

LIFE AFTER DEATH

HOLLY DENISE



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WELCOME TO HELL

SHE SAW HERSELF ON the ground, a broken thing being broken further still. The landscape was on fire, blurry, shapes melting into each other, all except the girl on the pavement. The girl who had her eyes, her nose, her face, who had said her name before the demons had roared and ripped and shattered her into pieces.

She hadn't had time to think or wonder or reconcile what she'd seen with what was happening, for in an instant those demons that had been on bikes were off of them, were circling her, leering and jeering and warning her with words about what was to come. But Buffy knew that wasn't how this happened. She knew, and when they came at her, she made sure they knew too.

And she wasn't alone. There was a girl, a soft girl, who appeared at the side of a vampire. Buffy didn't know how she knew he was a vampire, only that she did, and he seemed to know her, too. Know her in ways that made her feel something—not safe but safer—for he immediately threw himself into the fight. Into the action, and it was like her body remembered him. Like they had fallen into a familiar dance, the moves innate even if she couldn't hear the music. Even if she wasn't entirely sure what music was.

In the aftermath, demon parts littered the pavement along with the Buffy who had first said her name. This mirror of herself, scattered and broken. The soft girl came to stand beside her—the Buffy who wasn't on the pavement—and said her name as well. Soft, imploring, and Buffy didn't recognize her, but some part of her did. A girl who wasn't her, not like the broken thing, but also was, for when Buffy looked into her eyes, she saw herself.

There was a word for that. A word she knew. Sister.

"Are you real?" the sister asked, her voice trembling. And Buffy wanted to say no, but was terrified the answer was yes.

"Her hands," the vampire said, coming to her other side. He looked at her softly, gently, can I, and yes he could. Buffy let him.

"What is this?" she heard herself say, surprising herself with the sound of her own voice. A raspy, near-dead thing, much like the rest of her.

"You're home," the sister said, not near-dead, but brimming with life and light so much so she made the world around her blink out. "Buffy, you're home."

No, she wasn't. Whatever this place was, it wasn't home. But she knew not to say that. Not to the sister. Instead, she looked at the vampire. "Where have I been?"

He couldn't possibly answer that.

"Gone," he said. "You've been gone."

"I don't... I don't remember."

Something passed between the sister and the vampire, a look, a face, a worry, there and not-there in a flash.

"You're safe with us," the vampire said. "We'll take care of you."

Buffy hesitated, gave the hellscape around her another look. It didn't seem anywhere was safe. Not here, at least.

Safe was in his eyes, though. In the sister's as well. Safe and something other than safe, something she didn't know but found she trusted.

"Okay," she said, "okay," and let them lead her through the dark.

ABOVE GROUND

SHOWER. IT WAS A word she knew. She didn't know how she knew it, any more than she knew how she knew all the other words crowding her head, but she did know it. Shower meant clean. Meant water. Meant washing off the dirt and blood on her hands and under her fingernails, getting it out of her hair, all the places where the grave could be seen on her. It meant fresh and new. It meant life.

Those were other words she knew. Life, water, dirt, blood, grave. Strange that she had those words when everything else was empty. That she should know what a shower was but not recognize any of the people who had shouted her name once they'd burst through the door. Another thing she knew—her name. Buffy. She was Buffy. And she wasn't dead.

At least not anymore. That's what she'd been. Dead. That's what they'd said. What the sister had said. Buffy had been dead, and she wasn't anymore. The only person who hadn't called her dead had been the vampire. He'd said gone instead, and maybe that was the same thing.

Only it didn't feel like the same thing. Death was nonbeing, and she hadn't been a nonbeing. She'd been somewhere nice. Somewhere safe and warm and right, where nothing hurt, where there was no blood under her fingernails, where she knew more than mundane words. Where she didn't have a bunch of people waiting for her to...to...

So gone then. That's what she'd been. That's what she was. Gone from the place she was supposed to be and made to be here instead.

Here in this shower. In this room. In this house. In this world.

A cry scratched at her throat, and she thumped her head against the shower wall, trying to keep the sound in. To shove it back. Afraid that if it came out, if they heard, they would push their way inside this room the way they had pushed their way into the house. Talk loudly at her again, shout, all abrasive, demanding answers she didn't have to questions that made no sense. The most she'd been able to glean was that they knew her, thought they had rescued her. They had described the place she'd been as hell, and unless hell was a word she only thought she knew, they definitely had that wrong. Hell wasn't where she'd been—it was this. It was fire and demons and clawing her way to freedom before her lungs burned out. It was people screaming her name, talking loudly to her, at her, chasing away the only bit of quiet she'd managed to find since rescuing herself.

The sister had stayed, at least. She was here somewhere, and she had yelled at the others. Just not fast enough to keep the vampire with the vibrant hair from leaving. The one who had held her hands, who had known, just by looking at her, what she'd done to free herself.

She'd liked him and his still, his quiet, even if she didn't understand why he'd looked at her like he had. Why he'd choked when he'd said her name. Why a name would make anyone cry.

He'd gone before she'd had a chance to ask, and taken the quiet with him. Left her to the loud. To these people who also knew her name but didn't cry when they said it or shouted it. Who spoke it like an order rather than a prayer.

Buffy, her brow still pressed to the shower wall, watched as her grave dirt circled the drain. As it left her the way he had. The vampire. The not-dead thing that had been in the house with her, another not-dead thing. A piece of what she'd lost. Like attracts like.

She wished he'd stayed. Or that she'd gone.

Or that the grave had swallowed her whole.

MONUMENTS TO THE DEAD

IT TOOK LONGER THAN it should have for the name Dawn to stick in her head. Dawn. The sister. Like the sunrise. Bright and beautiful, but painful to stare at too long. Buffy didn't know why that was, only that it was there, a feeling rooted deep that seemed sensitive to the touch. Anytime her mind wandered toward it, her instincts flared and told her to back away. Save herself. So she did.

But still, Dawn was beautiful. Buffy might not know her, but she loved her.

The next name she learned was Spike. The vampire. The one who felt familiar even if nothing else about him was. She liked him, too. Wished he was around more. That she could wake up and be in a house with him and Dawn rather than the others.

Buffy didn't much like the others, and they didn't seem to like her, either. Not this her. They wanted the her they'd thought they'd been saving when they had done the spell that had ripped her away from the place that had been home. The redhead was the most abrasive, followed by the boy, though thankfully, the boy did not live in the house. Neither had accepted at first that she didn't remember them, rather decided they should yell meaningless things at her in some vague hope to jolt her memory. And when that hadn't worked—one of the other others, the one that Buffy thought might be her favorite of the people who were not Dawn or Spike—had stepped in and said, “We knew this was possible. She was gone for a long time.”

That was another thing. They had stopped calling her dead, had decided to use Spike's word instead. Though none had credited him with it.

“I guess we're lucky she's not feral,” the redhead had said, pouting, but otherwise seeming to concede the point. “That's what she said Angel was like out of hell.”

Feral. Another word that had an immediate definition.

“They found me fast,” Buffy had replied. “Dawn and Spike. Too fast to turn feral, even in hell.”

That had led to a lot of confusion, a quick exchange of worried glances, and then someone had said, “Buffy, outside isn't hell. That's Sunnydale. We're talking about where you were before.”

“Before was home,” she'd replied. “You did not save me from hell. You brought me to it.”

They hadn't liked that. Neither had Dawn, though again in a way that made her hard to look at for more than a few seconds. Like she had been shattered, much as the other Buffy had been shattered.

Later, after the boy and his companion went home, after Dawn closed herself in her room, Buffy sat in the bathroom, her back pressed against the door that led to the room the redhead shared with the only other nice one, listening as they argued about her. Knowing somewhere that it was rude, what she was doing, but also not caring very much. It wasn't like she'd asked to be here in the first place.

"How can that be true?" one of them asked—the redhead. "She jumped... She jumped into all those dimensions. How were we supposed to know?"

"We didn't bother to look. I don't think we wanted to know."

"That's not true!"

"But isn't it? I think... I think it might be a bit like Mount Rushmore," the other one said, voice somehow tentative and certain at the same time.

"What?"

"So focused on the outcome we didn't bother to consider what we were doing."

"How is that like Mount Rushmore?"

"I went there with my mom, before... Just before. And I thought it was neat. Stunning. It's one of my best memories with her because it was just us. My dad, my brother... I don't remember why they couldn't go but they couldn't. So that memory became precious to me." There had been a pause. "We learn about it, this place where these important men have their faces on a mountain. What we don't learn is that the land didn't belong to us, that it was sacred to the Sioux, and it was butchered so the state could make money. That's all it was, a tourist attraction, built on land that belonged to people who had already had so much stolen from them, with the faces of leaders who represent that loss. After I learned that... It was almost like losing my mom all over again. A good memory made bad."

"How is that at all—"

"Because we did the same, Willow. We saw something, we wanted something, wanted Buffy, and we convinced ourselves it was the right thing to do. And in the process, we destroyed something sacred."

"We didn't know," the redhead objected.

"Like I said, we didn't want to know. We just wanted the outcome."

It was strange how Buffy could follow and not follow at the same time, understand the sentiment if not the whole of the comparison.

Something sacred had been destroyed. She had been destroyed.

It was a few days before the names stuck in her head with any reliability. Before she stopped floundering at what to call the people who surrounded her, crowded her space, made her feel like she was in the grave again.

Dawn first. Then Spike. The third name she learned was Tara.

And the others, well, once they became important, maybe she would try.

A LOW SIMMER

“YOU ACTUALLY EAT THESE?”

“What’s wrong with them?”

Buffy’s eyes watered, her sinuses blazing, and still she chewed, more as a matter of pride than anything else. Spike was looking at her in a way that she was starting to find comforting, with an intensity that made her feel something other than empty, like there was a way to a not-awful existence in this world she was trapped inside.

It wasn’t quite routine, him swinging by like this, but she hoped it would become one. The last few days had been a matter of simply waiting for night so she could crawl back into bed and forget for a few hours what she’d lost. Not that her mind always cooperated; more than once, she’d awakened choking on air, certain her lungs were about to burst or fill with soil. But sometimes she was back there—the place that had been home. Warm and safe and so relieved to be awake from the nightmare that she’d been living, which made the return to consciousness its own form of death.

The others had given her a wide berth since the first night, though someone whose name Buffy couldn’t remember was preparing to make his way to Sunnydale from England—someone the redhead assured her would make everything better. Buffy didn’t believe her but decided not to argue, instead dedicating the time not trapped in nightmares or dreams to things like this. With the vampire none of the others but Dawn seemed to like, who brought her dinner and sat with her in the living room, cross-legged, and let her eat off his plate whenever she became curious. Dawn was often with them, but not tonight. She’d decided to try to do something “normal” and was staying with a friend.

And that was okay. Buffy found she enjoyed being alone with Spike.

She swallowed the scorching bite of chicken and perversely reveled in the burning trail it made down her throat. Like she’d consumed fire. “Food is one of the things I don’t hate about being here,” she said, snatching the glass of milk he’d insisted on pouring before letting her sample off his plate. “Letting me kill my tastebuds is just rude.”

He grinned, his eyes warm and full, and she felt it again. That sense of something that was so much better than the nothing she was living with. “You’re the one who insisted, love,” he told her, the grin turning smug. “Tried to warn you off.”

“Not hard enough.”

“Learned a long time ago not to stand in your way when your mind’s made up.” Spike nodded at the milk. “That do the trick?”

“My mouth feels less on fire than it did a minute ago.” She paused, tilted her head, and let her gaze drift to his lips. “Is that why you like spicy things? You’re cold, right? They make you hot?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

When she brought her eyes back to his, she found the light that typically greeted her had dimmed, and she didn’t know why. Just that she missed it.

They ate in silence for a bit, Spike clearing through the ghost pepper wings, Buffy picking at the safer garlic parmesan he’d brought her. Most of the quiet moments they shared were comfortable, which was one of the reasons she liked him so much. No pressure to be any one way, just allowed to exist in the in-between spaces, alone but not alone. Except this quiet wasn’t like other quiet. This quiet was loud, the air buzzing as though about to explode with all the words that weren’t being said. It made her skin itch, made her heart thump extra hard, made her realize that discomfort could exist with Spike too, which in turn made her sad.

“Witches clear out again tonight?” he asked at last, his attention still on whatever was left in his to-go container. “Seem to be out more than they’re in these days.”

“Yeah. They don’t know what to say to me.” Kind of like you a minute ago. Was it because she’d asked what made him hot? Had that been a not-good thing to ask? “Except this person who’s coming in from England is supposed to make everything better.”

Spike snorted.

“You don’t think so?”

“Think Rupert’s gonna throw a bloody fit when he learns how much yours truly’s been hanging around. Put a right stop to it.”

“He doesn’t get to decide who I spend my time with. Only I do.”

“Yeah, now. Wait until it starts coming back.”

Spike believed she would remember one day—the life she’d lived before she’d died. Buffy wasn’t as confident. She also didn’t know if she wanted it to return. From what she’d learned about life before, it hadn’t looked like this. It had been about the others, always the others, always making sure she did things they found acceptable. Though they hadn’t outright said it, hanging out with a vampire was not acceptable. Buffy knew that. She just didn’t care.

“I wish they weren’t here all the time,” she said. “It’s easier when they’re not.”

Spike lifted a shoulder. “So kick ’em out.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not? Your house, innit?” He finally looked at her again, solemn and serious. “They brought you back and expect you to fit into their lives. I say, until you remember, you make them fit into yours instead. If you don’t want ’em here, send ’em packing.”

Buffy opened her mouth, about to argue again that she couldn’t, but stopped when she realized she didn’t know why. It made sense—she’d been told this was her house. And if it was her house, didn’t she get to decide who lived here?

“What’s that look, Slayer?”

“I think I’m going to talk to them when they get back.”

And there it was. The light had returned. His special light. “That’s my girl.”

UNRESOLVED CONTRADICTIONS

“I’M WORRIED.”

“What about?”

“Giles.” Dawn took a sip of the strawberry lemonade she had corralled Buffy into helping her make, calmly, dignified, as though the kitchen weren’t a disaster zone of scattered sugar, bits of smushed strawberries, and splashes of juice that seemed to be everywhere except where they were supposed to be. Apparently, this was a ritual they had done together in happier times, pre-slayer times, and Dawn had thought it might help jog other memories to the forefront. It hadn’t. Still, mess aside, Buffy didn’t mind. What it hadn’t accomplished for her, it had done for her sister.

Or had right up until she’d started talking.

“What about Giles?” Buffy asked. “He’s the one coming in from England, right?”

“Yeah. He’s... He’s Giles. And I love Giles. We all love Giles. But Giles doesn’t love Spike.”

Buffy lifted a shoulder, nudging her full glass of lemonade into a circle along the kitchen island. “I don’t get that Spike is all that popular among anyone who isn’t you.”

“Or you. Now, at least.”

She didn’t respond at first, just watched the swish of the liquid in her glass, the way it neared the brim, threatened to crest, before falling back against the ice. The truth was her feelings about all things Spike were starting to confuse her, and she didn’t know if that was because he was the only other person in her world right now who didn’t make her feel like she was suffocating, or because of something else. At first, the aversion the others had to him had been easy enough to write off. She might not have her memories, but that hard, inherent vampire knowledge that she’d apparently been resurrected with was often enough to fill in the gaps. Increasingly, though, their distaste for him made little sense. Yes, humans being the natural prey of vampires would make the dynamic a little uncomfortable, but it seemed to be more than that. Or not that in any sense, actually. Buffy still hadn’t learned why Spike was in her world at all—just that he was, that the others had routinely left Dawn in his care while Buffy had been rotting beneath the earth. Yet every time she felt up to tolerating their presence, all she heard was how Spike was a lowly creature, evil, violent. That spending as much time with him as she did was dangerous—that he was taking advantage of her, and she was letting him. That the

second she remembered who Buffy Anne Summers was, she would be horrified at how close she'd let Spike get to her.

Buffy couldn't speak to the Buffy Anne Summers of Then, but the one of Now, the one they'd resurrected and didn't seem to like, didn't see what the big deal was. Yes, she had the inherent slayer-given intuition that vampires as a whole were dangerous. She also knew what her eyes, ears, and brain told her about this particular vampire—the one her instincts had told her to trust when she'd believed the world on fire. The one who looked at her like he could see in her the place she'd been before, who brought her food and ran the odd errand and had suggested she start patrolling to feel more like herself, something she hadn't realized she'd needed until she'd thrown her body into action and experienced a rush she'd discovered was as innate to her as the drive to breathe.

That vampire, Spike, was not like other vampires. Why the others couldn't see it or had decided to collectively change their minds, she didn't know. All she did know was she didn't trust them, which made their mistrust of Spike something like an endorsement.

"Are you worried Giles being here will change things?" Buffy asked at last, finally seizing her glass and lifting it to her lips. She had been wary of the amount of sugar Dawn had used but figured drinking the concoction was as much a part of the ritual as making it.

"I just don't want you to not like Spike anymore."

Buffy threw back a mouthful and tried not to wince as it hit her tongue. Yeah, way too much sugar. "I don't think you have anything to worry about," she said once she managed to swallow. "The others have so far been unsuccessful in their attempts to convince me he is evil incarnate."

"Yeah, but, Giles is different. He's a grownup. A real one."

"A grownup who left you with not-real grownups and that same vampire and is only coming back because I'm not six feet under anymore." Buffy placed the glass back on the island. "If he were really that concerned, he would've stuck around."

"I don't know. You've... I know you don't remember Dad, and really, he's not worth remembering on most days. Giles kinda became a new dad to you."

"But not to you," Buffy said. "Again with the leaving. Don't worry—nothing's going to change with Spike no matter how many people have a problem with him." She stared at the pink, swirly contents of her drink. "It just doesn't make sense."

"What doesn't?"

"Spike was fine to hang around while I was gone but not when I'm back? I am the Slayer, aren't I?"

"Oh." Dawn bristled and took another gulp of her liquid sugar. "That part doesn't surprise me at all. They've always been weird about the way he feels about you."

The words settled into her skin, blanketed her, before they finally fully registered. And though she didn't know why yet, couldn't, her heart started to pound, her chest suddenly tight. There was a feeling there she couldn't identify, only that it was a good feeling. One she wanted to capture rather than chase away. "How he feels about me?"

Dawn froze, then looked at her strangely. “Are you serious? I have to tell you this again?”

“Tell me what again?”

“Buffy, Spike’s completely in love with you.”

THE SITUATION BEING WHAT IT IS

“YOU TRULY HAVE NO memory of the life you lived before...” The man across from her, the man who everyone had insisted was going to show up and instantly clarify everything, looked down as though he couldn’t face the rest of the sentence. And despite herself, Buffy felt a pang. Part of her had been predisposed to hate him, this person who had taken off for another country, leaving Dawn in the custody of people who thought so little of her they entrusted her safety to someone they themselves didn’t trust.

Yet the monster in her imagination wasn’t the man in her living room. Instead, it was just a man. An older man, bedraggled from an international flight, seemingly combating joy and despair and grief all at the same time. Studying her as though she were exactly what she was—someone who had been dead and wasn’t anymore.

That didn’t make anything all right, but it did make her more inclined to listen.

“No,” Buffy said, wiping her hands along her hips. “It’s weird, what I remember. Words. Concepts. How microwaves work. Vampires. I even knew...me. My name. My face. I saw the robot-me when I was first back and I knew it was me. I don’t know how. Just that it just...I saw her and I knew.”

“That would indicate a very strong sense of self, I believe.” The man, Giles, flashed the sort of grin that looked pained. “And you...evicted Willow and Tara from the house.”

“It was pointed out to me that it’s my house and I should get to say who lives here.”

“And given what you’ve gone through, it makes sense to distance yourself from those who have caused the upset.”

Upset. How minimalizing, at least as she understood the word. There were bad feelings, yes, and a deep, clawing sense of darkness looming just outside her periphery, the confusion and hurt that came with using these lungs that should be dead, the world moving on without her regardless of what she said or did, the people responsible moving with it, blaming her for not being the Buffy they wanted or remembered. She felt like an old, broken rotary phone clinging to a history—her history—that was becoming more distant and hazy every second that ticked by, and that wasn’t what the others had expected when they’d sent off the order. No, they’d thought they’d gotten one of those cordless models that just needed to charge up before being all right again. Perhaps the only result anyone should have expected after they’d reshaped her into a robot.

And, she surmised, if she knew enough for that metaphor, then she knew enough to know that upset was a condescending way to describe any of this.

“You have every right to be unsettled,” Giles went on, his expression darkening. “With everything that I have learned, the place you were. In my wildest, I never thought Willow would attempt something so...reckless.”

“I would hope not,” Buffy replied before she could stop herself. “Especially considering Dawn. She had no real family here, and you left her with people who are barely in their twenties, trusting them to look after her, why?”

“Buffy—”

“I know they say they’re family. You’re family. Everyone’s family except my actual father, but I’ve been told you were closer to me than my father, so it’s...hard for me to understand how someone who I thought of as a father would leave my sister with people who are barely adults themselves.” She let out a breath. “I’ve been struggling with that since I learned. With everything I’ve learned, actually. Everything I keep learning.”

There was a moment in which he seemed incapable of finding words. Finally, he cleared his throat. “I would imagine it all a bit overwhelming, but Buffy, I never would have left if I thought Willow was anything less than up to the challenge of taking care of your sister. And I believe, if you did remember, you would trust that.”

“Maybe,” she said, doubting it. Doubting she wanted to meet the her that would be okay with any of this. “Maybe.”

“There may be ways to recover your memories,” Giles said. “If you would like to explore them.”

Send her back, in other words. Get the Buffy they thought they had ordered rather than the pieces that had arrived. “Because I’m not what any of you wanted.”

“No, that is not it at all.”

But it was—she knew it, and he did, too. Giles had flown across the world to see Buffy again and had gotten her instead.

She knew what Spike would say about that.

As though hearing the thought, Giles shifted, cleared his throat. “Willow and Xander told me you have been spending an inordinate amount of time with—”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“And this is precisely why I am concerned. Buffy, you must know that Spike—”

“Was trusted with a fifteen-year-old but somehow is not trusted to be around me.”

“The situations are hardly comparable. He might... We are simply worried he might seize advantage of your condition to his own ends. You don’t know what he is truly like. If you did, well, you would hardly be so cavalier.”

That wasn’t right. None of this was. The Buffy they thought she’d been or the one who had clawed her way through her grave, ripped her nails and her skin and her soul to get to fresh air. The one who was only at home when she was with her sister or the vampire who apparently loved her.

Perhaps if she had her memories and could tell the others so, they would hear her at last.

SOLIDIFIED

SHE SHOULD BE FASTER than a dog, especially a short dog like the one she'd spotted darting between gravestones. What was the point of being superpowered if a stumpy little pipsqueak could get the better of you? Buffy sucked in a breath and pressed on, letting her other senses take over. The smell of the air, the sounds of leaves and twigs crunching under feet, the jingle of a collar—that dog belonged to someone—and pushed her pace from quick to punishing once she settled on a direction.

Had the Buffy of before worried about the animals that managed to escape the safety of their homes after the sun had gone down? She wanted to think so. Wanted to have been someone whose priorities didn't end at human life, especially considering what she thought of the humans she did know.

"Oi, Slayer, where's the fire?"

Buffy flinched in the direction of his voice but didn't slow down—she'd just caught a flash of auburn fur and a lolling tongue. The dog sniffed the base of a headstone, and then—yes—lifted its leg to do its business. A final burst of speed and she was there; she scooped the creature into her arms once it had finished watering the grass, laughing in spite of herself when it barked happily and started licking her face.

"Got yourself a new fella there, do you?"

She glanced over the head of the squirming dog at the approaching vampire. "Little guy didn't know he was about to be someone's nighttime snack."

"Like I'd eat a mutt." Spike scoffed. "Kittens, on the other hand—"

"You eat kittens?"

"Vampire, right? Bloody leashed one at that. Suppose you think I'm supposed to be above it all?"

Buffy frowned, clutching the dog closer to her chest. No, put like that, she was being a little silly. It was just strange—all this time, everyone had been trying to convince her of how evil and wrong Spike was, and so far the only piece of compelling evidence she'd been presented had come from Spike himself. And not even evidence that was all that, well, evident. Even if Spike was muzzled, that hardly meant his natural instincts had been subdued. A living creature to feed from was infinitely more appealing to a vampire than cold, bagged blood.

Still. Kittens.

“I’ll knock it off if you’re gonna be precious about it,” Spike said, taking a step toward her, his tone low and teasing. “Not like I get them every night, anyhow. Just when we play cards.”

Buffy relaxed a little, which made the dog in her arms relax. “Kittens are a poker snack?”

“Usually what’s being gambled. Load of strays in the area, demon population keeps ‘em down.” He nodded at the dog, who was staring at him with a mixture of apprehension and interest. As though it sensed it had been spared being on the menu due to a lucky accident of birth. “Who’s the pooch?”

“I dunno.” She shifted the dog in her arms, surprised the thing hadn’t yet started to wiggle for freedom, and slid the collar into view. The tiny print was difficult to make out in the scant light, but she managed. “Looks like his name is Jasper. And goody, there’s an address.”

“Gonna take him home?”

“Well, yeah. Not like I can trust other vampires to have a kitten-only diet.” Buffy resituated the dog again. “Is White Oak the street next to mine? I’m still trying to learn.”

Spike nodded and fell into place beside her, as though it were a given he’d tag along. Maybe it should have been. Either way, she was glad for the company. She hadn’t seen him much since Dawn had dropped the love-bomb and had yet to work out how she felt about it—or how she wanted to feel about it. Just that the part of being alive that was hard seemed less so when he was around, and that was good. She needed it, needed whatever he gave to be able to get through the day. Even on the days when they didn’t see each other at all, she felt calmer knowing that she could seek him out if she needed. That he would be there, ready, and yes, loving her, just as she was now.

“My watcher—Giles—he wants to do something that will help me remember,” Buffy said a moment later.

She knew she didn’t imagine the way Spike tensed. “That a fact?” he asked carefully. “Yeah.”

“How do you feel?”

“Like maybe if I remember they’ll believe me when I tell them things they don’t want to hear.”

Spike nodded, the move also careful. She did her best not to stare at him. “Eager to speed that up, then,” he said after a beat. “Make sure you know what’s good for you.”

“And what’s not.”

He snorted. “Well, I knew we couldn’t be best friends forever. Was only a matter of time before all of you—”

“I want to remember because of you, too.”

Spike stopped, startled. She stopped with him. The dog gave a huff of annoyance but licked her cheek anyway.

“You seem to think that me remembering means I’m not going to want to hang around you anymore.”

“I never said that.”

“Reading between the lines is one of those skills that came with me out of the grave. You don’t have to.”

Spike opened his mouth, closed it, then sighed and looked down, scuffing his boots along the cemetery grass. “Just know my place is all. And how it was before. Don’t expect anything.”

“You think if I remember, everything goes back. That I won’t remember this? Everything that’s happened since I came back?”

He shrugged, and that settled it. Affirmed something in her mind.

She was going to let Giles do whatever he thought would return her memories, just for the pleasure of proving everyone wrong.

But first, she had a dog to bring home.

FRACTURED PIECES

IT WAS A SIMPLE spell, though one commonly used to help uncover memories hidden under trauma or repression rather than ones buried so far in the past they might not even exist anymore. Something like hypnotism, Tara explained, only more reliable because, well, magic—magic that would help identify whether these memories even still existed.

“And if they don’t?” Buffy asked, hugging herself from where she hovered in the entry hall doorway, watching as Tara set up the dining room table. “What if they’re just gone?”

“I don’t think they would be gone,” Tara replied. “Just...maybe left behind? Like where you were before? If that’s the case, then there’s a chance we can still get them back. Only I don’t... I think I’d need Willow to help with that.”

Buffy pursed her lips and nodded, glancing at Giles, who stood in the doorway that connected the dining room to the kitchen. She didn’t know a ton of what had gone on between him and Willow, only that there had been words of the not-pretty variety, and things were strained. Not as strained as they were between Buffy and Willow, granted, but enough so that he had requested that she abstain from this attempt. Instead, he’d shown up with Tara, who had offered a soft smile and asked if it was all right that she was there before stepping over the threshold.

“How is Willow?” Buffy asked now. She hadn’t spoken with her would-be friend much at all since telling her that she needed space and to please get her things out of her house. That conversation had gone about as well as could be expected between a recently undead slayer and the witch who had yanked her out of the hard-won peace she’d deserved after her brief, violent life. No amount of I didn’t know or I didn’t mean to could make up for what had happened, something Willow seemed incapable of understanding.

Tara glanced up, opened her mouth, sucked in her cheeks, then looked down again. “She’s... It’s hard. For her. N-not that it’s not hard for you—harder, even. I just... I think...”

Buffy held up a hand. “It’s okay. I didn’t mean to put you on the spot.”

“No, it’s... It’s important for me to be... To use the right words, because I know how much she loves you, and what she meant to happen, and I also know that what she meant doesn’t matter—it’s what she did that does.” Tara looked up again, somewhat shyly. “I understand why you don’t want us here, e-especially if you don’t remember us. We’re strangers, and all you know is that we’re the reason you’re not where you were happy. I wouldn’t want us around, either. That what’s hard for Willow, but that’s something she

needs to work out for herself.” She blinked then turned her attention to the table once more. “I think we’re ready.”

“Can I watch?” Dawn asked, materializing so quickly behind Giles that she earned a muted shriek, which she promptly ignored. “Oooh, what’s that?” She pointed at a spherical ornament Tara had centered onto what looked like a placemat made of crushed purple velvet. “It’s all...bedazzley.”

“It’s where Buffy’s memories will be stored if we are able to access them,” Tara said. “Sort of like how the Orb of Thesulah works. We should expect the strongest ones first.”

“So shiny.”

“Dawn,” Giles said, having recovered. “Perhaps it’s better if you—”

“No, she’s fine.” Buffy made her way to the seat across from Tara, not sparing the watcher another glance. “She’s in this world as much as the rest of us, and if I do remember anything, I want her here with me.”

“Plus, I wanna see how the bedazzled thingamabob works,” Dawn said.

Giles heaved a put upon sigh. “Very well. Tara, if you would proceed...”

Tara nodded and began speaking in a low, soothing voice, interspersing words Buffy understood with words that sounded made up. She followed the instructions as they came, fixed her gaze on what Dawn had called a bedazzled thingamabob and let herself get lost in the swirling patterns along its surface. Admired the way they seemed to pulse and glow the longer she looked, filling her up in fragments, making her temples throb and her head tingle. How long she stayed like that, she couldn’t say—time seemed like a separate entity, a flowing stream where she stood in the middle, watching as flashes and chunks that bore only vague familiarity rushed past, circled around, and rushed again. It was everything and nothing at the same time, faces she knew, sensations her body remembered, all at once, building and pushing until there was nowhere to go but out.

When Buffy came back to herself, she was gasping, clutching the table with enough force the wood splintered under her fingers. She heard Tara calling her back, trying to find her a soft place to land, asking softly, gently, if she remembered anything. If anything had returned.

Buffy closed her eyes and shook her head. “No,” she managed after a minute, her mind overrun still, crowded with images she didn’t understand. “No, I don’t think so. There’s a lot but it’s...blurry. I don’t understand what I’m seeing. It’s...”

Then she looked up. First at Tara, then Giles, and one of those blurs became something solid. Not a memory, not in full, but a feeling, distant but she knew it belonged to her. A her who had been hurt. Who Giles had hurt. Badly enough that Buffy, the version that had been, had never wanted to see him again.

And everything in her ran cold.

At one point, she had thought this man a true monster. Not one that abandoned teenagers, but...

“Oh god,” Buffy said. “Oh god.”

“What is it?” Giles took a step forward, his eyes bright and eager. “Do you remember?”

“I remember you.”

“That’s—”

“And I want you to get the fuck out of my house.”

HER COMFORT PERSON

“YOU’RE, LIKE, MR. SLAYER Expert, right?”

Buffy didn’t give him time to respond, rather plopped herself into one of the surprisingly cushy chairs scattered around the crypt Spike called home. She hadn’t slowed down to think, hadn’t slowed down much at all, just exploded out of the house while Giles had been in mid-explanation, pale-faced and excuses-making, and done what felt natural.

Step one: comfort food.

Step two: comfort person.

For his part, Spike stood by a fridge tucked in an alcove, watching her with mixed alarm and concern. “Slayer?”

“That’s me.” Buffy leaned forward and set the other carton she’d brought onto the coffee table, then settled back against her seat and started twining noodles around her chopsticks. “Sorry, I didn’t want to be in that house a second longer. Wasn’t going to wait for vampire delivery tonight.”

“How... Dawn tell you where I live, then?”

She blinked and looked up, frowning, and then realized he was right. Not once since she’d come back had she visited Spike in his natural habitat—it was always the other way around. Him coming to her with food or to see if she’d like to hit the cemeteries or just to hang out. It hadn’t occurred to her to question which direction to point her feet after she’d collected her takeout order. She’d just known.

Maybe the spell had worked, more than just the one awful memory.

“Tara came by,” Buffy said finally, aware she was avoiding the question, but that seemed the safest bet, considering she didn’t know how to answer. Spike was making his way over, slowly, like she might dash away if he moved too quickly. She didn’t speak again until he’d seated himself in the chair opposite and reached tentatively for the spare takeout container. “We did the spell, the one Giles wanted to do. To get me to remember.”

Spike froze mid-noodle inspection. “Yeah? All come back?”

“I don’t know yet about all, but I did... I did remember something about Giles. Hence why I am here.” Buffy licked her lips. “I remember him telling me he drugged me. Took my strength away, all so I could probably die facing an insane vampire who I think might have also kidnapped my mother. That part’s still blurry.”

She didn’t know if she was imagining it or not, but Buffy thought Spike’s expression might have darkened. “Cruciamentum,” he said.

“Yes. That’s what he told me. Some slayer rite of passage. Hence the question.”

Spike nodded, grabbed the spare set of chopsticks she’d placed next to the carton and got to work. “Seemed a laugh, to be honest. Give the girl all this power and then take it away just when she gets old enough to start thinking for herself. Nice, tidy means of keepin’ the Slayer in line.”

“Giles said he got fired for telling me about it.”

A snort. “What a sodding prince.”

“Did you know?”

“That he got sacked? No. Your mates were never hot to gossip with the Big Bad. Honestly reckoned he didn’t have the stones to put you through it, way you two were.” Spike helped himself to a mouthful of noodles, carefully avoiding her gaze. “That all you remember?”

“So far.”

He made a noncommittal noise. “Guess it must’ve knocked something loose if you found your way here.”

“Or I’m just especially attuned to you.”

Spike paused, lifted his eyes to her at last. “You think?”

“Dawn says you’re in love with me.”

Well, she hadn’t meant to blurt that out but there she was, blurting. At once, Buffy’s cheeks went hot, and her insides started to squirm. She placed her carton back onto the coffee table. It suddenly didn’t seem time for noodles.

Spike let out a long, slow breath but didn’t look away. “Nibblet’s been running her mouth.”

“Is it true?”

“Does it matter?”

“Of course it matters. You’re one of the only people I can even remotely stand to be around right now.” That wasn’t entirely accurate—he was one of the only people she wanted to be around right now. “I... If you love me, I want to know.”

Another pause, this one heavier, full of meaning she didn’t know how to quantify. Then Spike leaned forward, too, placed his carton next to hers and rested his elbows on his knees, looking defeated. “Yeah. It’s true. I’m in love with you.”

“Well, don’t sound so happy about it.”

“You’re not, Slayer. Happy about it.”

“You don’t get to tell me how I am.”

“I mean when—”

“I know what you mean,” she snapped, bursting to her feet. She did know—that was one thing Spike had in common with the others and hadn’t been shy about. Hell, it was one of the reasons she’d agreed to the damn spell in the first place, to shut them all up. “But what if I... What if you’re wrong? What if you’re all wrong? What if I remember and nothing changes about how I feel?”

Spike looked at her, his expression carefully neutral in a way she was coming to know meant not neutral at all. He wasn’t alive but he had tells—the tightening of his jaw, the

bobbing of his throat, the practiced rigidity, a poker player who knew his poker face was garbage but had to try anyway.

“How do you feel?” he asked at length, and she heard the tremor in his voice. Saw it on his face, his eyes. She hadn’t known until then, right then, if there was an answer to that question. It was why she’d waited so long to ask.

But she’d known the way here without being told. She’d come to him when she’d needed someone.

That was how she felt.

And the best way to tell him, the way that made sense, was to close the distance that separated them, take his cheeks between her hands, and press her answer to his lips with her own.

VAMPIRE'S KISS

IT WAS A HELL of a first kiss in every sense of the word. A tentative touch, a hopeful stroke, then an explosion of enthusiasm that brought the word passion from concept to understanding. She had ended up in his lap, gasping into his mouth as he plundered and clutched and growled, his tongue doing things she honestly hadn't known tongues could accomplish. And it was like she'd come back from the dead for real, an electric shock to the system in the best way, her skin hot, her heart thumping, her veins pure fire, all of her well and truly alive and learning what it meant to be in a living body, to feel a different kind of hunger.

But it hadn't lasted. Buffy had been rubbing herself against the pronounced and oh-so-intriguing hardness thrust against her most intimate places, drowning in his taste, his need, and everything else, and then she'd been on the floor and Spike had been on his feet. Pacing. Muttering. Apologizing, of all things ridiculous, as though she was hurt by anything other than the fact that he'd stopped. That she was no longer in his lap, rubbing her hot parts against his hard parts and discovering what else this very alive body could do.

"We can't," he'd panted, looking at her with a mixture of longing and heartbreak. "I want to. God, Buffy, you have no idea how much I want to, but we can't. You don't remember."

Buffy had sat up on her knees, not bothering to hide her hurt. "But I want to, too."

"Bloody hell, you're killing me."

"You're killing me. Doesn't it matter that I want this now?"

Spike had bowed his head, groaning the sort of groan that started in the feet and went all the way up. "'Course it does. It's more... Fuck, it's more than I ever thought I'd get. But you don't know... If you were yourself—"

"Am I not myself? Am I some other Buffy?"

"No, you're you. It'd be easier if you weren't." He'd worked his throat. "But you don't remember why you don't want this. And I'm not good enough of a man to keep saying no to you when you're all I..." He'd paused and swallowed again, pinched the bridge of his nose. "You should go. Before I..."

"Before you what?"

"Before I do something a monster would."

That had been a week ago, and Buffy hadn't seen him since. Had only the memory—of all the irony—of the way he felt against her, thrusting, rubbing, stroking, and wanting. And wishing she could say to hell with it and do whatever she could to convince him, monsters be damned.

Instead, it was Halloween, and she found herself at the magic store Giles ran with Anya, less because she wanted to be there and more because Dawn had insisted. Dawn didn't get the whole "avoiding Giles because of the Cruciamentum" thing, and as she had seen less and less of Tara and Willow since they had moved out, she'd decided that Halloween was the sort of holiday in which a fractured family could mend. While Buffy did not share her optimism, she had bitten the bullet and decided to get into the Halloween spirit by channeling the one thing she actually wanted.

Her method could use a little refinement, though. It was really hard talking around plastic fangs.

"Little on the nose, don't you think, Buff?" Xander asked when she flashed him a fangy grin. "And I say we're screwed if we all turn into our costumes again."

Buffy didn't bother to reply, both because of the talking thing and because she had already lost patience with casual references to past events that people dropped into conversations, like they hoped they could jump-scare her into remembering. And thankfully, she hadn't had much reason to talk at all because a magic shop on Halloween was apparently the place to be. There was too much for the others to do, which also meant Giles didn't have much of a chance to continue pleading his case to her. At one point, though, the crowds became too much—too many people with their people smells, their shouted questions, their public arguments, their Halloween insanity, and their being everywhere in a way that made the walls feel closer, made air seem thinner, made her feel closer to her own grave than she had since that first night.

There was a downstairs, though, and Buffy found it. Shut the noise behind her to submerge into the part of the grave she hadn't been able to take with her—the dark and the quiet. And there she found Spike looking through various storage shelves, unaware of her until his own preternatural sense kicked into gear, and then he was turning toward her and their eyes met, and her heart started thumping.

"Hi," he said like he hadn't kicked her out of his crypt the last time they'd seen each other.

"Hi," she replied, drawing his gaze to her plastic fangs.

The corner of his mouth twitched but he didn't comment on them. "How you been?" he asked instead.

"Hones'ly S'chike?" Buffy scowled and tore the damn things out of her mouth. "Lousy. I've been lousy. Did you really have to do that?"

"Do what?"

"Any of it. The rejecting me. The thinking you know better than me. The not coming by when you're... When I need you." She blinked, not realizing she was close to tears until her eyes stung. "I've missed you."

"Christ, I've missed you too."

“Then why?”

“You know why.”

“Well, I don’t care.” She threw the fangs at him, watched as they bounced off his chest. “The girl I was is dead. I’m right here, wanting you now. Do you love her more than me or—”

And that was as far as she got before she was in his arms and in his mouth again.

Exactly where she wanted to be.

LOVE OF HER LIFE

IT WAS HER FAULT this time.

Her own stupid, stupid fault.

Spike had pressed her against one of the shelves, growling his hunger into her mouth, thrusting himself against her center, hands everywhere, and she'd been flying. Soaring, really, for the first time since clawing her way to open air. And she'd wanted so much, wanted more, wanted to know what it'd feel like to have that mouth on her breasts, her stomach, if he would lick her where she was hottest and god, she thought he would, the way he was trying to devour her. How desperate he seemed to taste her everywhere.

And then something had pressed against her ribcage—not hurting but not pleasant—and she'd pulled away to see what it was, found that the plastic fangs she'd thrown at him were smushed between them, and the instinct had been to laugh, fangs ruining her makeout session, when a new flash had come. Something so vivid, so personal, it had to be a memory.

Of kissing someone else.

Of fangs.

Of shock and horror and fear.

Of confusion and betrayal and heartbreak.

And Buffy had thrown her head back, pressed her palm to her brow and muttered, “Angel,” without knowing why. Only realizing instantly it was the wrong thing to say, the wrong name, and Spike had left, not without regarding her with a look of utter devastation that shattered her all over again.

Buffy waited in the basement until the sounds of the party above died down, prodding at the memory of the vampire she'd apparently kissed before, trying to see beyond it. All she drummed up were more of the bad feelings. Was that why Spike was so adamant that she wouldn't want to be with him if she remembered? She'd been with a vampire before and that had happened? Never mind that he and the vampire in her memory were clearly not the same person, but nothing else made sense.

God, had she been like the others, happy to use him but eager to exclude him? If so, why in the world would he be in love with her in the first place?

Finally, Buffy trudged her way back to the store proper. If anyone was going to help enlighten her on who this Angel person was, it was the people upstairs.

Unfortunately.

"I said I can fix him!" Dawn was bellowing as Buffy eased the door closed behind her. She glanced over to a shelf to find her sister cradling pieces of a broken something close to her chest, Anya towering over her in a temper.

"What happened?" Buffy asked, wandering over.

"Dawn made one of the fertility statues a whole lot less fertile," Willow answered, trying and failing to smother a grin.

Buffy bit the inside of her cheek, also to keep from grinning, though mostly because she didn't particularly want to be in on a joke with Willow. Just call her petty. "What was Dawn doing by the fertility statues?"

"Ruining my merchandise," Anya snapped. "I understand and appreciate the interest in penises, but not when you ruin an eight-hundred-dollar Jukun figure."

"Eight hundred dollars?" Dawn squealed, the pieces abruptly hitting the floor. "Who in the world would pay eight hundred dollars for that thing?"

"No one now, thanks to you!"

Buffy shook her head and glanced away, only to meet Giles's eyes and experience that crashing sensation all over again. She didn't want to talk to him, didn't want to look at him, but of everyone here, he would likely have the best understanding as to who Angel was. So, against her better judgment, she approached, trying to ignore the instinct to run.

"Are you ready to let me explain?" he asked when she stopped in front of him, his tone and expression guarded.

She ignored the question in favor of her own. "Who's Angel?"

"Angel?" Xander echoed, approaching from where he had just wrestled free the fertility fragments. "Do I smell a memory?"

"Maybe. Who the hell is he?"

"Just the love of your life," Willow said matter-of-factly. "He's a vampire."

"Like Spike."

"Well, he has a soul," Xander replied. "And the good sense to know that slayers and vampires do not mix. And did I mention a soul?"

Buffy blinked. "I didn't know vampires could come with souls."

"Well, Angel's is a little sticky," Xander replied, sounding, strangely, like he was enjoying this. "There was that one time he experienced a moment of happiness and he lost it, murdered a bunch of people, tried to end the world, but went to hell for a while, then came back and made with the puppy eyes before he left again for your own good."

"But he was the love of my life?" That didn't sound very love-of-lifey. "When was this?"

"A few years back," Willow explained. "You never really recovered from his leaving. I mean, you dated Riley, but he left because you were still hung up on Angel."

"A few years ago. That would mean high school." Buffy looked at them all in turn, then pointed at Dawn. "When I was her age? That guy is the love of my life?"

"Well, it's complicated," Willow said, now sounding confused.

"A vampire who sometimes has a soul and sometimes doesn't who left me for my own good, and I was a teenager?" Buffy shook her head. "Is that why Spike took off? Because I dated a vampire before?"

“Spike was here?” Dawn asked. “When?”

“Downstairs. We ran into each other. There was some kissing—”

“Kissing?” Xander no longer looked like he was enjoying himself, rather like he might be sick. “Okay, we really need to nip this in the bud in a big way.”

Buffy rolled her eyes, her temper rising. “Who I kiss is no one’s business.”

“But it is dangerous, Buffy,” Giles said, speaking with an air of finality she didn’t miss. “And I think, to answer the question, perhaps we should call Angel himself.”

THESE AREN'T THE MEMORIES YOU'RE LOOKING FOR

BUFFY UNDERSTOOD SHE WAS vertically challenged but even so, she found the towering presence of the vampire who stood on her front porch to be, well, towering. And not in a good way.

But then nothing about Angel was a good way. At least nothing she'd remembered since Halloween, which was a lot—a lot she hadn't shared with anyone else just yet.

"Angel," Giles said over her shoulder. "Ahh, I see you've brought...a friend?"

"And a baby," Willow said, coming in on Buffy's other side. Buffy shifted and hugged her arms around herself, regretting the decision to do this at her house rather than at the magic shop. It had seemed like the wise move at the time, just for privacy's sake, but she hadn't had so many people she didn't trust in her sanctuary space since she'd thrown Giles out after the memory spell.

"It's a long story," the vampire she knew as Angel replied, not taking his gaze off Buffy.

"Real tear-jerker," the green demon at his side agreed, his tone kind and warm, which surprised Buffy enough she almost relaxed. "Angelkins thought I might be of some help here."

"Ahh, what sort of help?" Giles asked.

"The kind we need to be inside to give," Angel said, finally tearing his gaze from Buffy long enough to glance at the sleeping infant in the carrier he had clutched at his side. "Please, I remember how active the nightlife is here and I need to get my son somewhere safe."

"Your son?" Willow echoed. "You... How?"

"As I said, it's a long story."

And it was, as it turned out. A long story that involved prophecies, evil lawyers, and an unexplained mystical pregnancy. Once everyone was seated in the living room, Angel rushed through what Buffy could only assume was an extremely abridged version, culminating in his explanation that with so many parties interested in his son, he hadn't felt comfortable leaving baby Connor behind.

"And who is baby Connor's mother?" Buffy asked.

"Another long story," Angel replied. Then, perhaps at seeing the look on her face, inclined his head. "I gather you don't remember Darla."

"Darla?" Giles echoed. "Wasn't she—"

“The vampire who made you,” Buffy said. “She attacked my mom, and I thought it was you. It was right after I found out about your fangs.”

Angel blinked at her, not bothering to hide his surprise. Hell, everyone in the room was looking at her now, reflecting varying degrees of shock and uncertainty.

“Buffy?” Giles asked, uncertain.

“Yeah,” Buffy replied, wiping her hands along her sides. “A few more things have come back since Halloween.”

“What things? Why didn’t you say something?”

“Because I’m still trying to sort them out.”

It was true and not true—Buffy didn’t think she had much to sort as those memories that had returned seemed pretty straightforward and shared pain as the common theme. First with Giles, then Angel, starting with that initial betrayal, and from there, others just kept leaking through. The things he’d said to her after taking her virginity, the agony of losing him to his soulless side, the guilt she’d felt, the shame, the visceral shock of his soul returning to him at the exact wrong moment, and how she’d broken herself in doing the right thing. The world-saving thing. Then his return sometime later—she didn’t know how much later or what had happened in the interim, just that the memory was firm on the fact that he had been back from the dead—fear of hiding, of sneaking, the further pain of telling him they couldn’t be anything, of Angel standing on a cliff somewhere ready to face daylight, of her fear that he would. Angel turning and walking away into the mist, and she’d known it was over. And then, finally, a memory she didn’t understand at all, begging him to undo it, to change his mind, swearing she would never forget and standing there in his arms while her heart broke and her soul broke and everything broke, for he’d had a chance to be with her at last...and she hadn’t been enough.

“Well, I guess that’s good,” Angel said at last, shifting as though uncomfortable. Which, fine, he should be. Showing up here with a baby, of all things, that last memory clear—all the normal he’d had a chance of giving her, believing that was what she wanted, what she needed, and letting her go anyway. “It means there’s a way to get the rest of those memories out. That’s why I brought Lorne. He’s an empath demon.”

“An empath demon?” Willow asked. “How can an empath demon help get memories?”

“I can read people, sugar darling,” the green demon replied. “If they bare their soul to me in song, that is. Angel thought I might be able to see what’s blocking her. Sounds like you’ve made quite a lot of headway yourself there, little lady.”

“Not really,” Buffy said. “I don’t remember everything. We did a spell last week, and it only brought back a few memories, though not all at once.”

“But you remember me,” Angel said. “And Darla?”

“The memories that are coming back are not what I would call happy,” Buffy replied pointedly. “And they seem to be people specific, involving things that hurt. Like the memory I have of Giles is bad. You?” She held Angel’s gaze. “It’s not just one bad memory. It’s...so many of them. Nothing but bad.”

“Whoa there.” The green demon stretched out his hands with a nervous grin. “Let’s remember context is everything. If you want to sing me a little ditty, we’ll see if Uncle Lorne can’t clear this up.”

Angel was still staring at her aghast. “Buffy.”

“If you’re really the love of my life, I want a refund.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Well, you brought your friend here to read my mind, so I guess we’ll see if that’s true. What should I sing? Any requests?”

GIVE HER SOMETHING TO SING ABOUT

THE SECOND SHE STEPPED onto the back deck, Buffy felt certain she would find Spike waiting for her, and the disappointment when she was wrong nearly sent her back through the kitchen door. But no, inside was not safer. Inside was a vampire who everyone swore was the love of her life despite the fact that all she could remember of him was pain, the watcher who had been complicit in a barbaric ritual that could have killed her, Willow, a miracle baby, and a green demon who had just confirmed everything she'd been saying since the first night.

Yes, the green demon had said, she had been in a place like heaven. Whether it had been the actual heaven was less cut and dried because heaven was more a concept than a place, but what mattered was that peace and warmth and happiness had been her reward for her sacrifice. And yes, she was the genuine Buffy article, and that the memories that were to come were going to be doozies because brothers and sisters, Buffy Summers hadn't exactly had an easy life. Her most powerful memories were the ones she'd used to forge her armor; the ways she'd learned to protect herself, her heart, over the years informed by all the times those she loved and trusted had hurt her the most.

"And yeah," the green demon had said, giving Angel a sideways look. "I hate to tell you, babycakes, but you take the motherload. And that's even counting her actual mother."

"I'm going to remember her?" Buffy had asked. She both wanted that and didn't, knowing the memory would hurt.

"I'm afraid so, blossom. It's all gonna come back, but I can't say how or when." The green demon had patted her shoulder, given her a soft smile that made her think he might be the most genuine person in a roomful of people who claimed to love her. "And for your concern about a certain platinum hottie, give it time."

"Platinum whattie?" Angel had echoed, though the look on his face told her he already knew.

"Apparently, Buffy is not a one-vamp slayer," the green demon had replied, either not clocking the sudden tension in the room or not caring, and for that, Buffy found she liked him all the more. "I think everyone needs to prepare themselves for the fact that even when Little Miss Sunnydale has all the pieces, the picture might not be what you expect."

It was so similar to a thought she'd had already, Buffy was nearly convinced he'd plucked it right out of her head. "So everyone who keeps telling me that once I remember, I'll feel differently is...wrong?"

“Wrong is in the eye of the beholder,” the green demon had replied. “Life is indeed a river, not a lake. It changes as it flows and flows as it changes. Things could change as you remember more who you were, but going back to the status quo like nothing else has happened? No, sugarplum, I do not see that at all.”

And that was the last that had happened before the others exploded in shouted conversation—really shouted, like woke-the-baby shouted. Buffy had excused herself, and now here she sat on the back deck, wishing Spike had been waiting for her, trying to detach herself from the failure of not being the Buffy they missed, and the certainty that she didn’t want to be.

The door opened behind her, making her tense until she realized it was the green demon. “Sorry, strudel,” he said. “You need some quality time? Uncle Lorne can find somewhere else to escape the noise.”

Lorne. Right. That was his name. “Uncle Lorne is welcome,” Buffy replied. She wouldn’t mind some additional insight if he was offering. “Uncle Lorne did not tell them what they wanted to hear.”

“Forget them,” he replied, helping himself to the seat beside her. “You’re the one that’s important here.”

“I don’t feel very important. More like a big Buffy-shaped burden they wish they could fix.”

“Yikes. Well, can’t say I don’t see it. Or didn’t see it. Pardon criticism from a relative stranger, but the you who died? The glimpses I got made me think you were so afraid you’d lose them that you let them call the shots. They’re just not used to not being in charge.” Lorne sighed. “Here I thought Angelkins was the one with the martyr complex. Never more sad to be wrong.”

“I’m not feeling very martyr-y either.”

“And if I were to have one wish for you as you keep on keeping on, it’d be that. Life is too short and too precious to spend it living for other people.” Lorne paused, then nudged her with his shoulder again. “Really, regarding Not-So Tall, Blond, and Scrumptious, I think the best way forward is understanding why the big poodle’s so worried in the first place. Those fears are not unwarranted, but that doesn’t make them a dealbreaker.” Another beat. “Well, I better see if I can convince Angel that we need to be heading out. Just wanted to make sure you were okay, since you were the reason for the season, as it were.”

“I’m okay,” Buffy said, not sure whether it was a lie. “And I’m glad you came.” That, at least, was not.

“Me too. Oh, and before I forget...” Lorne fought his way to his feet. “Do yourself a favor and call the cops in a few days. Trust me when I say you’ll all be better off for it.”

“The cops?”

“You’ll know when. Some fights are not yours, and that’s okay. Focus on the ones that are.”

It was advice that made sense, even if she didn’t understand it. “Thanks for coming, Lorne.”

He winked. “Anytime, pumpkin.” And then he was gone, and she was alone again. Staring at the Spike-less yard with no company except her thoughts.

THE HAPPIEST MAN ON EARTH

“YOU ARE SO FULL of shit, you know that?” Buffy demanded as the crypt door clanged shut behind her, her blood hot, her temples pounding, everything in her about to burst. For his part, Spike just blinked up at her in surprise from where he sat on one of the sarcophaguses he’d repurposed into living room furniture, holding what looked to be a well-worn paperback.

“Hello to you, too,” he replied darkly, placing the book aside. “To what do I owe the—”

“Every memory that’s come back has been a bad one,” she spat. “Giles poisoning me. Angel... Everything Angel. Then I got another one of Giles telling me to kill Dawn. I’ve remembered awful, awful things. My mom”—she choked the word, not wanting to get sidetracked, but that memory had left bruises that had yet to heal—“dying. But also kicking me out of the house. My friends... I don’t know the context, but I remember them just all attacking me at some party. The only people I haven’t had terrible memories of are you, Tara, and Anya. There’s even one of some guy who broke up with me because he was cheating on me. They’re coming back, and so I started to think maybe you were right. Maybe I just needed to wait for the blanks to fill, to get one of you that would prove what you and everyone else has been saying.”

The fire in Spike’s gaze had died, but only a bit. “So that’s it, then?” he asked, his jaw tight. “Something finally knock loose?”

“I’ll say. So please tell me why you’re living here, avoiding me, if we’re married?”

There was a beat of stunned silence that Buffy couldn’t help but enjoy. Yes, she knew it wasn’t as simple as that—understood that if she and Spike had actually made it down the aisle, someone would have told her by now. Still, the fact remained that in a steady stream of awful memories, the only one she’d had of Spike was him on his knees, looking at her with absolute adoration, his words flooding her with such extreme happiness and joy, with everything her life had been lacking since she’d clawed her way back from the grave.

“Bloody hell.” Spike seemed to regain his composure, at least enough to run a hand over his head. “That’s what you remember? Everything I’ve done to you, and—”

“You know, I was recently accused of having a martyr complex. I’m beginning to think you might have one too.”

“Are you out of your sodding head?”

“Well, come on, Spike! Enlighten me if I’m so out of my sodding head. All these bad things you’ve sworn sideways you’ve done and the first memory I have of you is you making me feel... Making me feel like that. Happy. Happy like I don’t remember ever being. Like I didn’t know I could be.” God, she’d lost momentum, indignation fading into something less useful, less powerful and weaponry. If she started crying here because of a feeling she didn’t think she’d get to experience outside of a hazy memory, she’d never forgive him.

For a long beat, Spike just looked at her in that way of his—that way that had lit her up from the inside the first night, convinced her he was safe, that her instincts were right, that he would help her navigate hell. Only it was more than that too. More that he wasn’t saying, that he was holding back. One step forward, two steps the other way. Somehow she’d gone from having Spike as a comfort person to being stuck in some deranged dance contest where the objective was to see who could get the closest while not fully touching.

“It was a spell,” he said at last, sounding like the words pained him. “A spell that made us think we ought to get married.”

Something within her broke. “It wasn’t real?”

“Felt real enough in the moment, but no.” Spike blinked hard and looked away. “It was before I knew how I felt, that I loved you. Knew I wanted you. Fuck, I have from the start.”

“Then why—”

“You know why.”

“Because I said Angel the other night? That was me getting back memories, Spike. Not good memories. Everything I’ve remembered about him is awful.”

He snorted. “Yeah, well, some birds dig the pain.”

“I do not dig pain,” she snapped, firing up all over again. “And now? Learning that the best memory I have isn’t... That’s not real?”

“Buffy, I’d marry you in a heartbeat if that’s what you wanted.” He met her gaze again, and she saw in it the reflection of everything she felt. Everything she wanted to feel—the reason she’d come here tonight. “But to have you and lose you once it’s all out there would bloody kill me.”

“You’re too afraid of losing me to have me?”

“I’m afraid one day you’ll look at me like I’m a monster again. Couldn’t bear that. Not after...” He looked away again, swallowed. “Slayer, if you remember anything else, any other bit of us, and you still feel like you do now, might be I could trust it. Can’t until then. Until you remember more of me. Of us.”

Buffy inhaled sharply. That was better than nothing. “And until then?”

“Until then, we just...bloody wait.”

“Not like we have been, Spike. I can’t do this anymore. I can’t have you not in my life. I can’t have you avoiding me.”

For a moment, she thought he might deny it, but he knew better than to try. Instead, he sucked in his cheeks and nodded, looked back to her at last, his eyes softening.

“Been driving me up the wall staying away.”

“Me too. So let’s cut that out, huh?”

“Until you remember.”

“Until I have enough memories to convince you.”

He smiled, but it was bittersweet. “Until then.”

WITCHY BUSINESS

SHE ALMOST CALLED IT off, and for good reason. The question had sparked something in Willow's eyes that Buffy didn't trust—an interest, a gleam, a spark that had all her hackles rising to attention, practically screaming danger. But Buffy didn't call it off. She was too desperate to prove Spike wrong, and if that meant letting Willow think this could be a path to reconciliation, well, let her think that.

"I know Giles is all antsy about me and magic, but really, you should've called me first," Willow said as she started unloading her supplies onto the living room coffee table. Some crystals and what looked like a Ouija board, only different enough that Buffy knew it was probably not a game played by bored twelve-year-olds at a sleepover.

"Is Tara a remedial student?" Buffy asked at length. "She didn't do a good job with her orb?"

Willow stiffened, but only slightly. "Tara is remarkable. She's been doing magic since... Well, a long time. Much longer than me. I'm just..."

"Better?"

"I don't like that word. I am not better than Tara." But it didn't sound like she believed that, more that she was being loyal and falsely modest. "Tara is my everything. She's warmth and light and home and..." Willow cut her gaze away, her cheeks pinkening. "We're having some problems."

"Oh?"

"About... Well, magic. She sees magic one way, and I see it another, and she doesn't like the way I use it. Especially since, well, we didn't know you weren't in a hell dimension and that... That spell was very dark."

"And that wasn't, say, maybe a clue not to do it?"

Willow looked up sharply, all traces of humility gone. "We thought it was dark because it was taking someone out of hell. We had no idea—"

"Yeah, okay, whatever." Buffy sighed and folded herself onto the sofa. She wanted this done more than she wanted to argue the finer points of careless spellcasting. "So how does this work?"

There was a beat, then Willow nodded and refocused. "Easy peasy. All we need is some Lethe's Bramble." She indicated a couple of blossom-y looking things she'd placed on the not-a-Ouija board. "And this crystal." With her other hand, she waved at a shiny jewel that

looked either very expensive or very fake. “Then we do the incantation and presto mindo, you should have all your memories back.”

That sounded a little too good to be true. Buffy worried on her bottom lip, studying the spread. “And the board?”

“The board is a star chart,” Willow replied. “Specifically, the way the stars looked the night you jumped. The idea is to pull the memories from that night, so you’ll essentially be Buffy as if there had been no need to jump into Glory’s portals.”

“Like the last few weeks hadn’t happened?”

“Precisely!”

Buffy’s stomach twisted and those earlier misgivings began shrieking a five-alarm fire. “I... Willow, I don’t want to forget everything that I’ve been through since I came back. That—”

“But this is the best way! I can’t give you heaven back, but I can make you forget that you were there.”

“And you think that’s what I want? To forget when I was happiest?”

Willow’s brow creased. “Isn’t it? I thought—”

“No, it’s more than that. You want me to go back to a version of me that just...went with things. The one who wouldn’t have kicked you out of the house. You want to take heaven away from me again. No.” Buffy stood, shaking her head. Served her right for trying to use magic as a shortcut. She should’ve known. “No, this isn’t what I asked for. So thanks but no thanks. You can show yourself out.”

Buffy sighed and turned her back on Willow before the protests could start—before she could be suckered into an argument or offered a sales pitch. Life had been awful, had been suffocating, had been a few drops of stolen good in a sea of never-ending bad. The memories she’d gotten back hadn’t been anything to write home about, either, painting the picture of an existence in which her strongest happy moment hadn’t even been real. And yeah, maybe the context surrounding those terrible memories would make them easier to bear, but it would also be giving the people who had done this to her exactly what they wanted. It would be resetting relationships that were important to her, allowing all these doubts she’d been nurturing about her life before to die unexamined.

Also, and this was important, she didn’t want to die. And that was what this would be. A form of death—death of these thoughts, of these conclusions, these feelings and sensations, the life lived, against her will or not, since she’d torn into open air. Resurrecting the real Buffy Summers at last.

A hiss slithered through the air, breaking into her thoughts, and Buffy whipped around, not sure what she was seeing at first.

“For Buffy and Tara, this I char,” Willow was saying, the blossom on the not-a-Ouija board thing engulfed in flames. Flames she now held to the crystal. “Let Lethe’s Bramble do its chore. Purge their minds of memories grim, of pains from recent slights and sins. When the words are out, and the crystal is burned, the spell will be cast. Tabula rasa. Tabula rasa. Tabula rasa.”

“Willow!” Buffy burst into a run but it was too late. She saw the marks on the side of the crystal, the scorches, the damage done.

And before she could say anything else, think anything else, the world blanked out.

A NEW PARADIGM

“YOU ALL RIGHT?”

Buffy looked up as Spike entered the living room, her heart somersaulting again. It had been doing that intermittently ever since the world had come back to her—this world, with its flaws and its memory gaps, not the other world. The world she only knew through story and assurance.

“Feel a little stupid, is all,” Buffy replied, shifting on the couch. “And...I guess angry is too tame a word.”

“You wanted answers,” he replied, sliding into the chair opposite like he was made of liquid. “I get it, pet.”

“Do you? Because I almost...” She tightened her jaw and glanced away again, blinking hard. “She wanted me to go back to before Buffy. Like all of this hasn’t happened.”

“Not surprised, seeing as you’re not their girl Friday at the moment.” Spike turned his head as Dawn traipsed into the room, carrying herself as though she had just completed a marathon. She collapsed onto the cushion beside Buffy and, like Spike, slid down the couch until she was practically dangling off it.

“I can’t believe Willow,” Dawn muttered.

“You can’t?” Spike echoed, eyebrows arched.

“I... I don’t know. I guess I don’t want to believe it.”

Buffy didn’t reply, didn’t think she had anything she could say that would sound earnest. Her mind was still spinning with the events of the last couple of hours—the absence of self, the fear, the panic, the not knowing who she was or where she was or why she was, and the agitated redhead who had been just as lost and confused. At least the redhead had identification so she’d known her name; the most Buffy had been able to deduce was that the house they were in belonged to her, courtesy of the photos scattered about, and that she and the redhead knew each other.

It was fortunate she hadn’t walked out the front door into the town beyond and gotten herself into god-knows-what kind of trouble, as the redhead had suggested. Enough of the household photographs contained other people that Buffy had decided the best course of action was to wait until someone else, the woman who had to be her mom or the girl who had to be her sister, came home and helped sort them through stuff. And that was what had happened—Dawn had barged in fresh from school, taken in the scene, the situation,

then ordered Buffy not to move and that she would find someone to fix it. That whatever had happened was Willow's—the redhead's—fault and not to let her leave.

Within an hour, three more people had been at the house. Specifically Spike, Tara, and Giles, names returned to her as soon as the funky charred crystal was destroyed, and Buffy had been Buffy again—this Buffy—horrified and violated, staring at a red-faced Willow who immediately tried to talk her way out of it, but it had been no good. While Buffy had gained no new memories from the experience, she also hadn't lost any. Most crucially, that last one, where she'd told Willow that she didn't want to do the spell once she'd understood it, and that Willow had done it anyway. Not just to her, either.

"What?" Tara had asked, wide-eyed and horrified.

"She said your name along with mine," Buffy had replied. "I didn't get the rest, but considering she also told me you were having trouble—"

"I didn't mean for this to happen!" Willow had protested, but she also hadn't denied that wiping her girlfriend's memory had also been an objective, and from the heartbroken look Tara had given her before storming out, Buffy thought it safe to assume that relationship was over.

Then there had been stuttering from Giles and a demand for an explanation Buffy hadn't felt up to giving before Spike had ordered him to leave.

"Who are you to tell me what to do?" Giles had responded.

"Someone I want here, which is more than I can say about you at the moment," Buffy had replied. And that had shut him up. She understood why Dawn had rushed to him upon discovering her amnesiac sister and a buttload of magic supplies, just as she understood why Dawn had gone to Spike and Tara, but Giles was still not someone high on her list of trusted individuals, and after the day she'd had, Buffy just wanted to be with her people.

"Maybe we should, like, come up with a code or something," Dawn said now, dragging Buffy out of her thoughts. "Like when we're all with the others and we see something that could lead to badness. Willow using magic or... Well, I guess that's the only one right now."

Buffy grinned a little in spite of herself. "I don't see me hanging out with Willow all that much in the future."

"You might when you remember."

"Remembering isn't going to make me forget this happened."

"Still," Dawn pressed, "a code. Just for when one of us is worried. Like we could say a spatula is in the microwave or a giraffe is loose or heck, even just cowabunga. Something that makes absolutely no sense to other people but we all just get."

"Unless there is a spatula in the microwave or the zoo is minus a giraffe," Buffy replied dryly.

"You think this is a bad idea?"

"No, I don't." She swallowed and stretched, met Spike's eyes and held. "Considering the people I trust are limited to those currently in this room, and Tara, and that all the

other people seem to want a piece of me... Yeah, it might be good if we're out and someone says something that makes one of us all alarm bell-y."

"Good." Dawn straightened up, beaming. "Because I have another idea."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I think Spike should move in."

THOUGHTS THAT ARE LESS THAN PURE

IT DIDN'T TAKE NEARLY as much convincing as Buffy would have expected, getting Spike on board with the whole he should live here thing. Granted, he said it was temporary, and that he was doing it to be useful. Here when needed rather than potentially stranded thanks to the sun, which Dawn privately told Buffy was a bunch of bull because the sun had never stopped Spike from getting anywhere. It certainly hadn't been a barrier when Dawn had informed him that Willow had done some memory spell—he'd arrived ahead of Tara and Giles, under a smoking blanket, livid and ready to start detaching heads from brainstems.

Buffy wasn't going to say a word, though. The idea of having Spike just down the hall rather than across town was all kinds of comforting. As for his existing place, a friend from kitten poker was going to crypt-sit, make sure no one else swooped in to claim that piece of primo-cemetery real estate. After all, the Big Bad intended to return sometime down the line.

"Maybe," Dawn had replied to this. "You never know. Could be you like being a part of the Summers household."

"Could be big sis'll kick me out right quick."

"Nah. I don't think so. Plus, once you move in your stuff, it'll feel like home and you'll be like, 'Crypt? What crypt?'"

Spike had snickered. "Hardly see the need for all that."

"All what? The moving-in part of moving in?"

"Bringing over my clobber. Just need some blood, and a corner in the basement'll do me fine," he'd said. "Dank and dark. It'll feel like home."

"No, I think you should be upstairs," Dawn had replied as innocently as Buffy had ever seen her believably pull off. "We can drape blankets over the windows in Buffy's old room."

"My old room?" Buffy had asked. "Where am I going?"

"Duh, into Mom's." Dawn had given her a look like are you slow or something? before shaking her head. "I don't get why you didn't already move in there after you kicked Willow and Tara out. It's the biggest, and you are all head of the household-y. And Spike can be close to help you wake up when you get the nightmares."

Buffy's throat had tightened. Either that was an exceptionally good guess or she was more vocal in her sleep than she'd realized.

As though in answer, Dawn had turned to Spike and said, “I’d try to wake her up but I’m afraid she’ll kick me across the room, and then I’ll get in trouble for breaking something. Won’t be a problem for you! You’re always in trouble with Buffy.”

Spike had tried to mask a grin and failed. “Thanks ever so,” he’d replied, and that had settled it. Spike was not only moving in but moving into Buffy’s old room—a prospect that seemed to have him equal parts delighted and terrified—but all of Buffy’s things would be transferred to the larger suite.

Buffy would have asked her sister where she’d learned all that subtle manipulation, but she suspected she already knew the answer. And it was on full display again now, Dawn fulfilling the role of director as Buffy and Spike negotiated her mattress through the narrow doorway, the last piece before the room was officially hers.

“So, Tara has moved out of the apartment,” Dawn informed them from where she sat on the dresser, crunching through a bag of chips. “I guess they’re really broken up.”

Buffy spared her sister a glance, trying to gauge her mood. “You okay?”

“It’s sad. I think... I hope they can work it out,” she replied, her tone somber. “I get why Tara’s mad but... They’re just so awesome together. It kinda feels like it did when Mom and Dad broke up. Only worse because it’s Willow and Tara.”

Buffy didn’t reply, though not because she didn’t have the divorce memory. That was another one that had come back, along with what she assumed comprised the bulk of her pre-Sunnydale life. The terror and fear of learning her fate, her destiny, the horror of losing her first watcher, of getting kicked out of school for the act of saving countless lives, including her own.

It was more the Willow of it all. Willow being the architect of her own misery was less tragic than discovering their father had been fucking around on their mom and couldn’t handle the dad parts of being a dad.

“I’m worried we might have a giraffe situation without Tara to balance Willow out,” Dawn went on. “Like...she might go all deep-endy the way she did when Oz left. She’s already talking about getting a tongue ring or a belly piercing or both to score a hot rebound girl.”

Spike snorted and threw Buffy an amused look. “If a tongue ring’s the worst of it, I say we count our blessings.”

“I just don’t get it. That sounds extra with the ouch.” Dawn frowned. “Like why would anyone want a tongue ring? Yeesh.”

There was another pause, Buffy trying to smother a laugh and Spike now very obviously doing his best not to look at her, sucking in his cheeks in a way that told her he’d be blushing if he had the wiring for it. Moments like this were what made Buffy vacillate between thinking Dawn was innocence personified or a diabolical genius. In the end, she was just glad her sister was on her side. And extra glad that a certain vampire would be sleeping just down the hall, surrounded by what she was certain was lived-in Buffy scent and with naughty thoughts to keep him company.

If she could just spark another Spike memory to put his misgivings to rest, she might actually find herself on her way toward something like contentment. Not happy, not yet, but closer to believing it was possible.

A girl could hope.

NO REST FOR THE WICKED

SUFFICE IT TO SAY, she was pissed. More than pissed.

“Is this part new or was I always like this?” Buffy growled as she stomped away from the Bronze. Spike was at her left, looking and smelling amazing, and she didn’t even get to enjoy it the way she’d wanted, all because of Willow.

“What part’s that, pet?”

“The part where I am canceling the first good time I’ve had in a while because of slayer-related stuff.”

He snorted. “Oh, that’s you all over, that is. Always on the cross.”

“What? Do you think I like this?”

“No. Think it’s just what makes you who you are. So bloody set on doing the right thing you’ll abandon a grand ol’ time the second you see something amiss.” Spike threw a look over his shoulder, then grinned at her. “That’s my slayer through and through.”

“And yet people keep telling me—you keep telling me—that you’re evil. Shouldn’t you be back there encouraging the mayhem?”

“Did seem like quite a party. Shame to muck it up.”

“You think I’m overreacting?”

“When it comes to magic? Not hardly. Just don’t much care what happens to anyone back there. Whole lot of them could drop, and it wouldn’t matter a lick as far as I’m concerned.”

Buffy scowled at him but struggled to maintain it when his grin broadened. She couldn’t tell if he was baiting her or not, and decided the truth was probably somewhere in the middle. Spike was a creature who thrived on chaos, relished it, so naturally the scene that Willow and her apparently used-to-be-a-rat friend were creating at the Bronze would be one he found highly amusing, if not just fun. But still, when Buffy had groaned and thrown her head back and said this was a step too far, that Willow had officially crossed the line, Spike hadn’t argued. Hell, he hadn’t hesitated. He’d followed her right on out of the Bronze without batting an eye.

He might not care about people he didn’t know, but he was with her anyway. Fighting alongside her anyway. Making the decision to do the right thing anyway. That counted for a lot.

Later, after she had made Willow’s magic bender Giles’s problem, Buffy would tell him. It seemed like the sort of thing that needed to be said.

“There has to be a way to get through to her,” Buffy said a moment later, still walking at a clip but without the fury that had carried her out of the Bronze, her nerves settling. “I can’t believe this.”

“Which part? That the witch would go off the bloody deep end once the guardrails are off?” Spike replied with a huff. “Reckon the only thing holding her back was you and Glinda in the first place. After the number she pulled on you two, what’s a load of strangers?”

Well, if he was going to be all logical. “I guess I... I dunno. It made sense, in a twisted way, to use magic on people who deal with this sort of thing all the time. With a purpose, you know? It wasn’t a good purpose but she had her reasons.”

“Had her bloody reasons?”

“Yes. I’m not the Buffy she wants and Tara’s apparently not the Tara she wants, so she used magic to fix us. I never said the reason was good. In fact, I said the opposite.”

“Just checking, pet,” Spike replied, nudging her with his shoulder in a way that told her he was having a bit of fun at her expense. Which was good. If he were nearly as agitated as she was, she’d probably start screaming.

And Buffy suspected he knew that, too.

“Back there was reasonless,” she went on. “It was just chaos for the sake of chaos. It was... What the hell?” She stopped so suddenly her forward momentum nearly had her pinwheeling to the sidewalk, but Spike was there, gripping her arm before she could embarrass herself.

“Careful there, love. Nearly took a tumble.”

Buffy barely heard him. Her gaze was fixed on a van—one she’d seen before—parked outside the obviously closed history museum. It was hard to miss, given the elaborate paint job that featured a rendering from some scifi movie. And the times she had caught sight of the van had been...odd. Associated with disorientation she’d ascribed to her acclimating to life again. Nothing major but...

“What are we looking at?” Spike turned to follow her gaze. “You wanna steal a van?”

“What?” She tore her eyes away from the rather telling design to stare at her vampire. “What on earth gave you that idea?”

“Just dunno why we’re parked here when you have a witch to be tattling on.”

“Because I’ve seen it before. I think it might have been following—”

There was a thump, and then three black forms emerged from the museum, all wearing very obvious cat-burglar outfits. Buffy’s heart skipped and she motioned for Spike to pay attention, navigating so she was out of direct eyesight and watching as the forms became men, men with voices, boasting loudly over the score they’d just landed.

“He said I’d know,” Buffy murmured.

“What’s that?” Spike asked.

“Get their license plate. Hurry.”

To his credit, Spike didn’t ask any further questions, just darted ahead, blending with the shadows, all catlike in grace. If the three burglars saw him, they made a good show of

pretending they didn't, still cackling as they helped themselves into the van. Then it was gone, and Spike was back at her side, looking confused but determined all the same.

"Got it. What now?"

"Now we go to Giles, tell him what's going on with Willow, and call the police."

Spike's eyebrows shot up. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Whatever that was, someone I trust told me it wasn't my fight."

And that was good. She had plenty of her own fight to worry about without adding to the mix.

SOMETHING REAL

“SURE, HAPPY TO,” BUFFY said into the cordless as she wandered into the living room. Spike sat hunched on the sofa, watching her with that dark intensity that stroked the part of her still most desperate for life. “Yeah, I’ll come down tomorrow and make a statement. I... Yeah, I think he...” She arched her eyebrows at Spike in question. “I think he can come. It might be a bit difficult because he has a sun allergy, but I’ll see if I can help.”

Spike tilted his head, grinning. “Oh, turning me into a proper citizen now. Gonna have me blab to the bloody bobbies?”

Buffy rolled her eyes but grinned in turn. “One o’clock. We’ll both be by. Thanks.” She disconnected the call and placed the phone on the end table beside the chair Spike typically claimed, then sank into it herself. “It sounds like these guys they arrested tonight were gearing up for something big.”

“Surprised the coppers moved that fast. Usually takes a bit more than a tip off, yeah?”

“Yeah, well, the secret lair was the basement of this guy’s parents’ house. Cops showed up to follow the license plate and his mom let them in. Caught them red-handed with the merchandise and even a big board of other evil plans literally written out. My name was apparently on it.”

Spike arched an eyebrow. “Oh yeah? You know these blokes?”

“He asks like I would remember.”

“Fair point. Good bit of spotting you did tonight, then. Never expected you to be the sort to hand everything over to the authorities.”

“Yeah, well, I probably wouldn’t have if not for Lorne.”

“Who?”

Buffy blew out a breath. She hadn’t relayed much to Spike about the visit from the so-called love of her life, worried about mentioning Angel’s name after what had happened last time. While she didn’t think Spike would take off, she also didn’t want him looking at her the way he had on Halloween—heartbroken and shattered.

“Buffy? Everything all right?”

Ah, to hell with it. If she wanted something with him, and she did, she needed it to be honest. Absent of eggshells.

“After I got my first Angel memory back, Giles called him,” she began slowly. “He thought it was a good idea for some reason. And then Angel showed up with Lorne, his friend who can read people if they sing for him, and he read me. Confirmed a few things,

like I am Buffy and that my memories will come back at some point, the way they have been. And that people shouldn't expect me to be like the Buffy I was before I died."

He looked back at her sharply. "Any reason you haven't mentioned this before now?"

"I didn't know if you'd believe me, honestly. I've been pretty open about the fact that I want you and I'm frustrated with the waiting."

Spike sucked in his cheeks but didn't reply, which was reply enough.

"Lorne also told me that there was going to be something like this, like what happened tonight. Just that I'd know when to call the cops and let them handle it." Buffy ran a hand through her hair. "I wish he'd said something about Willow, but maybe he figured we already had that handled. Or maybe he couldn't see her as clearly, I don't know. Maybe he saw muppet-skin shirts in her future and figured that'd be warning enough."

At that, he snorted, some of the tension leaving him. "Muppet skin?"

"I don't know how else to describe that outfit." Buffy glanced down, wringing her hands. "Spike, I... I know you have reasons for not wanting... For being careful. But I am not going to suddenly wake up and not feel the way I do. Even when... When I do remember, when that day comes, it's not going to be like I won't also have all the memories of the last couple of months. Lorne basically told me as much. I asked Willow to do that spell just to hurry it along, but I know I won't feel any differently."

Spike glanced down again. "How much have your mates told you about me? Can't imagine they've been shy about listing my crimes."

They hadn't. "You're soulless but chipped, which means you can't hurt people. You tried to kill us a bunch of times, me especially, and would again in a second if you could. Constantly scheming, someone I can't trust." Buffy leaned forward. "Someone they left my sister with. Someone they trusted my most important person with."

"They tell you I did the bot?"

"The huh?"

"The version of you that you saw that first night. Had her commissioned."

"You did? Why?"

"Why do you think?"

Well, put it like that... Buffy wrinkled her brow. "You mean you've had sex with a robot me but turn down the actual thing?"

Spike threw his head back, groaning. "Buffy..."

"Are you afraid I won't be as good? I mean I don't—"

"For fuck's sake, of course not." He was on his feet in a burst, eyes sharp and nostrils flaring. "What that thing taught me is there is no sodding substitute for you. If you hadn't confiscated it when you did, I was liable to let its batteries run out and toss it in a scrapheap."

"I confiscated your Buffy sex toy?"

"You did. And you kissed me." Spike was breathing hard now, chest rising and falling. "That was real. You said so. And that's what I want. Whatever happens with us, it has to be real. Your fortune teller friend says your memories'll all come back? Means somewhere

inside is everything you felt before. And yeah, maybe things have changed. But I'd rather not live with the maybe."

Buffy blinked up at him, trying and failing to come up with a decent counterargument. "You are the most aggravating person on the planet, you know?"

At that, of all things, he smiled. "Learned from the best."

THE NEW SCOOBIES

IT HAD BEEN DAWN'S suggestion. Branching out, as it were, with people who had more experience with relationshipy stuff than a fifteen-year-old.

"I know you're not big on Willow right now, and that makes sense, giraffe-wise," Dawn had said. "But Tara's our friend, too. And... I think maybe she doesn't know how important she is to us because it's always been you, Willow, and Xander."

"So I've been told," Buffy had muttered. She honestly couldn't see a path that would take her back to that always, especially considering Willow had evidently decided that this whole not-talking-to-each-other thing was mutual since Buffy tattled on her to Giles. "I think those days are over."

"That's what I mean. With Willow being..." Dawn had made a vague gesture. "Tara is someone who can understand. And I think she'd be more on the do-what-makes-you-happy train where Spike is concerned than, say, Xander."

That had made sense, as had the suggestion about talking more closely with Anya, someone Buffy hadn't done much to connect with since coming back. According to Dawn, Anya was a fount of sex knowledge—or at least sexual comments that she was often scolded for making near impressionable ears—and if anyone knew how to seduce a reluctant vampire, it would be a former demon. So Buffy had decided to go out on a limb, reach out to Tara and Anya independently, see if they'd like to grab coffee. She'd been met with a mixture of enthusiasm (Tara) and suspicion (Anya) but both had agreed to join her at the Espresso Pump and seemed glad to start dissecting the problem that was her lack of a love life.

"I find getting naked helps expedite the progression to physical relations," Anya was saying now. "It is, in fact, how I snagged Xander."

"You just got naked?" Tara asked, wearing something between a grin and a grimace. "Just oops, no clothes?"

Anya nodded. "All I had to do was drop my dress and propose sexual intercourse. After an initial bout of confusion, he agreed with much interest." She beamed at them both, but the happy expression didn't last, rather something shifted behind her eyes, like she had just remembered something she'd wished would stay forgotten. "Granted, it's just the sex part that's easy with men. It's the other stuff they don't let be easy. Like, sure, he'll tell you all the things you've hoped for and he swears it's not just because the world is ending but then the world doesn't end and his friend is dead and it's not time, no, it can't

be time. Except now we're trying to resurrect that friend and we still can't tell anyone, and definitely not after that friend is back from the dead, hating us because we pulled her out of heaven—"

"Anya," Tara said, managing to sound both forceful and worried at the same time. "Is everything okay?"

"What?" Anya blinked and shook her head. "Oh yes. I am fine. Everything is fine. I am not withholding significant, joyous information for a reason that no longer makes sense." She was still for a beat. Then another. Then she blurted, "Xander asked me to marry him before the fight with Glory."

Tara blinked, looked at Buffy, but Buffy had nothing, so she just shrugged.

"He asked me to marry him and I said yes, and he won't let me tell anyone," Anya went on. "Won't even let me wear the beautiful ring." She dove a hand into her purse and procured a small box. "I carry it with me just in case. Also to assure myself that it actually happened, because sometimes I don't think it did. But it did. See?" She popped the lid back, revealing a surprisingly tasteful diamond band. "But everything's all messed up now and since you and Willow aren't talking, I don't know if he's ever going to actually go through with the wedding."

Buffy didn't know what to say to that. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. It's Willow's. If she had just kept her magical mitts to herself, we would perhaps be trying on bridal dresses and making seating arrangements." Anya sniffed and spared Tara a glance. "Sorry."

Tara offered a soft, pained smile. "It's okay. I... I hope she gets help. I love her, I just... I can't be with someone who would do that." She glanced at the table as though to compose herself but rebounded quickly. "And Buffy, on the subject of Spike... I get why he's worried. He really loves you. And he's... He's different than he was. Even a year ago, I don't know that I would have thought anything with you could work."

Buffy's heart performed a pirouette. "But you do now?"

"I do. I think he might be a little like Anya."

"Like me?" Anya perked right on up. "How?"

"Well, you had this thing happen to you, becoming human. You didn't want it, didn't ask for it. Spike had the same thing with the chip. And it took him time to acclimate. Where you had people to help, he had no one."

"I didn't have a lot of help," Anya muttered, deflating again.

"No, things could've been better. For you and Spike." Tara looked back at Buffy. "I think letting him know you understand his fears will help. It seems small but...being understood is a powerful gift. More than magic. More than anything, really. And I don't know that Spike has gotten a lot of that."

It didn't seem small. It seemed obvious. The sort of obvious that had been staring her in the face, just waiting to be acknowledged, if-it-were-a-snake style.

Maybe it wouldn't change anything, but maybe it would. And if it didn't, it was, at the very least, something Buffy could give him. Something that mattered. Something real, as he'd said he needed it to be real, and this was as close as she could get.

At least until the rest came back.

“UH, SLAYER?”

Buffy didn't turn, and not only because she was teetering on her tiptoes. The chair she'd lugged up from the dining room to help her reach her objective hadn't actually helped, so she'd added a few sturdy-looking textbooks to the seat to give her an extra boost. “You play way too fast and loose with the sun, you know that?” she said, pitching her voice to ring out above the thump of the hammer. “Honestly, Spike. It's like you want to die.”

“So you decided to nail bloody blankets over the windows?”

She shrugged, settling back on her feet and reaching into her pocket for another nail. “Seems it's the only way you'll keep them up so yes.” She hiked up the fabric of the blanket she'd found in the basement—some ratty old thing she'd never want on her bed, anyway—and began the hammering process all over again. “And I can't afford tinted windows, so this'll have to do.”

There was a pause, a long one, then a shiver swept over her skin as she sensed him coming closer. “And when this little stint is over and I'm back at the crypt, you're not gonna blame yours truly for those unsightly holes in the wall?”

“Why are you moving out?” Buffy exhaled, settling back once more. The makeshift sunscreen was...well, makeshift, but it'd do the job just fine. And he could still duck under the blankets to access either window in case a downstairs escape was not possible.

“Buffy...”

He didn't say more. He didn't need to. It was all there in his voice, the weight of it, the emphasis in the syllables. Every conversation they'd had to this point, every stolen look, every heated exchange, those amazing, toe-curling kisses that had made her feel alive. His misgivings and worry, his love and his want, no matter how hard he tried to keep it shielded.

She hesitated, then turned to face him at last before carefully negotiating her way off her provisional stepstool. “Look, I've been doing a lot of thinking,” she said as her feet touched the floor. “And one of the conclusions I've reached is I don't think I've been fair to you. But the flip side of that is I also don't think you've been fair to me.” She braced herself then met his eyes, prepared for the jolt that shot through her at the contact yet somehow still surprised anyway. Maybe it was just the way he looked at her. The way he always looked at her. “I know however I was before... I can't be making it easy for you. I have memories of losing people that are so painful I wonder how I survived it. And I have

memories of heaven, which was so good I wonder how I have survived without it. A lot is fuzzy and probably will be for a long time still, but I know about vampires. I know what you're doing isn't easy, against everything you're meant to do, and even with me throwing myself at you, you've been... You've been trying to do what's right, not just for me but for you, because losing someone you love, something you love, is actually hell. I'm not saying I'm heaven or anything—"

"You are," Spike said, his voice choked, his eyes, if possible, burning brighter. "Close as I'll get, anyhow."

Buffy swallowed. Dammit, she needed to get through this. "And if I were in heaven again, and I thought something I did might cause me to lose it, I'd... I'd do exactly what you've done. I get it, Spike. I do." She inhaled. "But I also need you to get me."

Spike drew closer, breathing hard and trembling, and she felt it in her bones, the weight of what came next. "How can I get you?"

"By trusting me," she said. "Trusting that when I do remember everything, I will also remember this. I will remember that you didn't try to take advantage of me when you could have. That you did not lie to me when you could have. That you wanted me to know exactly who you are and how I felt before I died—that you never argued with anything the others said about you." She paused, licked her lips. "Spike, ever since I came back, all anyone has told me is how close I am to people that, for the most part, I can't stand to be around, and how not-close I am to the people I actually want in my life. I can't tell you that things won't change as the memories come, but I can tell you that it hurts that you think more about what a dead woman would've wanted than what the one that's standing in front of you is telling you she wants now."

She almost regretted the words at the look on his face, but didn't, couldn't take them back. They were true and real.

"God," Spike said at length, looking down and blinking hard. "Buffy, I... I never..."

"I know." And she did. "I know, Spike. I just need you to know, too. This is how I feel."

"I've been a bloody dolt."

"Maybe." She grinned when he met her eyes, waited a beat, then cupped his cheek, breathing out when he sighed and leaned into her, a weight that had been there a second ago gone suddenly. Like that first gulp of cool night air she'd inhaled after breaching the surface, her body letting her know it wasn't through living. "But you've been a dolt because you love me. There are worse things in the world."

She tilted her head up and he came down, and then his lips were on her and she was charged through all over, lit up from the inside, and he whimpered and she whimpered, and maybe both of them were crying, but it was a good cry. A coming home cry.

She'd finally gotten there.

THIS WAS USUALLY AROUND the time she woke up.

God, oh god, please let her not wake up.

“Fuck, I’m thick sometimes,” Spike said against her lips before taking them in another hot kiss, pushing his hands under her shirt, skin on skin courtesy of the bra she hadn’t put on, but he still wasn’t touching her enough, the strokes of his fingers featherlight, almost ticklish, definitely teasing. Buffy was well past the point of being teased. Only every time she arched up, every time she whimpered, his mouth would curl into a grin and he’d respond with a playful nibble of her chin, a teasing lick along her neck, and she knew she was stronger than him, knew she could take control, but there was something about being like this, pressed to the mattress, Spike in the cradle of her legs, rubbing against her center that made her feel like she was in freefall. “A thick bloody git.”

He capped this thought by nudging the undersides of her naked breasts under her shirt, the touch so fleeting she might have thought it a mistake if not for the smug look on his face when she whimpered her frustration.

“And now you’re being a jerk.” Fine. If he wasn’t going to move things along, she would. Starting with stripping off her stupid shirt, baring her breasts to him. And that seemed to make Spike short-circuit, his expression going from teasing to stupefied in a way that would have amused her if she weren’t so desperate for him to—

He let out a moan and his head came down, and Buffy hissed a sob as he finally took her breast into his mouth, growling hotly around her flesh and performing feats with his tongue and teeth that had to be beyond anything she’d ever experienced before, otherwise she would have had a memory of it by now. He licked and nipped and sucked and she was hot, so hot, she was going to melt, only not because he was cool and he’d keep her solid.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous,” Spike whispered, releasing her nipple with a wet plop that sounded almost indecent against the air before peppering kisses across her skin to her other breast. “Have any idea how long I’ve been dreaming about these sweet titties?”

“Dream less, lick more.”

“As my goddess commands.” Spike flicked his gaze back to her and held it as he traced a path around her nipple. “And you are,” he said before delicately scraping her with his teeth, and if she’d thought she was hot before, she was an inferno now. Spike watching her as he explored, as he tortured, as he licked and sucked and treated her like she was a

delicacy. Like he could taste heaven on her skin and was desperate to consume as much as he could. “You’re my goddess. My sodding religion, Buffy. You’re everything.”

At once, her eyes were pricking, hot like the rest of her. Buffy shook her head, confused by the sudden swell in her chest, both at odds with the fire in her body and not. The idea of being anyone’s everything was so far beyond her comprehension, but it made her feel full in all the places that had been empty since she’d clawed her way back. Places she’d started to think were just always empty, because she’d only experienced a couple of stolen moments like this one, and it hadn’t seemed sustainable. A burst of good before the world claimed her back, pulled her under.

Spike was kissing his way down her stomach now, sliding away until she was no longer under his weight, and she missed it, missed him, so she jolted upright before he could start to tug at her shorts, captured his face between her hands and claimed his mouth again. Melted into him when he groaned, took the opportunity to fumble open his belt, undo the buttons of his jeans, whimpering when he thrust up, that hardness that was all hers under her hands, straining, desperate, just as she was. Then inching his jeans down his hips with one hand and reaching to finally feel him with her other, and starting slightly when her fingers met fabric rather than skin.

Buffy pulled away from his mouth long enough to take in the sight of his black silk boxers, the front tenting wildly as his cock strained for freedom.

Spike, breathing hard, followed her gaze. “Something wrong?”

“I... No.” She furrowed her brow. “For some reason, I just... I didn’t expect you to wear underwear.” Buffy dragged her finger along the slit at the front, trembling with excitement and the insane urge to giggle. “No idea why, just I thought...”

“I don’t. Normally.”

“Normally?” She flicked her eyes back to his. “Is this a special occasion?”

He grinned back at her, and that full sensation from before took her again. “The bloody specialist of occasions,” he agreed, nudging the fabric over his hipbones until his cock sprang free. She had her hand wrapped around him the next second, the action intuitive even if she didn’t have the memories to back it up, and began to stroke, making him growl a growl that was also a groan.

“So you knew?” Buffy asked, alternating her attention from his face to the way his skin moved along his shaft, taking in its size and curve, feeling a corresponding tug deep within herself at the thought of having him inside, of tasting the beaded precum along the head. “You knew this was how today was gonna go?”

Spike expelled a hard, breathy laugh. “Not hardly.”

“Then...”

“I know how your sister bursts into places without knocking. Seemed a sensible precaution.” Still panting, he met her eyes, his own bright and dark at the same time. “Slayer—”

But then he groaned and threw his head back, for she’d decided she’d done enough talking.

Especially when there were so many other things to do with her mouth.

PARADISE FOUND

THE WAY SPIKE LOOKED at her had always been singular, hard to define, like she was the rarest treasure in the world as well as the world itself. Like he was swimming in her, drowning, only he enjoyed the chaos, the descent, the way she filled his lungs and dragged him lower, lower, until he was another fixture in her ocean. It was what had sparked her with life that first night, a flicker in the dark when she'd been so ready to let all else consume her, and it was what lit inside her as she lowered herself onto his cock, took all those too big feelings into her, watched as his eyes widened and his jaw tightened and he looked at her like that only like that was so much larger than before.

"Fuck," he hissed, gripping her hips tight enough to bruise. She hoped she did—she wanted physical reminders after this was over, just in case he changed his mind and it never happened again. "Fuck, Buffy, you're the sodding sun."

"And you're the moon," she replied, steadying her hands on his chest. Though her memories of sex were mostly nonexistent, her body seemed to know the moves. Or she hoped it did, hoped whatever he was feeling was like what she was feeling, the slow slide of his flesh against hers as she began working herself up and down his shaft, that sense of wholeness, of completion, of all the things that had been missing, that she'd thought might remain forever out of reach.

Spike barked a throaty laugh and nodded, sliding his hands to her ass in a way that was commanding but not, not directing her strokes so much as helping her find the rhythm she wanted. Slow at first, then not slow, then frenzied, the feel of him too good, splitting her and filling her and striking something inside of her that made her skin spark and her heart gallop and her muscles clench, and he moaned and bucked deeper, hitting that place again, again, whispering just barely above the slap of their bodies. Yes, he was the moon, for the moon reflected the sun, and hers was the only reflection that mattered. How good she felt, how hot she was, how wet, how her scent drove him insane, how much he loved her, loved her pussy, loved what she did to him, and could she please squeeze him like that, oh bloody hell, he was going to dust and it'd be all right, he'd die a happy bloke, the happiest, the first vampire in history who had ever had a soul shagged into him, which had made her laugh, which had made him grin, and then he'd sat up so she was bouncing in his lap, his lips close enough to claim, and the way he growled into her mouth as she clenched and stroked and squeezed, still kissing her like she was an elixir, like she was everything. And right then, she felt like she could agree, because this was everything. Spike inside of

her, around her, tearing his lips down her neck and breasts and arms and collarbone and whatever else he could reach, calling her the sun, the galaxy, the universe, his pet, his love, his goddess, his slayer, his Buffy most of all, his Buffy, and it felt like a claim but also didn't, for she knew if she was his, then he was hers a thousand times over.

And then the world tipped and she was on her back, Spike above her, pounding into her, filling the air with the wet, fleshy sound of them, of her gasps and his whimpers and the whine of the bedsprings, and he was still talking, still filling her head and heart, Spike unleashed in every form of the word.

Then pulling out of her abruptly, shocking a moan from her lips, before he scaled down her body and buried his face in her cunt, and growled about how good she tasted, how he wanted her living on his tongue, how he could eat and drink her for hours and still be ravenous. She'd tasted good before, but now she tasted like him, too, and when he spent inside her, he'd eat himself back out just for the privilege of knowing he could. But for now there was this, the swirls of his tongue, the rumbles of his voice and purrs against her flesh, the thrusts inside and way he lapped, then teased, then sucked her clit, telling her to squeeze his head between her thighs, to hold him in place, and then finally lighting her off to that space, the fire inside bursting into a supernova of pure awesome, of pleasure so rich it almost hurt, and she was crying and trembling and he was still licking, still tasting, before finally crawling his way back up her body and spearing his cock into her just in time to enjoy the last wrings of her orgasm. Whispering against her lips, his own tasting and smelling of her, that she was about to do that again, this time around his prick, and she shook her head and said no, she couldn't, and he said oh fucking hell yes, she could. Then he thrust and bucked and fucked until the receding waves became less receding, that epic release on the horizon again, and Spike smiling a smile that was pure smirk, pure fucking pride, as he scaled a hand between them to tease her clit again. And then the absolute joy of watching him dissolve as she dissolved, as she clenched and spasmed into new release, Spike burying his face in her neck again, barking a sob of his own, and emptying inside of her, his goddess, his slayer, his pet.

Love was the one she loved the most. How the word seemed to tremble with its earnestness. Buffy, Spike's love.

And how she was starting to think he might be hers.

THE TUNNEL'S NEARING END

IT WAS A GOOD thing one of her best friends was a witch, because Buffy thought there was an excellent chance she'd need to invest in some magical soundproofing. Case in point, the day she and Spike had finally stopped dancing around each other, Dawn had come thundering up the stairs at what she'd thought were sounds of struggle only to get a very sex-educational eyeful. Buffy still wasn't sure what all had been seen but was completely sure she didn't want to know. Once Dawn had stopped bellowing about going blind and needing therapy, she'd flipped a switch and started rejoicing.

"Took you long enough, stupid!" she'd said once everyone was safely clothed and downstairs, slapping Spike's arm and giggling. "When are you gonna start listening to me? I have all the great ideas."

"Oi, I listen to you plenty. Moved in, didn't I?"

"Yeah, but you were all weird about it."

"'Cause I knew what you were up to."

"And it worked. Behold my genius."

"I don't think your genius can take full credit for this," Buffy had replied.

"Please do not tell me why that is unless you want CPS to get involved again. Doris told me I could call her at any time."

Buffy had rolled her eyes, decided that comment didn't even merit a reply, considering how panicked her sister had gotten during the one and only visit CPS had made to the Summers house, even if it had been fairly anticlimactic. The woman assigned to their case had taken a look around, decided everything was more or less in order, and advised that the only true concern was Buffy's lack of a steady income—something she was currently working to fix, as soon as she had the words with which to approach Giles. She had a feeling he was aching to go back to England anyway, since the relationship he'd rushed across the world to honor no longer existed. For now, he'd been giving her what she assumed were guilt payments to help her make ends meet but that wasn't sustainable.

"I think you should charge for slaying," Anya had said during their coffee date. "You are providing a valuable service to the citizens of Sunnydale. Compensation should be included."

Buffy had exchanged a glance with Tara, not sure how to respond. "I don't think the sacred duty thing comes with a benefits package."

“Well, it should.” Anya had sniffed. “Giles gets paid for his role as your watcher. In fact, he’s been retroactively paid for entire years of work that he did not do, because you insisted upon it. Why should watchers get paid when slayers are the ones doing the work?”

And that had been an excellent point. Maybe the people she rescued shouldn’t be expected to cough up a service fee, but the people who had a hand in Buffy being cosmically tapped for the gig? A salary seemed a decent exchange for what she was doing.

That was a conversation for another day. Granted, a day relatively soon, as Buffy owed Giles a visit just to see if he was any closer to figuring out how to get through to Willow. They hadn’t spoken much since the night at the Bronze when Willow and her former rat friend had been terrorizing the nightlife, just a few check-ins here and there, Giles always sounding like he thought there was some scoreboard on their relationship and if he earned enough marks, she would be over the earlier betrayals. After all, she had once before.

For the moment, though, Buffy was luxuriating in the quiet. She’d gotten up to see Dawn to school and do the responsible parent bit, but with the house absent any sensitive-eared teenagers, she was much more interested in taking advantage of the intervening hours by spending them with her vampire.

Her vampire who had, more or less, moved completely into her bedroom and was currently lying under her sheets in sweet repose, still as the grave save the occasional breath. Buffy watched him for a long moment, sitting beside him on the mattress, letting her gaze rove the hard, lean muscles that made him up. Those arms she enjoyed nibbling, those hands that knew just how to stroke, that chest she’d collapsed in laughter against the night before over something she didn’t even remember, except that she’d laughed and he’d laughed and it had been very funny. The curve of his cock against his thigh, how impressive it looked even when not straining toward the ceiling. How peaceful he looked, her live-in monster, and how it was that she had come to be here with him at last.

Life wasn’t good exactly, but it was getting there. He was getting her there. Spike and Dawn and Tara and Anya, and the growing number of days separating her from that first awful gasp of air. Time didn’t heal but with the right ingredients, it could soothe.

Buffy reached over, took Spike’s cock into her hand and began to stroke. Enjoyed the subtle way his body awoke, how she could feel it against her skin, in her heart and throat, how he hardened and grew and, as he began edging toward consciousness, purred and arched into her touch. Then finally, fluttered those beautiful eyes open and fixed them on her, first with sleepy wonder, then that molten heat that seemed to have a direct line to her clit. How immediately he fueled the fire.

“Got yourself a handful there, Slayer,” Spike purred, shifting and arching into her hand. “Know what you wanna do with it?”

“Hmm, well, I had a thought...” She leaned forward to brush a kiss across the head of his cock, a kiss that turned into a lick when he moaned, and a suck when he whimpered.

“It’s a bloody good thought,” Spike replied, funneling his fingers through her hair and pushing deeper into her mouth.

And it was. For many, many reasons.

DOMESTICITY WITH A SIDE OF BLISS

HE WAS ENTIRELY TOO good at that. The way his fingers traced the arches of her foot, kneaded into the places where she was perpetually sore from a combination of constant impact and shoes that were rarely worth the discomfort but she insisted on anyway. His touch was somehow both gentle and firm, and each stroke made her hyperaware of herself. A good, inner squirmy sensation that pooled in her center and seemed to radiate out until she was throbbing in the best way. The way only he could soothe.

Thing was, he knew it, too. Knew what his touch did to her. He'd taken great pleasure in detailing how sensitive his nose was, how he knew when her heart picked up or her breathing changed. That knowledge was on his face now, curved into a smirk she wanted to both kiss and punch off, which of course he also knew. They had discovered not too long ago that Willow's resurrection spell had cost Buffy whatever it was that made her register as human on his chip, and had delighted in the opportunity to vent the weeks of frustration they hadn't yet fucked out of their systems into sparring that was little more than foreplay.

Good thing Tara had consented to magically soundproofing the bedroom, otherwise Dawn would have undoubtedly called Doris by now.

As though summoned by the thought, Dawn stomped her way down the stairs and into the living room, her overnight bag tucked over her shoulder. "You guys are gross," she said without sparing them a look, busy pretending to be searching for something when Buffy knew she was waiting for final permission before leaving for Janice's. "Don't do anything anywhere I ever sit or eat, please. I don't need more childhood trauma."

"What you don't know won't hurt you, Bit," Spike replied, also not looking at her, rather keeping his gaze fixed on the movie they were pretending to watch. Buffy had only recently started allowing Dawn sleepovers again after discovering she'd been the subject of teenage deception on previous occasions, the old game of I'm-staying-at-their-house to secure a night of supervisor-free shenanigans. She'd been annoyed but in a manner that felt muted by the other annoyances in her life, and had finally allowed contact to resume as long as she and Janice's mom were the ones who made the arrangements.

Still, Dawn was a bit gun-shy. She'd confided in Buffy afterward that she felt closer to her than she ever had, and didn't want that to go away because of a stupid mistake. Buffy had assured her no lasting harm had been done, that she supposed things like this were

just regular growing pains. But also that she would be a more attentive guardian going forward.

“You don’t think I’ll be hurt on some spiritual level if I have dinner on a surface where my sister has gone freaky with her freak boyfriend?” Dawn said, stuffing one of the sweaters she’d left draped over the sofa into her overnight bag. “I don’t have to know it to know it, you know.”

“Aren’t you on your way out?” Buffy asked airily. “The movie starts at seven and I know you’re a previews junkie.”

Dawn sniffed and resituated her bag. “You could at least pretend you’re not dying to get me out of the house.”

“Yeah, well, that’d be lying, wouldn’t it?” Spike retorted, finally tearing his gaze off the screen to flash her a grin. “Toddle on off. The grownups have grownup things to do.”

“You guys are gross,” she said again, though there was a smile in her voice. Buffy looked up as well to do the sister thing—the silent communication that Dawn needed before feeling like she could leave. And that seemed to do the trick. Dawn stomped toward the front door with one last parting shot that Buffy decided meant, “I love you guys,” before the walls rattled with the force of the door slam.

“Bloody finally,” Spike said, dropping her foot without ceremony and sliding like liquid off the couch. “Thought she’d never leave.”

“Hey!” Buffy squirmed, lifting her hips so he could easily pull down her leggings, the crotch of which had become uncomfortably wet. “I was enjoying that.”

He grinned at her, all heat as he lifted her leg to fit it over his shoulder. “Enjoying what?”
“Good rubbies.”

“That mean you don’t fancy a good something else?” He trailed his gaze down to her center, where his fingers were already rubbing a wet line along her slit, nudging her clit on every upstroke. “Cause baby, I’m bloody parched. Been too long since I had this pussy in my mouth.”

“Three whole hours.”

“A lifetime for a man who lives on it.” Spike swore softly, spreading her open, and before she could come up with a suitable reply, he’d descended to lick her from her opening to her clit, which he then treated to a quick suck just to get her mewling the way she knew he liked best. And then his mouth was like the rest of him, in constant motion, whispering wetly over her skin as he explored and delved and soaked his face in her. Growling his delight when she whimpered, slipping a hand under her ass to pull her closer, tongue wandering, probing, slipping inside of her just to get her riled and wiggling and begging before he took pity and nibbled his way back to her clit, all the while somehow whispering against her flesh without breaking contact.

And god, she loved him. She did. She felt full of it, love bursting against her skin, aching to be shared, screamed, celebrated, but she knew better than to let the words out now. Not when pieces of her life were still returning to her, when she knew he would still worry. That he wouldn’t fully believe.

Until that day arrived, though, she’d enjoy the journey.

APOCALYPSE TIME

AT SOME POINT, THE memories that returned stopped being revelations. They were simply there, a foggy place made clear, another line connecting two or more previously independent dots, broadening her view of what life had been like before. And as the memories stopped being revelations, Buffy stopped announcing them, just let them roll as they came. She and Spike were in a firm place, yes, but his worries and fears were not gone, rather hibernating with one eye open. And while that was true, Buffy thought the smartest thing she could do was to avoid provoking them at all. If something came to her that troubled her to the point she needed to explore it, she'd reevaluate.

Hadn't happened so far, and she was starting to think it just wouldn't. What she was regaining was mostly background and context for those memories that had previously stood alone. The things she'd felt once upon a different lifetime, the pain and the heartache and the laughter and the joy in equal measure. She remembered meeting Willow and Xander her first day at Sunnydale High, remembered the many nights they'd spent together hunched over research, walking through cemeteries, or talking about their doomed love lives. She remembered the thrill of danger in pursuing Angel, of knowing she was doing something she shouldn't and how enticing that made it. Then inevitably how much it had cost her, and how the terrible knowledge of that price had made his decision to leave hurt all the more. She remembered the connection she'd once felt to Giles, how he'd tended to her bruises after he'd been fired, how she'd held him outside of a burning factory as he broke, the once-solid decision that if she ever did get married, he'd be the one who walked her down the aisle, and the feeling that, after her mom had died, she wasn't truly alone in the world so long as he was with her.

But remembered emotion was not experienced emotion. Each of those upheavals made sense within their individual contexts, but in a distant way that hardly seemed relevant. No matter how much returned, Buffy remained far removed from the person who had lived those moments. It was another her, another time, another life, one she shared but a thousand years ago if not more. And a lot changed in a thousand years.

And as time did not stand still, even more continued to change in her day-to-day. Good changes, even if they, like everything else, came at a price.

Like Willow finally hitting rock bottom and admitting she needed help. Her former rat friend had introduced her to what Xander had described as a magical heroin dealer, one who had gotten her hooked on magicks so intense reality itself became a shade. One

night, juiced up beyond belief, Willow had stolen a car to escape a demon that she had apparently created, and in her rush to escape, had pinned a pedestrian between the hood and the side of a tattoo parlor. Willow had walked away without a scratch; the pedestrian had clung to life for a long week before letting go. And that had been that. When Giles had announced he was returning to England, having negotiated the introduction of a slayer salary through Watchers Council, Willow had gone with him, ready to learn the restraint she'd spent the last few years brushing off.

There had been other changes. Anya breaking up with Xander over his reluctance to set a date for the wedding and moving in with Tara, Xander throwing himself into his work to cope, and his work just happening to be the construction of a new high school on the gravesite of the old one. The gang of old splintered and separated, Buffy's circle now comprised of the exes of her former best friends, her sister, and her boyfriend, every day a few more memories leaking in, bringing her closer to what she believed was the whole truth of herself. How Spike had introduced himself to her by threatening to kill her, how they'd rather be fighting each other anyway, how he'd helped her save the world before he'd loved her, and what he'd sacrificed for her after. The not-so-great way he'd declared his feelings, the disgust and revulsion she'd felt almost funny now for how much she loved him.

And she did love him. She truly did. She'd just wanted to wait until it was all back—until she knew that doubt would die a permanent death, that he would hear her and believe her without worrying one day she would remember something that made it not true. But there were fewer gaps now, if any gaps at all, and she'd started to think it safe to tell him just how much she remembered. Maybe in an inventive way, repurposing some of their memories to make it clear there was nothing that could come back to her now that would change the way she felt. That she remembered the good and the bad and the everything, and Lorne had been right. She had been right. There was no going back, just forward. Together.

Unfortunately, before she could fully flesh out her perfect I love you and it's real plan, her stupid sacred calling got in the way.

From beneath you, it devours.

It had been so long since she'd had a slayer dream, Buffy hadn't realized that was what it was until it kept repeating. Until she started waking up with a cold, choking sort of dread, an innate knowledge that the world was trying to warn her of what was coming.

That it was time, however much she didn't want to, to get the whole band back together. And things like elaborate love confessions couldn't wait.

Not with a probable apocalypse on the horizon.

THIS IS WHAT'S NEXT

SO SINCE HER GRAND gesture plans were indefinitely on hold, she was going the other way. Nothing elaborate, rather...this. Buffy screwing up her courage in the eleventh hour and just blurting it before the house descended into preparatory chaos. Tara was on her way to the airport to pick up Giles and Willow, and Anya and Xander were expected (separately) at any moment. Then everyone would be off to the races until whatever was beneath them devouring was in front of them and defeated.

And that meant telling Spike now. No more waiting for a perfect moment. The perfect moment was the one she had to create. Better than watching him wear a hole in the floor with his pacing, at any rate.

“Spike, stop.”

He glanced at her but did not stop. At this point, she didn't know if he could, as full of nervous energy as he was. While he hadn't said anything, she understood that the prospect of having everyone back and truly together like they hadn't been since before the resurrection had him on edge. Had those concerns he hadn't quite nipped in the bud nipping him instead.

“I need to tell you something and it'd be a lot easier if I could look you in the eye while doing it.”

At that, he whipped his head to her in alarm, grinding to a halt so quickly he nearly toppled over, saved only by luck and probably some of that inherent vampire grace. “Something wrong?” he asked, his voice urgent.

“No, you're just driving me crazy.”

Spike relaxed but only incrementally. “Course I am. It's what I do.”

“Yes. It is.” Buffy inhaled, bracing herself, her heart suddenly at a gallop for some stupid reason. Here it was. Her chance. Her opening. Her Rubicon. “And it's one of the many reasons I love you.”

“You what?” For someone who was almost always in motion, Spike could also become unerringly still, an animal scoping its surroundings for signs of trouble. In half a second, he'd gone from fidgety to rigid, a Spike-shaped statue, save for his breaths. And he was looking at her with such trepidation, such hope and heartache and confusion, as if certain he'd heard wrong but desperate to learn he hadn't.

“I wasn't going to tell you like this,” Buffy said at length, squirming a bit under his scrutiny. “It was going to be...different. Bigger.”

“Buffy, baby, you know I—”

“My first plan was to chain you up, actually,” she said quickly. “Back in your old crypt. I wasn’t going to go to the trouble of asking Angel to make an appearance, because he shouldn’t be a part of this, but there was going to be a dummy Angel. One I could hold a stake to and symbolically kill for you.”

Something flickered behind his eyes. “You...”

“Remember that? Yeah, I do.” Buffy edged forward on the couch, clasping her hands together. “I remember Parent Teacher Night. I remember the bomb-shelter-turned-vampire-slaughterhouse. I remember teaming up with you to save the world. I remember you trying to kill me in the sunlight. I remember you telling me about the other slayers you killed. I remember the shotgun.” She licked her lips, the knot in her chest loosening the more she spoke. The more his eyes softened, fear warming to that look of wonder she loved so much. “I remember the bot in all its truly disgusting glory. I am pretty sure I remember everything.”

Spike released a shaky breath. “How long?”

“How long what?”

“How long have you... How long?”

“A while now.” At this, she shifted, dropping her gaze to her hands but only for a second. “Like I said, I had a plan. I was going to do it, but I wanted to be absolutely sure no new memories were coming, but if there are new memories, they’re probably not big ones.”

“Buffy...”

“Then the slayer dreams started, and we got distracted with whatever from beneath you, it devours means. Which honestly means it’s probably apocalypse time. We haven’t had one of those in a while.” She rubbed her hands along her sides. “And I know everyone being here is going to make you kinda crazy. It’s going to make me crazy, too. I also didn’t want to wait until it’s end-of-the-world o’clock because I really need you to hear me. Believe me.”

And in a flash, he was in motion again, only toward her, around the coffee table until he was before her on his knees, his eyes dark and full and bursting with so much of that everything that existed within him, all that love and strength and devotion. All of it hers. All of him for all of her.

“You love me?” he whispered.

“I love you.” Buffy cupped his cheeks and kissed him. “I remember you, and I love you. And I love you even more because I remember you... Because remembering you means knowing how we got here and that’s...”

“Everything.” Spike kissed her again, the sort of kiss that could fast get out of hand if she wasn’t careful. That she would want to get out of hand if people weren’t on the way. “Buffy...”

“I just needed you to know that. Give you something to fight for so we can get to the other side of this apocalypse.”

“I was always gonna bloody fight.”

“I know.” She grinned. “But the sooner the fight is over, the sooner everyone gets the hell out of our house so we can celebrate in style.”

“So we can circle back to your plans of chaining me up? Think I might fancy that.”

“Among other things.” Distantly, she heard the sound of a car pulling up in front of the house. Of doors closing and voices, voices she knew, wandering close. “Something to look forward to after we save the world again.”

“Slayer, I’ll hold you to it.”

“You fucking better.”