gut already twisting with regret. It wasn't fair, he knew. None of this was fair, and none of this had been on her—he'd been there, or half of him had, and he'd understood the logic. Bloody well championed it. Told her she was making the right call, that it made sense. And the times he'd felt pangs of uncertainty, of resentment, of frustration, he'd swallowed his misgivings and deferred to her, apparently estranged from the parts of himself capable of giving those concerns voice. How the amulet had made that decision, the so-called good qualities and the bad, he had fuck all idea, as from where he was standing it had all amounted to the same. Two half men pretending they weren't, forced now to reconcile the separate lives they'd led.

“I'm sorry.”

He whipped his head up, his chest twisting. Buffy hadn't moved, though she

was looking at the floor again, her face paler and her lips thin.

"I should have..." She flexed her hand, studied her fingers as they curled, straightened, and curled again. "I didn't know what to do. I should have—"

"No."

"No, I should have—"

Spike was moving then, closing the distance between them, both charged and terrified, and living in a body that felt entirely comfortable touching her and not at all comfortable touching her, warring sensibilities combating for dominance while his brain tried to make sense separating truth from his own reservations. Still, he managed to only hesitate a second before taking her by the shoulders, squeezing until she met his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said, wondering vaguely how many more times he'd have to say those words. If he'd ever stop getting in his own way, blurting the wrong thing, lashing out rather than sitting with his own discomfort. "It's all...crowded in here, and I'm having trouble quieting it down. Shouldn't have taken that out on you."

Buffy shook her head. "It was my call. I thought it was the right one but..."

"But you can never know, can you? And I did, love. I knew."

"You knew?"

"That it might all come to nothing? 'Course I did. The one who was with you was the one with all the brains, like I said. He had it figured."

"I don't think it's that simple. I never knew." She licked her lips and glanced away, but didn't make a move to pull back, out of reach. "The parts of you that were...that you called *lesser* were some of the parts I missed the most. It wasn't you without them."

He chuckled lightly in spite of himself. Couldn't help it. "Thanks ever so."

"I mean it in a good way." A pause, and the corner of her mouth twitched. "Even if you do drive me crazy. But the point is it was *my* call in the end. You just went along with it, and that was a lot to ask of anyone."

"Maybe, but I reckon I would've done it anyway."

Buffy met his eyes again, asking without asking, as though she'd been in his head a few minutes ago. A look both similar to the ones Dru used to skewer him with and not, for there was no malice or suspicion behind it, just sad understanding. A recognition she couldn't ignore.

"Because you love me," she said. The words so simple, so bare, so true, a reality he was more accustomed to her running from than acknowledging. The version of him that had accepted everything at face value, known and agreed and understood without room for wonder or doubt, had gotten this on the regular, and somehow known that it wasn't landing the way it should because of the bits that were missing. The bits that had been starved for it, starved for her, for years now, not able to fully appreciate the miracle of her acceptance when it was given. That version of himself hadn't let him soak in her earnestness or

openness. He'd understood that it was important but had been detached from the pieces that told him why.

In so many ways, it was like the last weeks with her hadn't existed. How could they have when he hadn't been fully capable of appreciating them?

Christ, his head really was all over the place tonight. At least it was together.

"I love you," Spike said hoarsely. "I love you more than... God, Buffy..."

She offered a watery smile, nodded, and took a step forward. "And that's why you went along with it. My plan that kept you from being all you."

"It wasn't entirely *your* plan," he reminded her—reminded *himself*, his brain still filtering through the information overload. "Think I'm the one who brought it up."

"But I'm the one who decided. We wouldn't be here if I'd argued with you."

"Maybe." Probably. "But it's beside the point, sweet. I trust my general. I trust my *slayer*."

"Even if she doesn't trust herself?"

"Of course. That's when she needs it the most." Spike held her gaze a moment longer, then blinked and looked away, his own eyes stinging and his sinuses starting to burn, which made him aware of just how sore he was all over. The bruises, cuts, and scrapes from another apocalypse averted mapped across his skin, and of course being in two bodies at the time meant he had double the chance to take those blows.

He glanced back at Buffy, saw she had arrived at the same conclusion, or at the very least was studying the sore, raw places on his face and neck with concern. "We should get you cleaned up," she said, fisting the lapels of his duster and gently coaxing it off his shoulders. "You looked pretty rough when we..."

"When you and I found me?"

"This is going to be confusing for a while, isn't it?"

"And here you thought life off the Hellmouth would be nice and straightforward."

Once again, the corner of her mouth twitched, and bloody well took his heart with it. He'd forgotten what that felt like, somehow—or hadn't appreciated it enough these last few weeks. Being the man who got her to smile. "When did I say that?" she asked.

"Dunno. Might've made it up. Sounds like you, though."

Buffy arched her eyebrows, the grin broadening. She was pushing him back in the direction of the bathroom—he remembered enough of the layout of the place to know that—and in no time at all, he was stumbling over the threshold of the door, eyes intent on her face, the rest of him going tense as he was sure she was bound to notice. If she did, though, she didn't say anything, just stopped when they were beside the sink and the mirror combo and started pulling on the rest of his clothes with single-minded focus.

"How?" she asked after dragging his shirt over his head.

How? How what? Spike just looked at her, dazed.

“You said it sounds like me. Expecting life to be straightforward after Sunnydale.”

Oh. Right. He blinked and shook his head, trying to relocate the thread of their conversation, which was bloody hard when the Slayer was pulling his belt free from his jeans and working at his fly. And he and Buffy hadn’t been naked together in so long, but also not long at all, and everything was happening fast, so fast, and he didn’t care but he also did, because part of him had been envisioning this reunion for the better part of a year. Always in dark, stolen moments as though he were in danger of being caught, and the hope had been tentative enough, a desire constantly out of reach.

“Ahh, didn’t you used to talk about bein’ normal?” He watched her, dumbfounded, as she sank to her knees in front of him and began unlacing his boots. This was Buffy as he’d never seen her, and he felt bloody well startled out of his skin, uncertain what to do or if there *was* anything to do but stand there and follow her direction. “How it was all you ever wanted?”

Buffy glanced up at him, the angle making her look almost devilish, and god if his cock didn’t take notice. Granted, his cock had been paying attention this whole time, operating by its own rules and observations, already piqued by her proximity and position. But Buffy regarding him with sly cheek was its own aphrodisiac, and if he didn’t watch himself, he could easily overstep.

“Were you there when I was having this talk with Angel like twenty minutes ago? We covered the *normal* thing.”

Yeah, that sounded familiar, but it didn’t deter him a lick. “Cover it with me,” Spike replied. Wanting, needing, as much of this as she would give him when it was *just* them. When she had no point to prove to anyone other than herself.

“Okay, well, I thought about it,” she said, nudging his shin in a way he knew, instinctively, meant it was time to toe off his boot. “After Sunnydale. You were gone, and everyone was asking me what to do, and there were new slayers everywhere, and that night... We went to LA. Angel was still in his hotel and had enough rooms for all of us. That night, after I was alone, just...in a bathroom like this one...” She nudged his other shin, and Spike dutifully kicked off the remaining boot, tried not to shiver when she started to tug at his socks. There was something strangely intimate about being undressed to this degree, even by her. Maybe especially by her. “And I looked in the mirror because, well, it’s a mirror, and that’s what you do if you’re in front of one.”

“Present company excluded,” Spike said lightly.

“Right. There was a cut on my forehead. It’s, like, my favorite place to get cut, actually. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been bandaged right here.” She drew a diagonal line starting at her eyebrow and sloping down toward her ear, looking chagrined. “Probably making the same move, or trying. You used

to tell me I dropped my shoulder too much.”

“You still do.” He remembered having that thought recently, in fact. Or one of him had.

“Point is, I was looking at myself, at that cut and all the others, and it occurred to me that if I wanted, I could decide that Sunnydale was the last time I’d bleed for this world. It would really be my choice now. I’d just trained up an army to handle slayage, and god knows Kennedy would’ve loved to have called the shots.”

Well now, there was a thought terrifying enough to give even a monster nightmares. “Bloody hell, Buffy.”

She snorted and shook her head. “Well, it was a thought I had. I don’t know what to tell you. Except that I was at the end of the day, and you weren’t there with me, and I had all these new memories that I still hadn’t made sense of, and it was... I looked at myself and my freshly recut face and thought maybe I didn’t need to be this Buffy anymore. Maybe it was time for someone else to take over, and then I could retire, go to Disneyland, or hell, maybe even college. I’d just lost my home and my... I’d lost you. And the last time I was really with any of my friends or Giles, they’d all decided to kick me out of the house. We put that and everything else on hold so we could do the apocalypse thing, but it was still there. Things like that don’t just go away because you win.” Buffy lifted a shoulder, all casual-like, when he knew everything going through her head was anything but. “So yeah. I thought about it. Just getting everything set up and then going off and living my own life. Being a normal girl because really, I’d done everything. Given up everything, including my life, more than once. I didn’t want to do it anymore.”

She fell quiet, glanced down in that way she did when she was ashamed, when she knew she was revealing more of herself than she normally would. But Spike had already seen it—seen all of it, all of her, too many times to count, and there was no one else with them right now. He slid his fingers under her chin to tip her head back, and she went easily, no resistance. Just them again, him and her, standing in this room that should be impossible for them to stand in together yet wasn’t, because they were Buffy and Spike, and they made a habit of defying the impossible.

He didn’t ask, either. Didn’t need to prod. Buffy blinked and seemed to come back to herself in increments. Then she licked her lips and blew out a breath. “Then I went to sleep. I slept for...god, maybe sixteen hours. Enough that people were worried, but I was apparently out cold. And when I woke up, it was just... I can’t tell you what happened, if I had some sort of Scrooge dream or something, but when I woke up, I just knew that I was going to be a part of whatever came next. The things I’ve seen and done... I can’t just turn off the Slayer part of me. And...”

“And?”

She licked her lips again, squared her shoulders, and met his eyes. “And I didn’t want to.”

“There’s my girl.”

Buffy snorted, which she somehow always managed to make graceful. “Yeah. Just took two deaths—maybe three—one unasked-for resurrection, an apocalypse that cost me my home and the man I love to realize that maybe I’m just not cut out for normal.”

It was the first time she’d come close to saying it since they’d been alone, and wanker that he was, he didn’t know how to respond. Didn’t know how to handle it beyond looking down before she could see something that made him feel even more vulnerable than he did at the present—standing in a bathroom with her, any bathroom, as she stripped him down and told him all the things he’d once dreamed of hearing her say. Bit too much like waking up from a nightmare only to tumble headfirst into a dream, real as all this felt. The nightmare at least was honest and easier to accept. What happened in dreams, especially the good ones, never followed him into the waking world.

Maybe she sensed his discomfort, for Buffy was suddenly all business again, ushering him toward the shower at the far end of the loo. It was a rather nice setup, now that he was in a mind to notice. No tub, just a closed-off glass box with a drain in the floor, plus a small bench equipped with the standard hotel fare—a towel and a couple of washcloths all fancily folded. Buffy stopped when he was standing in the middle of the space, left him there feeling mildly ridiculous but only long enough to grab one of the complimentary bars of paper-wrapped soap from the counter, along with a mini shampoo bottle, which she unceremoniously shoved into his hands before pulling her own shirt over her head.

And if Spike had been self-aware before, he was now knocked off his bloody feet. “Buffy—”

“I’m going to say this once and then we’re not going to talk about it ever again unless *I* am the one who brings it up.” Buffy pitched her top into a corner, toeing off her boots with calm precision. “I’m very aware of where we are. I know what I’m doing. I also know I don’t *need* to do it, but I am, and it’s my choice. Please don’t make me feel weird about it.”

He snapped his mouth shut, but only for a second. “How did you know what I was gonna say?”

She gave him an *are you kidding me* look that he realized he had more than earned. “I know you, dummy. You just spent a year split down the middle but you were about to be all self-conscious about me being in the bathroom with you, getting voluntarily naked, and I really want to skip this part because it’s *my* part, and I get to decide how I handle it.” She had her pants off now, was standing before him in her bra and knickers, her skin a tapestry of welts and bruises that she hadn’t mentioned, probably hadn’t even felt, because that was

just the way she was. The eternal warrior. "I'm not saying that I'll always feel the way I do right this second, but right this second is all that matters to me until I get to the next one, and once there, I'll let you know. But for now, please don't be... Don't make me feel like I need to be thinking of something I really don't want to think about right now."

He was nodding before she finished speaking, feeling both ashamed and relieved and then ashamed of his relief, but that was his own sodding problem, not hers. If she was fine being in here with him then he would take any scrap of space she wanted him to occupy and do it. "You're a marvel," he murmured.

"I'm a cranky slayer who has waited way too long to get to this moment to stop because of the scenery," she replied. "Not sure about this *marvel* business, but if that's how you prefer to see it—"

"It's how it is."

"So says you."

"Bloody right, so says me. I'm the man who loves you."

"You're the man who's annoyed with me."

"Two things can be true at the same time, and I'm not annoyed." He grinned as she made her way over, completely naked now, her body telling the story of what they had just survived better than he or anyone else ever could. He remembered thinking she was the most gorgeous thing he'd ever seen the first time he'd laid eyes on her, then how he'd felt like a bloody traitor for thinking anything of the sort, but the heart had known, and the demon, while content to lie, had as well. Still, if Buffy had been gorgeous that first night, it was nothing to how she looked now. Hardened with age, both the actual years separating that moment from this one and the ones that were less easy to measure, more felt in the bones by what the body, heart, and mind had survived.

"You're not annoyed? Even though I'm the reason we're having this conversation now and not immediately after we learned about the split?"

Oh. Right. He had been annoyed about that. Distracted right quick with everything else, least of all Buffy divesting him of clothing before stripping down herself. And even then, he wasn't sure *annoyed* was the right word to fit the myriad of contradictory emotions tearing through him. The confusing sensation of his head being swollen, brain overstuffed and threatening to burst from his skull, sorting through two sets of pasts, both comprising things he was proud of and things he wished to forget. Fuck, Buffy hadn't even brought up the Harmony dalliance, the memory of which hit him with a sort of shame he'd thought himself beyond after he'd earned the soul. How he'd used her, the way he'd been used once. How even she had known it enough to throw that in his face. The things he'd said, careless and insulting; the things he'd thought that had made sense yesterday but didn't now. Everything. All of it. The crushing weight that lurked just beyond these walls, waiting to press against his chest until it didn't matter that he didn't need to breathe, just bloody caved in.

“No,” Spike said truthfully, taking in Buffy’s wide, beautiful eyes, shining with vulnerability that he doubted he would ever get used to seeing aimed at him. “Bloody grateful is what I am, pet. For everything.”

A soft smile touched her lips, but she turned away as though shy, switched on the shower to hide her vulnerability amid the rush of water. And that was all right, he supposed, because there was more to them than tonight. A load they would need to work out together as they learned this version of who they were.

For now, though, he supposed all that could wait. He could instead let himself enjoy the less complicated moments, the luxuries a very real part of him had never thought to experience. Buffy’s hands on his skin, wandering with delicate curiosity, as though she feared too much pressure might make him break again. But for someone newly made whole, Spike didn’t feel all that fragile. The throb was still there in his head, in his bones as well, but it wasn’t as intense as it had been even a moment ago, never mind the moment before that. A lot like the soul in that regard, the steady acclimation made possible by surviving the present long enough for it to become the past. For it to be like the bits of dirt, grime, and blood now sloughing off his body and circling the drain at his feet. He didn’t know what wounds belonged to which part of him, where he’d been when he’d received each cut, which version had bled and which had bruised, but they were all his now. All on one body occupied by one man, and all worth it. Every one of them worth it.

For every one had brought him here. To this place where Buffy was with him, behind him, pressed against his back and running a cloth across his shoulders, down his spine, then tossing it aside to lather shampoo into his scalp, helping him wash all of it away except the parts he wanted to keep. And moments later, her cheek pressed against his back, her other arm wrapped around his middle, her warmth separate from the heat of the water, more alive and vibrant in ways he couldn’t explain but also understood better than he understood damn near everything else. Holding him the way no one had ever held him, not really, the way he’d thought was too out of reach for poor sods like him.

Only he realized she wasn’t just holding him but shaking. Not a lot but enough to notice. To understand the water under her face, sliding along his skin, was a different breed of warm. That the air faintly smelled of salt along with the standard fare of hotel soap and shampoo, that Buffy was holding him, hugging him to her, and crying, and he didn’t know why but he also did, because he felt it, too. This sense of fragility, of precarious balance, and he was turning before he realized it, cupping her face, feeling the reassurance of her pulse beneath his fingers, and gazing into those eyes he’d crossed oceans for, defied gods for, those eyes that had haunted half of him and tormented the other half, his selves pulling themselves apart even more just at the thought of one day possibly being right where he was.

She looked at him with those eyes, and he looked at her, and then they

were kissing. He wasn't sure who had moved first, if his restraint had broken—delicate thing it was anyway—or if this was her, if it was her hunger in his mouth, her need, her desperation, if he was swallowing her or himself, and it didn't matter. Nothing mattered except Buffy's lips. Buffy's tongue. Buffy's tears sliding from her cheeks to his, her arms around his neck, her arse suddenly in his hands, then more than her arse, the whole blessed weight of her against him, entwined around him, his cock full and flush and sliding between their slick bodies with enough friction to tease but not do much more than tease, and that was fine, brilliant, because he would never expect it anyway. Not in here, of all places. Not now. Sharing the space was one thing but being together here was something else, and he knew that. He did. He understood.

But Buffy must have understood something else, something he didn't, for her hand was around his cock the next second. She was small and lethal and holding him with that grip that could break a man—had broken him a time or two, just enough to get him addicted to the hurt. She was chasing his tongue with hers, scraping his lips with her teeth, rumbling the most delicious sounds into his mouth and now pumping his shaft with strokes that were somehow desperate and tender at the same time. Like he could feel that want, that need in her skin against his, her warmth and life and more than that, her love, in the slide down his cock, squeezing him at the base, then pulling back up with a little wrist work that tugged his foreskin over the head and squeezed, just like he'd shown her what felt like an age ago. And he wasn't the one who needed to breathe, but he was still somehow the one who broke away panting, laughing, dragging in air that tasted less like tears and more like warm, aroused slayer, like *Buffy*, his favorite taste in the whole sodding scope of existence. Water splattered around them still, against the shower floor and filling the air, and she was so close and wet and maybe he should ask. He *definitely* should ask, but Christ, the moment was too perfect to risk breaking.

Thankfully, *fuck*, Buffy was on the same page, curling one of her powerful legs around his calf and using all that phenomenal strength to bring him in, close, so that his cock was slipping along the wet perfection of her pussy, and he remembered, fleetingly, that moment back in London. Right after he'd gotten his body and felt the electric need to touch, feel, stroke, experience what it was like to be alive, and what had happened after. The devastation that hadn't been true devastation in the way he'd feel it now—something he'd heard and understood academically but not where it counted. Not like he would faced with the intensity, the burn, the desperation and need and absolutely wonder that his arms were full of Buffy Summers, that she was panting his name against his lips, dragging his cock along where she was hot and soaked, gasping a moan when the head made contact with her clit and rubbing herself and him to a frenzy there, teasing them both to the point of exquisite pain, then finally slipping him to her opening.

“Wall,” she whispered against his lips, and while the word didn’t register in his brain, it certainly did where it mattered, for he had her spun around and pressed to the shower wall in half a blink. And then he was inside her, he was home, he was where he had always belonged, and Buffy let out a sound that mimicked a sob, that would have terrified him had she not chased it with a laugh, relieved, and smiled into his mouth before kissing him again. Keeping her lips on him as he began to move, to stroke inside her, following that perfect bliss that was being one with the best person in the whole fucking world. Of feeling her feeling him, nails digging into his skin, leaving marks over his marks, which was brilliant because hers were the only ones he wanted to bear. Then the exquisite bliss that was Buffy whimpering and gasping and clenching and squeezing, rolling her hips as he thrust, rocking her between the porcelain at her back and his chest, trying not to dust with pure bliss as her pussy tightened and clasped, soaking him in ways a shower never could, pulling him deeper and deeper into the vortex that was her, the inevitability that was Buffy Summers, this immovable point on his particular horizon that had reshaped everything he knew about himself and the world around him, his north star, his hero and more.

There were a million ways he’d thought this might go—both parts of him. The idiot who had been too much of a bloody coward to do what came natural and the calmer, poised git who had spent the last few weeks in a purgatory beyond anyone’s imagination. He’d wanted to truly take his time, spread her out and explore, feast, feel her heels digging into his back and her nails against his scalp, fingers entwined through his hair to pull, direct, guide while he reacquainted himself with his favorite brand of worship. It hadn’t been this, rushed and desperate even though they were on no one’s time but their own, but it felt perfect nonetheless. Felt like them. Messy and unplanned and chaotic. Their own brand of living, unmatched by all else who had tried until they’d found each other.

It was there—with her legs around his waist, driving his thrusts, her nails digging into his arms, her mouth hot against his lips, his neck, his nipples, teasing with tongue and teeth alike—that he finally let himself believe. All of him—not just parts—but everything that made up William Henry Pratt understanding that Buffy’s love wasn’t something he had in pieces, rather in whole.

And whatever came next, whatever the sorry world threw at them, he would always have this. The immutable knowledge that Buffy had seen the wreck that was Spike and loved him anyway. So much so she’d followed him into the shower, washed the dirt and blood from his hair, and cried against his skin before pulling him fully into her orbit. That even when he was inside of her, she clutched at him with urgency that belied all else. And when he started stroking her, thumb slippery over her swollen clit, she responded by sinking her teeth

into his shoulder and squeezing him into bloody oblivion. Hard enough it hurt
a hurt that transcended pain and pleasure to become something new, the same
way he had after she'd crashed into his world.

It was more than love. It was life.

And starting now, it was his.

I DON'T GET MANY THINGS RIGHT THE FIRST TIME

THERE WAS A LOT of talking in her future. Deep, introspective talking about feelings and next steps, and Buffy, quite frankly, hadn't had the energy to even figure out where to start, much less carry the thread. She'd entered the bathroom practically vibrating with awareness, and it hadn't helped that the air had been humming, too, as though waiting to go electric at whatever open wound she and Spike first decided to prod. In the end, just surrendering to what her heart wanted had been a matter of building resolve for what came next—she could think more clearly if she tended to the soft, squishy Buffy parts first. The general could wait her turn.

Only it wasn't the general who awoke tangled in Spike the next morning, but still soft, squishy Buffy. A soft, squishy Buffy who had been sleeping next to him for a long time now, only with a clear divide. Her side, his side, and ne'er the two should meet. That had been her reality yesterday and wasn't anymore; her current reality was one where she was naked and warm and pleasantly sore in places that hadn't been sore in...well, since she and Spike had nearly destroyed each other during their first affair. Except this, last night, had somehow been more intense. Maybe because she'd been there in full rather than in part, no reservations or second thoughts, no ever-present voice whispering that she was doing something wrong or dirty. Just let herself be with him, fully with him, in ways she'd wanted for longer than she'd been able to admit to herself, much less anyone else.

And either Spike had been on the same page or he was just that used to following her cues, for he hadn't slowed down long enough to let thought enter the picture. After emptying inside of her, he'd promptly slid to his knees, hiked a leg over his shoulder and proceeded to eat himself right out of her pussy, making hungry, indecent sounds that ensured the next time she came, it was with a scream. And he'd kept doing it, kept his mouth in motion, licking and swirling and sucking, teasing her clit with featherlight strokes, then flattening his tongue against it and pressing down until fireworks shot off behind her eyes. Until she was all limp noodly, and he'd gathered her into his arms to cart her to the bed, where he'd promptly laid her down, spread her open, and done it all over again. Fucked her with his tongue until she'd begged him in earnest to

show mercy, only for him to grin up at her, wild and untamed, and hold her gaze as he kissed his way up her body, his cock sliding along her soaked flesh, and teased her into submission once more.

At some point they'd collapsed into each other, panting and sweaty (well, her sweaty; Spike covered in her sweat and her other stuff), and agreed that now that they had gotten the sex part of reuniting out of their system, they could start tomorrow by talking.

Except tomorrow was now today, and Buffy still didn't feel like talking. She felt, as she gazed up at the familiar lines of his face and let her eyes wander down his jawline to his neck, his shoulders, then along his arms toward those hands that knew her so well, missing the chipped black paint she'd once pretended to hate...hungry. From there it was an easy bridge to his chest, with his extremely biteable nipples and the barest hint of a treasure trail trailing down to, well, treasure. The impressive length of his unerect cock against his thigh, the head barely poking out from the foreskin. He was the only man she'd been with whose penis had made her mouth tingle with the need to get around it. Granted, she also felt that way about his Adam's apple, but she figured Spike would appreciate her attention more south of his belly button insofar as wakeup calls went.

A first wakeup call. A first morning together. Well, not first, but a first that—god willing—wouldn't be spoiled by calamity, apocalypse, or Spike opening his mouth and saying the exact wrong thing. The culmination of so many mornings spent both alone and with him, the former believing she'd lost her last chance and the latter with specifically forged distance that had been important but still difficult to maintain. She'd gotten to tend to his wounds the night before, such as they were; today, while it was still just them, she wanted to tend to the rest. Indulge in her Spike fixation the way she'd never let herself indulge before. Just a girl and her creature of the night boyfriend, being lazy and decadent and together after a journey over which they'd more than earned the right.

Buffy wasn't all that concerned about waking him, knowing firsthand just how hard he slept, especially when he was, in his words, particularly *knackered*. Still, she was careful as she moved, the first slides experimental to gauge just how out of it he was, then with slightly more force as, even asleep, Spike seemed determined not to let her go, holding onto hands and arms and legs and whatever else had gotten tangled up in him after they'd collapsed. After a couple of minutes, though, she'd successfully extricated herself from all grabby parts and sat back on the bed to study him, her sleeping not-a-monster, in all his splendor and glory.

There was a time when she'd taken this for granted. When she'd taken so much for granted. And she supposed that was life, too. The less glamorous, lauded parts of life, not knowing what you had until you didn't have it anymore.

Buffy was just extremely fortunate that her world, crazy and demanding and scary and heartbreaking as it was, was the right amount of not normal to give her what other people rarely got.

It didn't take much coaxing to get her vampire to roll entirely onto his back from his side, watch him shift and stretch and murmur incoherent nothings as he went. Then it was a matter of easing between his legs, settling where she wanted him to find her when he finally did open his eyes. Buffy pulled herself as far up as she could manage, keeping her gaze on his face for a long moment before shifting to his cock. She'd never gotten to see him up close like this when he wasn't erect and trying to guide her mouth where he wanted it—just Spike in repose, relaxed and as close to a normal man as she figured he'd ever get. Also as close as she'd want him to get, because, well, it might have been a hard lesson to learn, but Buffy was definitely of the mindset that anything regular, ordinary, or normal was probably overrated.

Still, she kinda liked this, just for the novelty, and was determined to enjoy herself. She teased a finger from the base to the tip of his cock, half-expecting it to harden under her touch, and surprised when she didn't even earn a whimper. The next stroke was a bit bolder, and it allowed her to enjoy the satin feel of his skin, watch the indentation of her finger along his flesh until she reached the tip again, that little bit of crown visible through his foreskin. And she decided she wanted to see more of that—more of Spike in his natural state—and carefully took his cock into her hand, rolled back that skin to expose the head. Then the thought arose, the curiosity of what it was like to have Spike in her mouth in this state rather than the one she was accustomed to, and since there was no time like the present, Buffy didn't hesitate to close her mouth around him.

At last, Spike shifted. Not a ton but enough to make her flick her gaze back to his face. He was still asleep but other parts were starting to wake up. His cock twitched and flexed, expanding in her mouth, and damn, that was an experience she hadn't known she wanted until she had it. Spike coming to life for her, because of her, responding to her even in his sleep. Buffy drew back until her lips were at the head, just barely grazing, and she could see him again in full, now the view she knew so well. Only it wasn't like it had been before—was a world apart from that, and god, there was so much freedom in that knowledge. Freedom she almost didn't trust because, well, she had no reason to. Every time with Spike before this had been clandestine, the outside world waiting to consume her whole once she hit her peak and came back to earth. That last night in Sunnydale, burdened with the knowledge, the damn certainty, that one of them wasn't going to walk away from the coming fight, and then not knowing what to expect in the aftermath. In the *maybe when* Spike had rejected when she'd offered it, the nebulous *after* neither one of them had really believed in. Then in London, that sensation of being with him but not really being with him, of almost having it but not. There had always been something, and the thought

that there might not be anymore was almost too big for her head, never mind her heart.

But only almost.

Buffy wrapped her hand around the base of his cock and began pumping him at a rhythm, swirling her tongue around the head, first over the foreskin then rolling it back to lick him there, exploring the ridges and the dip and lapping up the first hint of precum. The muscles in his thighs had gone tight, and he was starting to shift more, not a lot but enough to notice. A soft arch of his hips when she sucked her way down his length and back again, then a low whimper when she cupped his balls in her free hand and rolled them against her palm. She didn't know exactly when he woke up—there was no gasp, no sigh, no surprised jolt followed by the murmur of her name like a prayer. She simply became aware that she was being watched just before she felt his fingers in her hair, brushing strands away from her face, and looked up to find him regarding her with those deep, endless eyes as though she were the one being swallowed. And that was heady, too. Spike looking at her as she worked his cock in and out of her mouth, as she hollowed her cheeks and swirled her tongue and squeezed the part of him she couldn't comfortably work in, right up until the moment she decided to try. Watching his eyes grow darker, his jaw tight, his thigh muscles tensing and his nostrils flaring, and she knew he was close, could feel the raw power of his restraint under her fingers. She grinned, or tried to, which made him break—made him whimper. Had him reaching for her hair again, only this time to grip, guide, a breath shuddering through his lips that might have been her name. Then he jolted, his cock pulsing, and he was spending in her mouth, panting now, his fist wrapped around her hair hard enough to hurt but somehow only making her burn more. Making her aware of how hot she was, in her face and hands and blood and especially between her legs in that logic-defying way that had been routine with them, with him, making her want him even when parts of her were sore, pleasantly or otherwise. But that was Spike all over. He'd told her once that she'd crave him the way he craved blood, and the bastard hadn't been wrong.

About the important things, he rarely was.

It was in the moments after, Buffy with her head resting against his inner thigh, her fingers playing over his cock, which barely softened at all before growing thick and strained and all vertical again, that he finally spoke, stroking her hair back from her brow with soft, tender touches so faint she could have believed it the wind had there been any.

"If this is a dream, be a love and don't ever wake me." His voice was rough. The rest of him wasn't. "Just let me stay here."

"It's not a dream," she told him. "Dreams don't last." Not the way nightmares did, anyway. "I... I've been wanting to do that for a long time."

She wasn't looking at him, but she heard his smile all the same. "Far be it for

me to stand in between the Slayer and what she wants.”

“It just... It wasn’t right before.” Buffy sighed and shifted, turning her head so she could see his eyes. “When it was just half of you.”

“Wouldn’t have complained.”

“Half of you would have.”

“Half of me wouldn’t have known.”

“You would now.”

Spike regarded her for a moment, his expression soft. “Come up here,” he said after a beat, wrapping his finger around a tendril of hair and tugging. “Can’t think properly with your mouth that close to my prick.”

“This prick?” Buffy grinned and tongued the underside as she pushed herself onto her arms. “I thought you’d prefer me down here.”

“Buffy...” He fluttered his eyes shut, arched his hips. “Please.”

There were a lot of possibilities behind that *please*, a lot of ways to interpret it. Ultimately, though, Buffy suspected she knew what he was asking, and even if she’d like to bask in the afterglow a little longer, maybe it would be better if they got the talking part out of the way. Make returning to life outside of these walls seem less daunting. So, with a sigh, she brushed a parting kiss to the head of his cock and crawled back up the length of his body. The second she was within kissing range, he caught her lips with his, which made her grin, cupped the back of her head to hold her to him, which made her whimper, and proceeded to make that singular magic with his lips and tongue that truly *was* singular.

Her Spike, whole at last.

“Mmm,” Buffy murmured into him before breaking away with a breathless laugh. “I thought you wanted to talk.”

“Can talk plenty,” Spike agreed, rolling her over until she was on her back, him propped up on his side and roaming his eyes over her in ways that made her feel both powerful and self-conscious at the same time. He seemed particularly focused on her breasts, the tips of which proceeded to go tight and pointy under his attention. “What’s there to talk about?”

“I... I don’t know, I guess. I thought there’d be more talking after you were...you again.”

The corner of Spike’s mouth twitched. He leaned over to curl his tongue around her nipple. “And all the talks we had before I got my other half back would just flit out of my brain, is that it?”

Put it like that, it sounded insane. But also plausible because, well, Spike. Half of him *had* decided to stay away from her for a year. “I just... I want to make sure we’re still all same pagey. About everything.”

“That I want to go home to our flat in London?”

“Yeah.”

“That I love you.”

Buffy arched an eyebrow. “There were things we talked about, Spike. I guess I just want to know that... You’re *all* you now. And you know what you didn’t know the last time we had this conversation. It’s not just guessing anymore, it’s actually knowing. Why you stayed away, why you... Why you didn’t believe me.”

Spike flinched at that, as she’d known he would, and maybe as she’d needed him to—needed to see that he grasped how much that had hurt, as the part of him she’d been living with had understood but never *felt* the way she was used to Spike feeling things. The Spike with all the emotional intelligence in addition to the smarty-pants intelligence that he worked so desperately to hide. The Spike who had the quality that made him the perfect person to be alone with or not-alone with, depending.

And now he was sitting up, the playfulness gone, his expression serious. “It’s still noisy up here, love,” he told her, running his fingers along his brow. “Gonna take a bit to sort it out.”

“I don’t expect—”

“I know. Just...” He closed his eyes, tightened his jaw as though begging for patience or searching for words, or maybe both. “There’s these two thoughts, see,” he went on a moment later, setting his gaze on hers once more. “More than that, really, but boils down to the muck that I thought living here and everything else with you. It’s not tidy, putting those thoughts together. They still feel separate, and both make all the bloody sense in the world, even if I don’t... I know I would’ve come looking for you if it had been all me. I feel that in my bones, my blood. You told me you wanted me around and if the sodding apocalypse wasn’t enough to keep me away, nothing was. But I still remember all the other rot—how it felt, not knowing. Thinking maybe those last minutes with you were the best a man like me could hope for. That you were better off if I stayed out, let you live your life without me pulling you down. Your mates all bloody hate me—”

“Spike—”

“This is what I thought, Buffy. Not what I think. What that part of me thought while we were separate.” He ground the heel of his palm against his brow, grimacing. “Seems like rubbish now, but it didn’t when I was in the thick of it, Angel tellin’ me how much I’d muck up your life, how if I really loved you, I’d let you go.”

Her throat tightened. “He said that?”

“Not in so many words, no, but...”

He didn’t finish. He also didn’t need to. She understood. Subtle manipulation and gentle nudges were more Angel’s style—his way of getting you to do what he wanted while making it sound like it was your idea. Even on the occasions when he was particularly forthright, he positioned everything he wanted not only as a good option, but the only right option. Usually by making

himself a martyr in the process. How could anyone possibly argue when he was the one falling on the sword, making the big sacrifice? Burdened by the tragedy of being the only one who both knew what needed to be done and had the strength, the selflessness, to do it.

He'd done it to her. Of course he'd do it to Spike. And even if Spike had been wiser to those manipulations than Buffy at the time, he hadn't been a full person, had he? Separated from the part of his sensibilities that allowed him to easily pick out an unspoken agenda.

"So you stayed in LA," Buffy said, more to fill the silence than anything else. "You stayed and...slept with Harmony?"

Spike winced again and looked away. "Was hoping that wouldn't come up."

"Sorry, I tend to pay attention when people talk about my boyfriend banging other women."

He dragged a hand down his face. "It wasn't... Yeah, it happened. Not proud of it by a bloody mile. I was... Fuck, I don't even know what I was. It was just the once, though. Had a bit of a buzz after I got my body back. Bit like I felt with you."

"You did *not* just compare me to Harmony."

"Bloody hell, Slayer, of course not." There was a beat, and then he did look at her, one of those stark, naked Spike looks that she *felt* in ways she'd never felt anyone else. Like he was speaking to her in a language only she could hear, much less understand. "It was more just...bloody everything. All at once. Dunno if I can explain it properly, how it felt to go from...not even nothing, but like you'd lost a piece of yourself. Like an arm or sommat had been lopped off and you felt where it was supposed to be, that place. Wound never healed up, you just walked around with it, feeling that and only that. Then in a bloody blink it's over. You've got your arm back, and you have to touch...*everything*. Have to feel *everything* because you forgot what it was like, feeling things. Being able to touch. You go a bit mad with it. Or I did, at least, this part of me. The one that was here. The part that was with you... How I managed to restrain myself with you back in London long enough to get back to yours, I have no bloody clue."

Buffy's stomach twisted, her heart thundering, the rest of her a bit startled at how well she understood. How much sense that had made, given the disparity between their situations. How the ability to feel anything had driven so many of her decisions once upon a resurrection, and yeah, she'd been whole but she'd felt fractured. Felt separated from the part of herself that made her Buffy, and that had informed every decision she'd made for months, until the wealth of what she'd felt had threatened to smother her alive, and she'd needed to create distance in order to survive. Distance that had, of course, nearly killed them both in the end.

"It's okay," she heard herself say, and was only mildly surprised to discover she was telling the truth.

Spike lifted his head, gazed at her uncertainly. “Yeah?”

“Well, I’m not... It’s not like it was *all* you.” Buffy sighed and dropped her eyes to the hotel comforter. “Not the way it was all me.”

“Buffy—”

“Spike, I don’t... Maybe I don’t need to do this.” She played her fingers over the sheet, aware of the pulse in the air, of her own heart beating in ways she rarely slowed down enough to clock.

But they had come this far, right? Way too far to let themselves trip as they crossed... Well, not the finish line, as there was no finish line, but if they were really fortunate, the last major threshold that kept them from seeing what they were, what they could be, not forgetting but not dwelling on the distances already traveled, building upon a past of hurt and heartache.

“Here’s what I want,” Buffy said at length, slowly meeting his gaze again. “I want...us. I want to try. I want to more than try, actually, I want to succeed, but I’ll start by trying first. You and me, together. Like a team. I want you to still love me, and I want to love you, and I want to keep fighting because I don’t think I can not fight, I think that’s just who I am. I want to stop answering to other people—like really stop. When we go back to London, if that’s what we decide to do, I want to take full control over all the slayer stuff. I don’t want to do it alone, but I need people who trust me, believe in me, at my side. And my entire life, Spike, that’s only ever been you, one hundred percent of the time. I want to live with you and love you and, if slayers get old, get old with you. If we don’t, well, we figure that out, too. You help me try not to wig and I’ll help you... I don’t know how I’ll help you, actually, but I’ll do it. However I can.”

“You’ll help me by being you.” He reached for her, his palm against her cheek. “By being Buffy Summers. The best bloody person I know.”

“Oh.” Her skin started to heat, her vision growing watery. “I can do that.”

“Do you think for an instant anything you said is something I don’t want, too?” He barked a laugh, warm and incredulous, his own eyes shiny and wet. “That I haven’t wanted since... It’s why I did what I did. Why I decided to fight for this sodding soul in the first place. Just never thought... Once I got it, I knew better. Understood things the way I couldn’t before. ’Bout me and especially you. What I could ever ask of you.”

“You’re not asking. I’m giving.”

“And that’s what makes it a bloody miracle.”

Buffy shook her head, reaching for him in kind. Needing to feel his skin under her fingers. “It’s not a miracle. It’s... It’s just us.”

“Well, *just us* is sodding miraculous.”

“Do you always have to argue with me?”

“Think you know the answer to that.” Spike smirked and kissed her, and it was more than a kiss. More than a promise, too, even though it was also both those things. Everything. All the things in the whole world, and for the first time

in longer than Buffy could remember, she felt...not something, but the absence of something. Something that she'd gotten so used to feeling that she had to pause when she realized it wasn't there anymore—poke, analyze it—and then she was laughing, almost cackling into Spike's mouth, and he was laughing too as though he understood the joke, and maybe he did, maybe he didn't, maybe he felt, or didn't feel, the thing that wasn't there that always had been. Unruly and heavy, that piece of herself, her reservations and fears and loathing and all other bad thoughts and feelings she'd ever forced herself to swallow, that she'd carried into everything she'd ever allowed herself to have with Spike, just *gone*.

If she was lucky, if she tried, maybe things could be like this in the moments outside of this one. She wouldn't be someone who lived to escape anymore, whose peace was found only in shadows, but always within reach.

"Christ, I missed you," Spike rumbled against her lips, her chin, and he was pressing her back, rolling over her, falling into the cradle of her legs. "Every bit of you, Buffy. That's what I want. Feels like..." He lifted his head and blinked, looking at her with that Spike-branded intensity that always, somehow, felt like too much, but also always, somehow, left her desperate for more of it. More of the *everything* that seemed to pour from him in those looks. "Home, I guess, best word for it. Seems a bit ridiculous to say, considering where I've been, I suppose."

Buffy raised a hand to his cheek. "Here but not?"

"Right. But it's true. I feel it." He dropped his brow to hers and inhaled deeply. "Bloody strange, to tell you the truth. Hitting like this. Like I just woke up."

"Well, technically, you kinda did."

"Bitch." He grinned and kissed her. "You know what I mean."

"I think I do. I want to." She hesitated, trailing her thumb over his skin, her heart stuttering at the way he leaned into her touch, as though desperate for it. "You were with me but also not with me. And I... I wasn't exactly forthcoming-Buffy. I didn't... I just wanted you to be you. And you weren't."

"Sodding warts and all. Drove me batty, mind. I understood it. I think I did, but I also didn't, because I didn't feel like two men. All I knew was I was with you but not. Lying there and missing you, and feeling like a git for it. Resenting it at times." He dropped his gaze to her mouth, his own growing heated. "Wanting to kiss you, knowing you wanted it, too, but that it wasn't enough. *I* wasn't enough, and then not even having the proper wiring to feel that the way I ought to."

"It wasn't about that—"

"I know, love, I do." Spike flicked his eyes back to hers. "But it all amounts to the same, yeah? I had you, and I didn't. And part of me didn't at all. And I missed you. Missed you when I could touch you, which mucked with my head, but I think I also missed myself. The parts that... All of it." He lowered

his mouth so that when he spoke, his lips brushed along her chin. “Can I show you what I missed, Buffy? All the things I missed?”

There was only one answer to that, but Buffy didn’t remember giving it. Just that the next second he was kissing her again, deeper and hungrier than before, with all those parts, the pieces that she’d spent the last few months without, and yes, this was what she wanted. Yes, he could touch her like that, pin her wrists to the mattress above her head as he explored her neck with lips and tongue and teeth, and teeth were just fine, actually—maybe not enough but hold that thought because now he was making his way down her body, pressing biting kisses along her collarbone, then the tops of her breasts, then swirling his tongue around one nipple, then the other, teasing and sucking and telling her all the things he’d missed. The way she tasted, how warm she was against his skin, in his mouth, how he could feel her heartbeat, her strength, and how he loved the way it picked up or skipped whenever he pressed his lips *here* or licked her *there* or teased her with his teeth *just so*. And then further down, stroking her sides, then her hips, and then he was perched between her legs, his hands on her inner thighs, framing her, making her squirm, half-embarrassed and half in need, startlingly aware of herself, how hot and wet and throbbing she was against the otherwise cool, sterile hotel room air.

“Missed this sight,” Spike said in a tone so low it was practically a growl. “How good you smell. All this juice, just for me.”

And she’d missed how he could do that—touch her, talk about her in ways that made her burn with something other than self-consciousness. How he made her feel powerful and womanly and all the things he said she was when he was between her legs. How he relished in making her wet, buried his face in her pussy with a happy groan so that she soaked his chin, his cheeks, his mouth and his nose. Like he wanted to paint himself in her. Then what he did with his lips, his tongue, the soft kisses he doted along her flesh, teasing and frustrating in equal measure and *more, more, more*, his fingertips sliding along her folds, her slit, slipping up until they framed her clit but didn’t do more than that because that was what she wanted, and Spike was determined not to give it until she begged. Apparently asking for *more* on repeat wasn’t enough.

“Spike,” Buffy gasped, lifting her hips to follow his mouth as he pulled away, smirking. “Please.”

“Oh, I like *please*. Missed the way you said that, too.” He winked and licked a line from her clit to her opening, and then his tongue was inside her, pushing, thrusting, lapping, exploring, and he slid his fingers to skim along the sides of her clit as though to remind her of what he hadn’t yet given her. “I know you’re not hurting if you’re still being prim and proper, Slayer,” Spike murmured with an obscene smack of his lips. “When you’re really desperate for it, you forget your manners.”

“Fuck you.”

“Ahh, getting closer.” He tapped her clit as though in reward. “Love this, too. Watching you fight yourself. Knowing it’s inevitable...”

“Ugh!” She tried closing her thighs around his face, not expecting it to work and unsurprised when it didn’t, then wiggled again. It was a matter of pride at this point—making him be the one to give in, to surrender and moan and fall into her like she was his personal gravity well. “Have you forgotten how to do it?” she asked instead, blinking at him with as much innocence as she could muster. “It has been a *long* time.”

His eyes darkened and another growl rumbled through his throat. “Last night a long time?”

“Beginner’s luck?”

“Oh *beginner*, now, am I?”

“Well, we were already cooking from the fight and stuff. If you’ve lost your touch—”

“You think that’s gonna work?” Spike asked, then nipped at her inner thigh. “Think I’m that bloody fragile?”

“I would be if I’d forgotten how to do something I used to be so good at.”

“Mmm,” he rumbled back, looking less annoyed and more amused, damn him. “Maybe I have lost my touch. Might need you to show me how to get a woman like you off. Would enjoy that, actually. Watching you play your pussy for me. Wishing it was me here doing this...” He stroked down her slit again, then dipped two fingers into her opening, shallowly at first, then deeper, as though he couldn’t help himself. And Buffy knew exactly what to do—how to clench and squeeze and put those muscles he loved so much to enough use to make him jealous of himself. “Christ, pet...”

“Spike...”

“Love this,” he swore softly, staring now at his fingers as they thrust inside her, the sound wet and hot, and, paired with the reverence on his face, enough to make her think it didn’t matter which of them won. “Love watching you take me, how you feel, how you squeeze. How hungry you are for it.” He flicked his gaze back to hers, his breaths growing ragged, and then he was twisting his wrist, pressing inside of her that place only he had ever found—that place she hadn’t known about until he’d shown her—and sound became a distant thing, far away, to the point she wouldn’t be able to say if she’d started making demands or he had, if she’d broken or he’d surrendered, but the next second he was finally, god *finally*, treating her clit to long laps of his tongue.

And Buffy fell back, if falling were possible while already lying down, Spike falling with her. Fucking her with his fingers and licking her clit, then drawing teasing circles around it with the balled end of his tongue, then flicking it, then pressing down again, all the while groaning into her like he could feel it, too. Her hand ended up in his hair somehow, fisting, pulling, holding, trying to direct him after something both *there* and elusive. Then he was whispering again, his

voice somehow carrying over the indecent sounds tearing through her throat, telling her he'd missed this, too. How hot she got, how she tasted when she was on the verge of falling, the sounds she made, the scent of her sweat, how both versions of himself had stolen away too many times to count to pull on his cock thinking about this exact thing. Her legs around him, her pussy hot and soaking him, and that specific way she trembled, just like *that*, before she tumbled over. How he knew that was the moment to pull her clit between his lips and suck like he was trying to pull her inside him, and *there* became *here*, white-hot and not at all elusive, and she fell apart, her skin and veins and hair and fingernails and everything ablaze, and Spike just growled and kept licking, kept sucking, kept fucking her with his fingers until one wave crested into another, and her back was bowing off the bed and he was still growling, and it hit that place where it was almost too much, where it almost hurt in a way that never made sense to her when she was anywhere but inside of it, but a hurt that she wanted the way she wanted him.

Her legs were tingling when they fell slack, when he pressed his lips again to her inner thigh, then along her belly, higher as he climbed back toward her mouth. Buffy didn't open her eyes until she felt the head of his cock slipping between her folds, until he was there, sinking into her, grinning and asking if she wanted to reconsider that whole *forgot how* nonsense, and she didn't know what he was talking about until she did, which probably meant he had won in the end. And that was okay. Spike deserved to win, especially when winning was like this.

She'd won so much in their time together—if this was to be different, let it start by being more equal.

"Missed this, too," he said, holding himself there inside her for a moment before drawing back. "Missed feeling your heart beat like this. Like a bloody echo, love. How good you feel. Like home." Spike blinked hard as though he was fighting himself, and he was, in a sense—he always was, and she always knew it. Whether out of habit or self-preservation, she couldn't say, but it was there in the tremble of his arms, in the tightness of his jaw as he speared back into her, harder this time like he could chase away whatever phantoms lingered. Phantoms he might never be able to fully outrun.

The same phantoms that had separated them—ones she'd made, ones he'd made, ones they'd made together and apart. Buffy dug her nails into his shoulders, rolling her hips in the rhythm of his thrusts, that specific oneness they had always done well but never right, and felt at once overwhelmed by the magnitude of what they had managed to surmount and the world of unknowns waiting outside this room. Waiting for more reasons to take this from her—to make him doubt, to make him *miss* the way he said he'd missed, to make all the soft moments harder to believe because the sharp ones were the sort that could cut.

And that was when it hit her. When the teasing and the lovemaking and the doubt and the missing all coalesced. Spike pumping into her, his eyes in her eyes, his body in her body, his heart in her heart, the part of him she needed that she'd never had. That he needed to understand she wanted along with the rest. Along with all of him.

"I want to see you," Buffy whispered against his lips, hiking a leg around his waist, pulling him in deeper and rising. "Let me see you."

Spike furrowed his brow and kissed her, sweet and desperate at the same time. "I'm here, love."

"No. All of you." She cupped his cheek again, ran her thumb along his mouth. "I want all of you."

He stared at her, not following her until he did. She saw the moment he did—the way recognition lit up his face, made his nostrils flare and his mouth pull tight, and she thought he might deny her, but that was silly, because this was Spike and he never denied her what she asked. What she told him she wanted. Instead, he held her gaze while his own shifted, the blue melting into gold, the smooth landscape of his forehead giving way to ridges that had the slayer in her waking up, tightening around his cock, around him, but before he could mistake her response for fear, she captured his lips with her own. Kissed him and kissed him and pulled him as deeply into her as she could, clenching and whimpering and showing she trusted him with her tongue by thrusting it into his mouth. Dancing it along his fangs, faintly at first as he began pounding into her in earnest, the bed springs whining and the headboard—sturdy thing that it was—thumping a cadence against the wall at its back, and Buffy teasing his fangs softly, then not softly, pushing against the point until the taste of blood filled both their mouths, and Spike gasped and growled at the same time, pulling back but pulling her with him, onto him, so that she was no longer against the mattress but in his lap, working herself up and down his cock at a frenzy as he sucked her blood into him. The first she'd willingly given.

But not the last. Not the last.

Spike didn't fight when she wrenched her mouth away, just gazed up at her with those demon eyes, breathing heavily against her lips, a bit of her blood smearing his own, watching her with that wonder she'd never let herself see when he wore this face. The part of him that he thought he had to hide.

That she wanted to show him he didn't.

"Buffy—"

Buffy shook her head and pressed her hand to his mouth, bouncing on him harder now, the edges of her world beginning to shimmer once more. Split and full of him but not as full as she could be. She held his gaze and pricked the tip of one finger against his fangs, ready when he whimpered, when he sighed, when he tried to close his eyes but no, "Look at me," she whispered, and he did, because she'd asked, and watched as she smeared the bit of blood she'd drawn

against her throat. Watched his demon eyes follow, fill, watched as tears spilled down the face he rarely showed her, and he might fight but he knew that wasn't what she wanted, instead followed the trajectory she had laid out, hesitating only when his mouth was there against her pulse.

And she'd been wrong earlier. He'd wanted to hear her plead with him, beg him for what she needed, what he could give, so she'd plead. She'd beg. She'd ask him.

"Let me have all of you," Buffy whispered, sinking back down to the hilt and squeezing. "All of you, please, Spike."

There was a beat, then a moan, then ecstasy. Pure euphoria in the form of pain and pleasure and his rumbling into her, his fangs in her neck, her blood pumping and his throat working and he was drinking and she was spasming and he was crying and she was holding and then he was following. Bucking, releasing, flooding her with him and she flooded him with her, and she hit it, that moment of perfect clarity, of balance and peace and everything else that could possibly matter. Spike inside her, cock and fang, heart and soul, and Buffy holding him to her the way she hadn't before. The way she'd wanted, needed, and hoped to never lack again.

The world tipped on its side once more, and when it returned, she found herself cuddled against his chest, panting and throbbing and sated all at once, her neck beating in time with her heart, her vampire regarding her with his demon eyes, waiting, nervous, then lighting with the most beautiful smile she'd ever seen at whatever he found on her face.

"I love you," Buffy told him, her voice hoarse, either from the sounds he'd coaxed from it or the place where his fangs had pierced her or both. "I love you, Spike. All of you."

"Buffy—"

"Just...if we're ever split again, remember that, okay? The *all of you* part. All of Spike for all of Buffy, that's the deal."

Spike stared at her for a long beat, trembling. Watching her, seeing her, understanding her, the way only he ever had or could.

And, when he smiled, showing her he'd heard as well.

"I can do that," he promised, then sealed the promise with a kiss.

LIFE IS JUST THIS

BUFFY HUFFED AND GAVE her blood-stained underwear a last glare before pitching it into the wastebin by the sink. A perfectly good pair of panties ruined by mother nature.

At least she'd managed to get back to their apartment before the sun had gone down and the journey from headquarters had a chance to grow even more traffic-heavy than usual. London had become busier over the last few months, courtesy of what Spike called the lookie-loos—those vamps who wanted a peek of the famous Buffy Summers and thought they might also be able to knock off a baby slayer for easy bragging rights. While she was certain she would have been able to manage a horde of ultra-motivated bloodthirsty admirers, fighting her way home would have made Buffy extra cranky.

As it was, she was already cranky. And three guesses with who.

No wonder Spike had had a spring in his step that morning. He'd known, the bastard, and he hadn't said a word. No, just kept throwing her heated looks anytime they'd been in the same space, and because that was also par for the course, she hadn't thought those looks as anything more than his normal swagger. They also hadn't seen each other all that much since leaving the house despite working at the same place, as Wednesday was both of their busy days, but the glimpses she'd been afforded had told her there was something on his mind. Something that, yes, came with a mental image that made her legs all wobbly and her skin extra hot, but honestly, she could kick his ass for not letting her know. What was the point of having a vampire boyfriend if not to be forewarned when her period was about to start?

The result was Buffy had to bum a tampon from one of her students, which made her feel less instructor-y and more clueless-girl-who-didn't-know-how-to-count. And she did *so* know how to count. She was very good at counting. Just that Spike usually said something when her period was imminent because her time of the month was *his* time of the month, according to him. His time to enjoy his favorite cocktail right from the source.

If she didn't know better, she'd think he'd done it on purpose—the whole *not telling her* thing. Something about how the blood was even sweeter when she was in a temper. How he could taste her irritation, her frustration, and how

good it was, knowing all that passion was for him and him alone. Buffy had tried explaining that not all passion was good passion once, but that conversation hadn't gone the way she'd intended, probably because at some point she'd ended up upside down by the kitchen sink, gripping her own ankles for support and hoping like hell that Dawn didn't decide to make this the one day she came home early.

Yeah, Buffy Summers was truly living the hard-knock life these days.

"Honey, I'm home," Spike said as he helped himself into their flat that night. "Something smells delicious. What do you have cooking for your Spike?"

"I could kill you right now," Buffy replied in her best you're-not-getting-any voice, doing everything she could not to look up from the paper she'd plucked off the coffee table just to have a prop at the ready. "I could, and no one would blame me."

"Mmm. Gonna do me before or after dinner? Wouldn't mind working up an appetite, and you smell even better when you're all hot and—"

"I'm serious!"

"And I'm not?"

Buffy sighed and gave up the charade, bunching the paper into a ball that she then lobbed at her stupid vampire's stupid head. It bounced and rebounded without making him so much as blink. "One of these times, I'm going to cut you off," she said, rising to her feet.

"Very convincing, that."

"You could've told me."

"You could've paid better bloody attention," he replied, his grin broad and unrepentant as ever. And dammit, she liked that grin—loved it, actually. It was an infectious thing, the way it lit up his eyes, shed years off his face—unfair for someone who was immortal but no less true because of it—and made her feel again each of the moments that hadn't been this, because having lived those moments made living these moments even better. "Shall I demonstrate? Shall I pay *bloody* attention? Got all the right tools to map you out."

"You are disgusting."

"Good thing you fancy disgusting." Spike closed the distance between them in a burst of vampire speed, and before she could protest or think of some other insult to hurl at him, he had cupped the back of her head and was doing magic with his mouth that made all the stand-your-ground thoughts fly out the window because, well, it was silly ground anyway.

Because this? While, yes, they were nearing the point where she'd lived more of her life with this than without, there remained a deficit. Years spent at odds with him and herself, and that wasn't even counting the months when they'd been mostly platonic roommates. Spike had told her once, enthusiastically and while doing some of that same mouth magic, that sleeping beside her while she smelled *like this* had been the closest thing to torture he'd ever experienced,

which was saying a lot because he'd both been actually tortured and done some actual torturing. Nothing compared, he said, to knowing she loved him and not being able to touch her—dragging in lungfuls of air that smelled of her and blood and all his favorite things, and having to keep his hands to himself.

It hadn't been easy, the acclimation part. Some things had been downright difficult. Getting used to living in a space with a Spike who was *all* Spike, listening to stories he'd only half-lived but had full context for these days, the doubts and misgivings and everything else, facts put to theories and more than that. It was one thing to know and another to live, especially considering the massive amount of stuff that changed in a short amount of time. Buffy finally feeling at home enough to make their London apartment, well, a home, put art on the walls, pictures in frames, make plans that were long-term rather than being all seat-of-pantsy. At the same time changing what her day-to-days looked like with the new world they were building, leaving desk jockeying behind for field work, and Spike also finding his place at her side—carving out room for himself that was just his without also being hers, because as painful as the split had been, he'd thought maybe it had done him some good, too. The part of him that hadn't had the confidence and the knowledge getting the chance to learn who he was apart from his relationships, and how that made him better for her than he would have been otherwise.

Made him the sort of man who knew himself more thoroughly than he ever had. And while they had both decided the cookie metaphor had been a mistake—especially since Angel couldn't seem to get over it—Buffy liked to think that she and Spike were mutually doughy, at least enough so that the baking they did could be done together. If the time without him whole had taught her anything, it was that no one was ever truly finished. That finished meant dead, and she had a whole lot of living she wanted to do before she crossed that particular line.

All that meant was life was, for the first real time, something resembling good, and that made his orneriest days worth it.

Especially when he did that thing with his tongue.

"Mmm," Buffy murmured against his lips, pulling back just enough to get the words out. "Anyone ever tell you you're a bad influence?"

He grinned and nipped at her mouth. "Might've heard it a time or two. Want me to be better?"

"Is that a trick question?"

"Maybe." He slid his hands to her ass to haul her against him, groaning low in his throat at whatever he felt. "How long we got before the bit gets home?"

"Probably not enough time."

"Just probably?"

"Unless we wanna incentivize her to hurry up with the moving out thing, but you're too much of a weenie for that."

The grin widened. “Dunno. Could get used to the idea of having you all to myself. Not having to worry about someone walkin’ in at a crucial moment.”

“Even if it means scarring Dawn for life?”

“Some sacrifices are worth it.” Spike hiked her more fully into his arms and started walking her back—not toward their bedroom, rather the kitchen, where he plopped her down on the counter and helped himself between her legs, pressing his palm against her center and making every nerve in her body burn in that special Spike way. “But since I aim to get a meal in, guess this is as good a place to dine.”

“You are a dork.” Buffy let her head fall back as he began skating a path down her neck. Whimpering when he danced his lips around his mark—the one neither of them ever let get too healed before opening it up again—then flat out groaning when he teased it with his blunt teeth. If sense had not already been on the way out of the building, this was where it would have departed for good. “A complete dork,” she added.

“And completely yours.”

“Mhmm. *Completely.*”

“Bloody right.” Spike shifted so he was on his knees, pressing kisses above her belly button as he tugged her slacks down her hips. “Hush now. It’s supper time.”

Buffy released a trembling breath and nodded, threading her fingers through his hair. He hadn’t gelled it within an inch of its life today, probably in preparation. Cocky asshole and considerate monster all in one package.

All here. All with her.

Exactly where he was supposed to be.