

# REBIRTH

HOLLY DENISE



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“AND HOW’S THIS FOR a bright side? At least we don’t have to do any more research.”

Buffy was glad someone was seeing the half-full, because from where she was sitting, there was no bright side. Just a crap side. She’d just come back from possibly the most uncomfortable conversation she’d ever had with Spike to a house buzzing with activity, only to learn that yay. More Spike stuff in her future.

“She was sure?” Buffy asked, knowing she was stalling but also what the hell, she’d earned it. “There’s absolutely no chance the vision might’ve been a teensy bit off?”

Willow shook her head, frowning in a way that telegraphed she did not understand why Buffy wasn’t doing cartwheels of joy. “No, definitely. Drusilla was *just* in LA, according to Cordy. She did a lot of damage and I guess after Angel...” There was some furtive eye-shifting that screamed whatever was going to come out of her mouth next would be an abridged version of the truth, which Buffy would have to circle back to at some point when she had capacity. “Drusilla needed to get out of town fast and, well, Spike being here and everything, it makes sense that this is where she’d come.”

Yeah, it did. Too much sense. Sense Buffy could stand to be less sensible. She’d come home ready to send everyone at their battle stations to help her figure out how to navigate the whole *Spike’s in love with me* bomb that life had decided to throw at her, only to find an excited Willow brimming with news from Los Angeles that couldn’t possibly have come at a worse time.

Because now Buffy couldn’t focus on what he’d said. The look in his eyes, the sincerity in his voice, or any of the other insanity that had occurred within that vampire den. Now she had to think about *Drusilla* and how *Drusilla* was a part of the *Spike* equation.

“I guess I better head back,” she muttered, tearing a hand through her hair. If anyone knew how to find Dru, it’d be Spike.

A thought that lent her pause. How likely was it that Drusilla had rolled into town without Spike knowing from the start? The train massacre had looked standard vampire to her, sure, but someone who had known Dru, lived with Dru, *loved* Dru as long as Spike had—or whatever twisted version of love vampires experienced, anyway—would know the signs, right? Was it possible the entire failed date attempt tonight had been a part of a long con to throw her off the scent? Pull the wool over her eyes? Let Drusilla do whatever Drusilla was going to do as a part of his larger ambition of winning back the real love of his life.

*But Dawn said Spike’s in love with you, a nasty, unwanted voice whispered. That it’s obvious. How long could this have been in the works if it’s just an act? And are you forgetting that time he tried to kiss you?*

No, she wasn’t. That lean-in, the hunger on his face, the feel of his hands around her shoulders... It had been weird at the time. Thrown her the way everything else had that night—the stories she’d thought she’d wanted, the clarity she hadn’t gotten, the not-so-subtle way he’d called her out on her own freakish proclivities, how slaying did indeed turn her on. It had been a crap sundae of an evening and then he’d tried to kiss her and she had just felt... Well, she hadn’t had time to dwell. Had arrived home to the sort of news that wiped out everything else, making it seem unimportant, and she’d been

happy enough to let it rather than try to pick that weird moment apart.

So, either Spike thought he was in love with her or he'd actually pulled off a longer scheme without showing his hand. The only way she was going to find out for sure was to go back to his place and ask him, all direct-like, and count on his history of being a crap liar to tell her the truth.

God, she was so screwed.

"All right, well, I'll see what I can find out." And wait to deal with the fallout of Spike's declaration once she determined whether it had been sincere or some really sick ploy to get into her head, which so wasn't working. Nope. Her head was an impenetrable fortress so far as Spike was concerned. "Thanks for coming by with this. If Dru is in town, well, that's just a complication my life really doesn't need at the moment."

"Of course," Willow replied brightly. "Do you want me to come with? Scowl meanly at her over your shoulder? Make sure Spike doesn't give you too much trouble?"

"A bit late for that, but thanks for the offer," Buffy said, forcing a tight smile that hopefully didn't betray the chaotic state of her insides. She needed to get a handle on this Spike thing herself before she started looping in anyone else. "I can handle Spike. And Dru, if need be."

She hoped that was true. And hey, maybe if she were lucky, Dru wasn't even here to start problems, but rather take Spike off her hands. Out of her town at long last, and never mind that Buffy didn't like how that thought made her stomach twist. Her stomach had never known what was good for it. A Spike-less Sunnydale was just what the doctor had ordered.

Right? Right.



The first thing Buffy became aware of was the pounding in her temples, how it seemed to stretch down her jaw and neck, intense and relentless, and the persistent throb in the back of her skull from where something had clobbered her good. The next thing she became aware of was the strain in her muscles, owing to the fact that her arms had been stretched and cuffed. There was an awful taste in her mouth, which was dryer than it had ever been, and her left side hurt something awful. A different kind of hurt—a hurt that was like a burn.

A few seconds crawled by before the fog began to clear, then everything rushed at her with the subtlety of a freight train. Journeying to Spike's crypt and finding it empty. Deciding to do some Nancy Drewage in the meantime, see if she could determine for herself if Spike actually thought he had feelings for her or if the entire thing had been an elaborate, confusing ruse. Helping herself through the downstairs hatch that she'd seen him use enough to guess there might be something of interest down there, and lo and behold more than something of interest—Spike had turned the crypt into a two-story apartment. One complete with a bed, a few scant pieces of furniture, and some decorations that somehow elevated the space from hole in the ground to actual cozy

bedroom.

Buffy had been honestly, if not begrudgingly, impressed until she'd found the shrine. Full on, serial-killer obsession shrine with her at the center. Drawings, photos, some clothing items that she'd accused Dawn of stealing, and god, she'd had her answer. Spike was obsessed with her—fully obsessed. Maybe in a way his deluded brain had translated to love, but *holy crap*, she'd needed to get out of there and stat. The Drusilla stuff was important and had to be addressed but not then. Not when she'd just discovered...this.

Then climbing back to the main level, experiencing that telltale tingle, looking up and seeing Spike glaring down at her, cool as a cucumber, blood smearing his mouth and his eyes frighteningly dispassionate. And then...

"I think our girl's playing possum," a singsong voice called now, somehow both far away and much too close. "Wake up, nasty little possum. It's time for you to give us your coins."

"Dru, please—"

"Shhh. The high priestess doesn't like the view. She cannot see the tower."

The last thing in the world Buffy wanted to do was open her eyes and make this real, but she was not a girl accustomed to getting what she wanted. So she forced her eyes open, forced herself to take in the scene, and everything within her that hadn't yet fallen went crashing the rest of the way down.

Buffy hadn't seen Drusilla but for a handful of times three years prior, most memorably the night she'd stumbled across Angel enjoying a clandestine moment in the park—one that he'd proceeded to lie to her about. After that had been the bomb-shelter-turned-vampire-dinner-party, Drusilla standing at the sidelines, watching, and the instinct that had driven Buffy to ransom her in exchange for Spike not turning the place into a true slaughterhouse. Next had come the restoration ritual, then the Judge, but those memories were vague, like trying to glimpse something submerged under water, for everything around the Judge had eventually been dominated by Angel. Angel becoming her enemy, the bad guy she needed to defeat, if only she could convince her broken heart.

Regardless, the Dru most dominant in her memories was not like the Dru in front of her now. That Dru had been in flowy white dresses that made her look soft and innocent; this Dru wore skin-tight black that showed off her sharp angles, no longer soft but harsh and vibrant. A skilled seductress rather than a lost child. One regarding her with a mixture of interest and loathing, and Buffy didn't know why, couldn't, until the rest of the scene came into view.

Until she realized that Spike was across from her on the ground, manacled with chains that made his wrists smoke, his feet the same, and he was looking at her, at Buffy, with such raw terror her world went sideways.

"There's our possum," Drusilla cooed in delight. "Wouldn't want to be late to her own party."

"What is this?" Buffy asked, pulling forward on her chains. "Spike, what the hell is this?"

"The Slayer is a thief," Drusilla replied, turning to regard Spike with a look packed

with meaning. “She steals that which does not belong to her, doesn’t she, my precious prince?”

“She didn’t steal anything,” Spike barked, his mouth contorted into a grimace. He sucked in a breath and pulled against his restraints, a hard yell ripping through his throat as the air cracked and sizzled. “I’m right here, baby, she can’t have me if I—”

“Hush now. The fool is a liar.”

“I’m not bloody lying,” Spike ground out through his teeth. “Let me out of these blasted cuffs and we’ll drain her together. You and me. The way it’s meant to be. She’ll be out of our bloody hair forever.”

“Now, now. Mummy’s talking.” She turned back to Buffy, her gaze cool and assessing, shrewd beyond any allowances Buffy had made in the past. But then, her opinion of Dru had never been very charitable, informed by her own bitterness and jealousy, not to mention some very specific ideas about what made someone *insane*. But *insane* was not *stupid*, and Buffy saw that now—saw the woman’s madness for what it was.

“You know what you stole, don’t you, dearie?” Drusilla asked, speaking as though she’d sensed the thought. “You know whose toys they are.”

Buffy worked her throat and glanced back at Spike, whose eyes were wide and full of horror beyond anything she’d ever seen on him. Spike was a lot of things—most of them bad—but he’d never been one to betray genuine fear. That he was doing so now made her hear the lie from before, made her realize exactly what she was about to lose.

It had been a long time—a really long time—since Buffy had been genuinely afraid of a vampire. Afraid like she had been in the Master’s lair, knowing what was coming, seeing it on the horizon, no way out. Even the incident a few weeks ago hadn’t done more than startle her into awareness of her own mortality; she’d known she could run faster than that guy, known she could get to safety before she needed to worry about making it to tomorrow.

A whimper clawed at her throat, and she began tugging at her bonds in earnest.

“Oooh,” Drusilla said, moving faster than Buffy had ever seen a vampire move, and then her chin was caught between those sharp-tipped fingers. “Naughty, wicked slayer, touching my things without permission. Shall I show you what happens to bad dolls who speak out of turn?”

“Dru, just—”

She snarled an actual snarl, something more animal than human, and it should have sounded ridiculous but it didn’t. “My Spike is all a-tangle for you, dearie. See the pretty ribbons?” Drusilla released her abruptly, her nails slicing open her skin as she went. The pain was somehow both minute and intense, a deliberate papercut that had its own heartbeat, and Buffy whimpered before she could stop herself, her chest tight and her instincts screaming, and now she was bleeding around vampires. Around an insane vampire who believed she’d stolen something prized and cherished. Something Drusilla had evidently thought would always be waiting for her if ever she decided she wanted to play with it again.

“Have you sung for her, dear heart?” Drusilla asked airily, keeping her black gaze fixed

on Buffy. “Does she know how much you bleed for her?”

“I do not—”

“Deceitful tongues shall be cut out of unworthy mouths.” At that, she turned her glare on him at last. “Do. Not,” she ground out, each word a bullet, “Lie. To. Me.”

Spike stared at her for a long moment, his expression unreadable, which Buffy found more disturbing than almost anything else that had happened tonight. Not once in the years that she’d known him had he had a reliable poker face—his emotions always on full display, his intentions stupidly easy to deduce just because he couldn’t help but blab until everything was either on the table or so transparent it might as well be. That he was sitting calm, still, while his wrists and ankles smoked and sizzled, had Buffy in freefall, the kind bound to kill her.

At length, Spike worked his throat and shifted his attention to her. “I had a plan,” he said, then barked out a bitter laugh. “About as brilliant as any other I’ve ever come up with.”

Buffy’s heart somersaulted. “Did you know she was here?” she asked. “When we were at that den earlier. When you... Did you know then?”

He shook his head, and god help her, she believed him.

“Came back here to lick my wounds,” he went on. “And Dru was waiting for me. Spun a tale about what she’d been up to in merry ol’ LA with your former honey. Sounds like a load of laughs, sorry to have missed it. Then she offered to do my part of the killin’ for me, work around this sodding chip and give me my fangs back.”

“And, what, you said no?”

“Course not. Evil, aren’t I? Serial killer in prison according to some.”

Buffy didn’t blanch. She refused to feel bad for being right, even under these circumstances.

Spike exhaled sharply and looked away, though only for a second. “Thought I’d try it on, see if it still fit. Turns out it doesn’t. Didn’t take any joy in it. All I could—” He caught himself before he could finish the thought, straining his neck with a hard grimace, as though angry with whatever he’d been about to say. “What all do you want, Dru? A full sodding confession?”

“You were bad,” she chided in answer, voice suddenly childlike again. “Going to hurt your princess.”

“So you got the jump on me first.”

“Tell her the rest, love. Tell her what the pixies told me.”

There was a beat. Then another. Then Spike sighed in harmony with his hissing skin and settled his gaze back on Buffy. “I was gonna offer her up,” he said. “To you.”

“To me?”

“Like Angel did, yeah? With Darla. Make a big show of it. What I’m willing to do for you.”

“Grandmum is still cross with him for that,” Drusilla said. “She wants no cake at his party, but she will take a bun when the time comes.”

Buffy stared at Spike, willing herself to understand but her brain wasn’t cooperating,

just chasing the tail ends of barely formed thoughts in a continuous loop. “You were...going to kill Drusilla to prove something to me?”

He nodded. “Prove that I mean it.”

“Mean what?”

“What the sodding hell do you think? That I love you.”

Buffy blinked at him, waited for him to hear how ridiculous that sounded. How, quite frankly, insane it was to try to demonstrate your love for one person by killing someone else you claim to love. Like, how was that supposed to prove anything other than the fact that Spike was completely twisted?

Something of this must have shown on her face, because Spike’s expression darkened. “It’s about what I was,” he replied sharply. “A man she plucked outta mediocrity. Saved from dying a nameless nobody, some pathetic lovelorn git. She meant the world. She *was* my world. And that was the sodding point. She was my world, she built me up from nothing. I owe her *everything*, and I’m willing to let that go, all of it. Who I was, everything that meant, every bit of me that mattered a lick this last century, *for you*. It was showing you that I am not *that* anymore, and the chip has fuck all to do with it. Killing her was gonna kill *me*, Slayer, and that was the point. Willing to die, turn my back on everything I was, become someone else, because I went and fell in love with you.”

Buffy didn’t know what she’d expected, but it wasn’t that. She didn’t even know what *that* had been, really. A sledgehammer to the face would have been easier to understand, to wrap her mind around, because while she was still certain that Spike was... Well, if nothing else, really warped in how he viewed pretty much everything, some of what he’d said didn’t sound as crazy as it should.

A low, manic cackle filled the air before her brain could jump-start, dragging her out of her confused thoughts and back to the very real present. Drusilla, head tipped back, insane laughter peeling from her mouth, black eyes glittering but not with humor. “That’s it,” she said a moment later. “I saw her around you, dancing, teasing, the sunlight you hoped would not burn. But all sunlight burns, the Slayer most of all. She is why you taste like ashes. Why you’re on fire from the inside.”

“Dru, just—”

“No.” That hard bark was back, the one that truly sounded a combination of human and demon, as though she were speaking through a roar. “There is only one way to save you, my sweet. Only one way to keep the sun from consuming you whole.”

Drusilla turned back to Buffy then, her eyes flashing yellow, her fangs descending, and everything went loud. The blood in Buffy’s head, the thunder of her own instincts, both human and slayer, cadencing through her with increasing desperation. And she was pulling at the chains around her wrists, trying to drown out the hard, ribcage-rattling thumps of her heart. Trying not to panic at the screams tearing through Spike’s throat, the sight of him thrashing and jerking and searing away his own flesh against the bonds that shackled him. And Dru was there at her throat, fangs gleaming in the crypt’s weak lighting, and this couldn’t happen—it couldn’t. Buffy had not survived what she’d survived just to die like this. She was supposed to die doing something brave, saving the

world, saving her sister, saving her mom, saving someone or everyone or anyone, and then there was a familiar sting of pain and, god, she was bleeding. She could feel it pumping through her veins, her arteries, a waterfall of blood unleashed, and Dru was there, guzzling it up, drinking it down, slurping noisily at Buffy's death, Spike still screaming, though farther away now. Forever away. The already weak light growing dimmer, blacker, the edges of Buffy's vision seeming to collapse in on themselves.

And as her body grew heavy, skin tingling, nerves numbing, world disappearing, Buffy's thoughts growing sluggish, distant, she started to feel maybe it was okay. Maybe it was right. Maybe this rest was exactly what she needed after all, because she was so tired, and keeping her head up was so hard, and sleep would give her the escape she'd been chasing since she was fifteen. Since her life had become something that wasn't hers.

And her lips were wet and there was copper in her mouth and it tasted good, so good, quenching a thirst she hadn't realized she had—hadn't realized she'd *always* had until that second. Until the elixir was pouring down her throat, cold and wonderful and giving, and it was nice. This last thing she tasted, felt, experienced. If she were to die, this was the way to do it.

She could rest now.

At last.



Once again, she hadn't staked him. Hadn't cut off his head or set him on fire. And this time, he really wished she had. Not empty words or a drunken rationalization, Spike truly wished Dru had, for once, seen it in her black little heart to find some scrap of affection for him—whatever had brought her to this cesspool of a town in the first place—and done him in proper. It would have been a mercy compared to what was coming, because fuck, he didn't want to see that.

Didn't want to look into the Slayer's eyes, *Buffy's* eyes, and see a version of her he didn't recognize. Without that spark and warmth and life that made her who she was, aggravating bitch and all. The woman who drove him mad, made him want to pull his hair out from the root, scream and curse and shove her up against whatever was most convenient so he could shut that smart mouth of hers up with his own.

There was no telling what sort of Buffy would emerge from the makeshift grave Dru had fashioned for her. Not a proper grave, of course, but being that it was Sunnydale, there were plenty of graves to pillage for fresh dirt. Dru knew what she wanted and how to get it—if not by getting her own hands in the mix, then by bewitching some poor unsuspecting sod to do the labor for her. It was important that Buffy rise from the earth the same as any other vampire; it was also important that she do so somewhere safe, somewhere her mates wouldn't accidentally stumble upon her and suss out what had happened. Spike's bed had proven the optimal location. Meaningful too, a sort of macabre bridal suite, and lucky him, he'd had a front row seat for the entire show. The fancy wankers who had hauled in the Slayer's grave dirt while grinning and nudging each

other about how fitting this was, the Slayer turned into one of them. Harm showing up at some point, Spike couldn't remember when, only to make the mistake of looking Dru in the eye, and there had been no bloody hope for her. Was almost a pity how quickly it had happened—how little chance she'd had the second she'd come thundering in, looking for payback for being ditched for the one true love of Spike's life.

She was dust now. Gone. Everyone was gone. Even Dru hadn't stuck around for opening night, either suspecting what would happen or knowing it, courtesy of those rotten pixies. And Spike had been left at the foot of the bed, ankles and wrists still bound in the chains that burned every time he dared jostle even a little, but the threat of pain had become secondary. Everything had become secondary to the wait.

He honestly didn't know what Dru's end game was here, and that bothered him too. Save for the fits that took her, the truly bad days when nothing could reach her through her screams and terrors, there was always a method to her madness. A reason fueling each decision. At first he'd thought perhaps the reason was giving him what he wanted—Buffy was the sun, out of reach to anyone who didn't want to go up in flames, and even if he had been right about the heat and desire between them, she would never admit it. Definitely would never give in, take a ride on the wild side and explore those darker impulses. If Dru wanted her family back, Darla and Daddy in tow, and the only way she thought she could have that was by giving Spike a plaything of his own, well, she had all the makings for it. Except the fact that she'd bloody well scarpered and left him as an offering for her new daughter to decimate upon awakening.

The other option, the more likely one, was punishment. Punishment for disloyalty, for falling out of love with her, for going soft for the Slayer, ruining any chance of reconciliation by turning traitor on his own kind. Befouling the gift she'd given him a century before in that alley. *You turned your back on Princess, forgetting she owns the castle*, he could almost hear her saying. *Princess needs to remind you whose subject you are*.

Ultimately, though, Spike reckoned it didn't matter. All came out the same. Buffy was dead but not gone, seconds, minutes, hours away from that first punch of air, lungs that no longer functioned seizing as the body came to some mimicry of life. And then she'd sit up, scattering gravedirt along the comforter, and she'd see him, bound and waiting for her, assuming the blessed bindings Dru had secured didn't eat their way entirely through his bones. And no matter how much he wanted to believe that Buffy would remain, his Buffy, all he could think about was the night he'd sworn never to think about again. His mum looking at him in ways that would haunt his nightmares for more than a century, whispering filth and pressing against him, touching him the way no mother should touch her child, and freshly turned William standing there, frozen with disgust and horror alike, trying to grapple with a reality that seemed impossible. How he had risen and felt like himself, just shed of the responsibilities and shame that had dogged him as a man. Everything had seemed so simple, so clear, and he'd believed it'd be that way for her too. That he could release his mother from a body that was determined to kill her and give her the same chance to live that he'd been given, and how instead, he'd been the thing that condemned her forever.

Time did a wonky thing over those restless hours, seeming to crawl and fly, occupying two realities. Feeling the progression of the sun making its journey across the sky, his stomach tightening as dusk and his own sodding reckoning drew nearer. Remaining ever aware of every sound or shuffle around him, from the dripping of water down one of the passages to the squeak of a rodent braving its exposure to snag up a few crumbs. Then the clank of the door upstairs and voices, Willow and Harris, calling for him but not finding him, not knowing about the downstairs, that there were places yet to look. Spike watching the ceiling as though he could see them through the stone, his instincts at war with his mind and heart, screaming at him to keep his bloody mouth shut. That there was no way they wouldn't stake him before he could explain that this was not his design, and he couldn't even blame them, for he was the reason it had happened regardless. He was the reason Drusilla had decided to not only target the Slayer, but turn her into the thing she hated. The fact that he was bound and suffering wouldn't slow them down—it'd just make the job of doing him in all the easier.

And maybe he ought to let them...except no, they'd also kill the Slayer. Make sure she never rose. Even knowing what might be coming, he couldn't let them kill her for good, and he couldn't let them kill him, either. If anyone was going to do it, let it be Buffy. She was the one who had earned it.

"Well, it doesn't look like he's here," came Willow's voice from above. "That probably doesn't mean anything, right? Just a big ol' coincidence that Drusilla is in town, Spike's missing, and we can't find Buffy...who was last seen by me, and said she was coming here to talk to Spike *about* Drusilla. Oh god, Xander, I feel sick."

"Buffy could handle Drusilla," Harris replied boldly, though in a voice that trembled. "I'm not worried about that."

"You're not?"

"Come on. It's Buffy. She's too...*Buffy* to let a crazy person like Drusilla get a jump on her."

Spike rolled his eyes and managed to stifle a grunt. Well, that was nice. Somehow her closest mate had managed to make what happened sound like Buffy's fault. Also demonstrated how someone like Dru had lived as long as she had with only one genuine near miss when it came to reckoning, even if that near miss had been a bloody disaster.

"Are you forgetting the vamp that staked her with her own stake?" Willow fired back. "That wasn't that long ago. And Drusilla being crazy means she's probably a lot less predictable, especially if she's got Spike on her side."

"Look, Will, trying to be calm, non-panicky guy here. You're not making it easy." There was a pause. "And... Okay, this is gonna sound really out there, but the timing is just crazy, and while we're trying to not freak out while simultaneously freaking out, I might as well share. Yesterday, when Buffy and I were looking at the train, she told me that Dawn thinks Spike's in love with her."

"What?" The air filled with a gagging noise. "Spike's in love with Dawn? That's...ew."

Spike curled his lip and shook his head. What sort of monster did they think he was?

"No, Dawn says Spike is in love with Buffy, not wherever your sicko mind went. Not

that Spike being in love with Buffy *isn't* sick, but at least it's not lose-my-lunch sick."

"You think..." Willow trailed off. "Wait, so Spike's in love with Buffy but Drusilla's in town, so maybe they're working together and just can't tell us?"

"Do you hear yourself? Spike is not in love with Buffy."

"But you just said—"

"I said that's what Dawn said. What Dawn thinks. Dawn, the fourteen-year-old that's a mystical key thing that didn't exist six months ago, whatever our memories say." A pause. "And yeah, Spike might have a creepy obsession with the Buffster, but do we think, honestly, for one minute that Drusilla rolls into town and he doesn't jump all over that? The guy who was trying to stake himself over her just a few months ago?"

"Well, I don't know," Willow replied uncertainly. "Like...when Oz left, I never thought I'd get over the hurt, you know? But then I met Tara and it was... It was like a whole new world opened to me, and don't you dare make a gross lesbian joke, Xander Harris."

There was no response to that outside of silence. He must have mimed zipping his lips or something. Were that they would stay that way.

"And when Oz came back, it was...old world meets new world. Do I go back to the old Willow or do I keep becoming the new Willow? Saying goodbye to Oz again was hard, but it was my choice that time, so, less hard? I just wasn't that Willow anymore."

"And you think Spike might not still be the same Spike who tries to kill us every chance he gets because he has the hots for Buffy? Willow, seriously, I love you but I must once again ask, do you hear yourself?" A hard, heavy sigh. "If anything, the fact that he's not here just proves that he and Dru are up to their old ways."

"And Buffy?"

"I think maybe we don't raise the alarm just yet. It's not like she hasn't taken off without telling anyone before."

"No, I don't think so. Not with Dawn being all...mystical-energy-in-little-sister-wrap-ping."

The voices were moving now, following the footfalls that traipsed toward the door. Spike kept his gaze on the ceiling, working his jaw and doing what he could to shout down the inner screaming that he was being thick, letting them leave like this. His wrists were going to char at this rate, ankles not too far behind, and sure, Harris was a wanker who would see the chance to get rid of the resident vampire, but Willow could be reasonable, yeah? She, at least, hadn't written off the possibility that Spike knew his own bloody heart better than the rest of them.

But no. There was only one way out of this for him, and he was looking at it.

He just hoped she made it quick.



It was the strangest thing. Buffy could feel the air was cold, way too cold for her to be anywhere good, but the preternatural warning her body typically gave off when she was awakening in a dangerous situation just...wasn't there. She didn't feel much of anything,

except hunger.

No, wait, that wasn't right. *Hunger* wasn't right. It was too tame, too *human*, and whatever she was feeling right now was like the concept of hunger had taken a physical form, and that form was in her stomach, scratching at her inner lining, stretching up her windpipe, drying out her mouth and leaving her with such raw desperation she thought it possible she could eat a literal horse. Like if she opened her eyes and there was a pony in the room, that pony better run before—

*I drain it dry.*

Buffy's eyes and lips flew open at the same time, a hard, suffocating gasp clawing its way to freedom while inexplicable dirt flooded her mouth. She jerked upright the next second, choking and spitting out tiny, somehow sweet-tasting granules and blinking other debris out of her eyes. Had she fallen asleep in a flowerbed? What the heck?

Only, no, a flowerbed would be under the sun, and there was no sun here (*thank god*). Buffy shook her head, heaving breaths still—breaths that didn't seem to soothe her at all. In fact, the more she breathed, the less stable she felt, like she was drowning all over again, only this time without the drowning part. It took practically no time for her eyes to adjust and the space around her to assume shape.

A bed. She was in a bed, covered in dirt for some reason, surrounded by things that were vaguely familiar—a dresser, a night stand, some carelessly discarded clothing, and...

"Spike?" Her voice was dry, raw against her parched throat. She blinked, hoping to make sense of what she was seeing, but no, there he was. Spike on the floor in front of the bed, his hands cuffed and smoking, his legs the same. And she had seen it before—seen it recently. A memory there on the surface, waiting to be rediscovered.

Spike and his love confession. His Buffy shrine. A burst of pain and then Drusilla in front of her, claiming she had stolen... Stolen...

Buffy's eyes widened and she slapped a hand to her neck, which sent shock waves of new pain exploding across her skin. And it was there, in that pain, that she knew. Understood.

"She turned me, didn't she?" she asked, her voice shaking against the air's unsettling stillness. The sort of still where only dead things could exist. "Drusilla. She turned me."

Spike was studying at her as he never had, his eyes large and full—so full it made him hard to look at. He didn't reply and she realized she hadn't expected him to. What was there to say? She turned and started to edge her way over the mattress, her body strangely charged, every movement amplified, as though she had thought herself to her feet rather than physically gotten there. It was strange and head-trippy, and unnatural in a way that could only mean she was also unnatural, supernatural, more than she had been before.

"Oh god, this is real." Buffy steadied a hand against the wall. "She..." She glanced at Spike again, at his smoking wrists, and frowned. "Why...? Where is she? Why are you still chained up?"

There was a beat. Then he swallowed. "Wager she wanted to let you decide what to do with me. As for where she is, no sodding clue. Took off after getting your grave set up."

"My grave?"

He nodded to the dirt-covered bed. “Dru’s a traditionalist. Got to rise from the earth the way she did.”

“And she chose...here?” Buffy frowned, pressing her hand now to her chest. Her cold, unmoving chest that answered her with silence. “Oh god, I am so hungry. How do you live like this?”

“Think you know the answer to that.”

She did, of course. She knew the script, knew what she was supposed to do now. Tear out of here with her new fangs and her new lease on...well, not life, but existence. Go home to her unsuspecting mother and sister, render whatever Glory’s plan was for Dawn moot by ripping into her soft throat, then head out to find her friends, her watcher, and truly make this town hers. But the thought alone had her insides twisting, her heart screaming, everything she knew to be her, be *Buffy*, railing its defiance, its horror, and there was only one reason she could think that might be. One reason simultaneously amazing and awful. She blinked rapidly and looked back at Spike, found him studying her with a soft sort of wonder that made her eyes sting.

“You have your soul still, don’t you?” he asked softly.

“I... I think so.” Buffy shook her head as though that would help clear things up. “I don’t... Shit.” She stumbled forward on legs that still seemed to move of their own volition, dragging her closer to where Spike was. Spike, who had screamed and sobbed and begged Dru not to do it, not to turn her, who had told her he loved her. It didn’t seem as ridiculous as it had earlier. In fact, it didn’t seem ridiculous at all. She managed to stop when she was in front of him, staring hard at his bindings. “How do I get them off?”

Spike blinked at her as though not following. “Not gonna put up a fight if you aim to do me in, pet.”

“Well, no. Obviously not.” Buffy hesitated, reaching gingerly for the chain. She didn’t know if her skin was recoiling in anticipation of pain or on instinct, if some part of her would have known the metal was blessed without direction. But it seemed better not to think on it if she was going to do what she was suddenly sure she was going to do.

“Buffy.” The alarm in Spike’s voice had her in knots all over again. “Don’t, sweetheart, it’ll—”

*Burn.* And it did. As though she had gripped fire itself. She yanked back at once, not realizing her fingers were coiled around the metal until the snap of it hitting the floor echoed through the air. The floor clear across the room. Buffy blinked, her mouth falling slack, and stared at the path the chain had taken as though that would somehow help her make sense of what had just happened.

“Bloody hell.” Spike was inspecting his freed wrists when she turned back to him, the flesh a bit red but looking to have been spared thanks to his shirt. It had probably killed him to stay still as long as he had, every movement a reminder, but from the look of things, she’d freed him of both cuffs in one go without even trying.

As though hearing the thought, he snickered and glanced up at her. “Dunno how you managed that without cleaving my hands off.”

“I don’t either,” she replied, then lowered her gaze to his feet. “Do you want me to... I can try to break those, too.”

She expected him to say no, that she should snoop around and try to find something to pick the lock apart the old-fashioned way. That would have been the smart response, at least, considering she literally had no idea how she’d broken the hand manacles as easily as she had. But Spike just nodded eagerly and stretched out his legs, his eyes dark.

“Don’t touch it direct,” he said. “Should be a shirt or something in the wardrobe over there.”

Buffy straightened and looked around to reacquaint herself with her surroundings. It was weird to think of Spike having a wardrobe, especially considering he had a rotation of maybe three outfits, but sure enough, there was a dresser with a selection of black tees stuffed inside the uppermost drawer. She pulled one free then wrapped it around her hand and wandered back over, considering how she would need to pull at the bindings to get them to fully give.

Again, though, it was simpler than it had any right to be, this time without the flare of pain. Either she was running on pure endorphins or whatever strength she’d had before had been amplified, and honestly, Buffy wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer. Didn’t know if her brain could handle it on top of everything else, the shock of waking as she had, of the looming reality crash waiting to smush her under its weight once she had a moment to truly consider what she had lost.

At the moment, though, she was famished.

Spike must have known, or it was all over her face, for the second he was properly free, he took a step toward her, placed a gentle hand at her back. “Let’s get you fed, pet.”

“I don’t want to eat anyone,” she replied, unable to keep her voice from shaking.

“Don’t have to. Got plenty of blood upstairs.”

Right. Of course he did. The pig’s blood or whatever he got from the butcher that he was always complaining lacked the zest of the real thing. Looked like she was about to find out for herself. Maybe if she was lucky, having nothing to compare it to would make it more palatable. Either way, Buffy nodded and started for the rungs that would lead to the top level. The same rungs she’d climbed what now felt like a lifetime ago. What, for her, *had* been a lifetime ago. She tried not to think about that, tried not to think about the world that existed outside of these walls, that was going to have only a passing resemblance to the world she’d lived in before. The people the same but the rules different. Everything different.

The thought jolted her through with panic, such that Buffy didn’t nudge the cap at the top of the ladder so much as shove it. The thing wrenched off its hinges and soared to the crypt ceiling, where it cracked and splintered, showering debris along Spike’s first floor. Buffy froze on the rungs, gaping, her chest tight and her head, while not pounding—no pulse to pound—spinning so fast she nearly lost her balance.

“Bloody hell,” she heard from below. “Always wondered about that.”

“About what?” she asked, voice shaking all the more.

“What happens to a slayer that’s turned. If they’re like the rest of us or...”

He didn't finish the thought. He didn't need to. There was so much packed there in that *or*. Buffy inhaled, experienced the feel of her lungs filling without the relief, and pushed on until she was crawling through the hole. Stumbling onto her feet, which seemed to move at a speed that her brain could not keep up with. She looked around, took in the more-familiar surroundings of this part of the crypt, not sure what to do or think when she saw it was just the same as ever before. That while everything in the world had changed, the world itself had not. And there was that sensation again, more acute now, more immediately identifiable as panic.

"So your plan," she said to Spike as he heaved himself up after her, "was to chain Dru up and try to convince me you love me by threatening to kill her."

"Not threatening, love. I'd've done it."

"And she knew."

"Turned the bloody cattle prod on me, so yeah."

Buffy closed her eyes as though that would help her steady herself. As though that would make it easier to find the anger that had to exist beneath the shock, the devastation, the slew of other words that were, quite frankly, not powerful enough to define what was going on inside of her head. "Did you know the whole time?"

"What's that?"

"Dru. When you took me on that decoy stakeout. Did you know Drusilla was in town then? Were you covering for her?"

"You asked me this already," he replied, his voice terse as though he had any right to be annoyed.

Fuck him. "Well, sorry for dying and forgetting. Next time I'll be sure to take notes. Maybe bring a tape recorder, make sure I don't put you through the inconvenience of repeating yourself."

"Buffy—"

"Just answer the question. Did you know?"

"*No*." The word came out harsh, a bark, and when she turned to face him, she caught the fire in his eyes. The resentment and regret, and the honesty most of all. Everything that hadn't been there in that other life when she'd asked him if he'd lured her out on a sneak date. "I swear it, Slayer, I had no sodding clue she was even in the country until after I got back from you ripping out my insides."

"Ripping out your insides?" she echoed, her anger not gone, just needing a new outlet. "Isn't that a little dramatic?"

"What would you call it?"

"A reality check. You got me out there on false pretenses."

"I did not," Spike shot back. "Learned there were a couple of pillocks picking off tourists and took you to where you could find them."

Buffy opened her mouth, frowned. Wait. "So that was legitimate?"

"Yes, it bloody was." He swelled up, all righteous indignation. "Was playing a hand of cards and a bloke was going on about these vamps who live on the out-of-towners. Families using the Hellmouth for a pitstop, come off the highway for a bite and the loo,

things like that. Since the snacks aren't local, no one makes a fuss when they go missing. Nice way to stay off the Slayer's radar, which you saw yourself they were keen to do, how fast they scarpered. Put like that, taking out a trainload didn't seem off, so I went to the trouble of beating a location outta someone and bringing it to you. The Slayer. To do your hero thing."

Buffy blinked, losing her grip on her anger. She had honestly not considered that Spike's time-waster field trip might have been in good faith. "I... Oh."

"Yeah, apology accepted."

"It wasn't just an attempt to trick me into a date?"

Spike broke his gaze from her at that, his own fire deflating. "Can't say I mind spending time with the woman I love, pet, even if she thinks I'm dirt, but I wouldn't have bloody said a thing about it, about any of it"—he gestured between the two of them in a fury—"if you hadn't come out and asked."

"Oh." And she wouldn't have come out and asked if she hadn't been so wiggled. If she'd been able to think about anything else since Dawn had dropped that bomb on her.

*And why is that, Buffy? Are you ready to be honest?*

Buffy licked her lips, glanced at the door. The door between her and the rest of the world with its rules and people and sacred callings, and she was a vampire now. *A vampire.* That nightmare that had dogged her for years had come to life. And she had no idea what to do beyond try to live through this minute to get to the next one. Her fears had always centered on what would happen to the people she loved if she became the sort of thing that preyed upon them—if she would go the way so many others had gone. There one second and not the next, their protector to their executioner. Never had she thought it'd be like this, Buffy brain and Buffy soul locked inside a vampire's body, and the steps ahead of her so unclear she couldn't even be sure they were there. Going to Giles seemed like the most obvious plan but what happened when she got there and needed an invitation to come inside? Would he even give her time to explain, or would he do what she'd always hoped he would do, and kill her before she could hurt anyone?

The idea didn't bring the comfort it once had, having graduated from hypothetical to reality. Buffy hugged herself. Was she really ready to *die* die? Would she just stand there and accept it, if her watcher came at her with a stake? She glanced at the pieces of the sewer lid that had splintered and cracked and shuddered again. Did she have any choice? If she could do something like that, shatter something without even trying, did that make her the sort of creature that needed to be put down just for everyone's safety? Would she even trust herself to fight back?

Her stomach cramped with another hunger pain, a hunger that seemed to spread to her bones, and she turned again and found Spike there, waiting, a packet of blood in his hands, then in hers. She didn't remember snatching it from him but she must have, for the next second the blood was in her mouth, her fanged mouth, coating her tongue and pouring down her throat and somehow both dulling and magnifying the ache in her belly. Like there, *good*, relief, only it was a greedy relief, satisfied only until the next swallow, and the one after that, and she couldn't stop. If she stopped, she'd die, and no,

no, she did not want to die. She didn't want this to be the end—didn't want to just not exist. Poof, no more Buffy. Just gone.

She'd already walked to her death once. The thought of doing that again...

Buffy somehow forced her fangs to slide free of the bag once she realized she'd drained the thing and was sucking down nothing but blood-flavored air. She felt a mess on her face, damp splatters that were starting to dry, and Spike still standing there, looking at her the way he had downstairs, wonder and uncertainty, heartache and fear, and when that surge came again, she felt no need to shove it back. The same she'd experienced in increments since Dawn had spilled the beans—that spark of excitement that she'd been so desperate to smother, to ignore, to believe didn't really exist but did, it did, because Spike had been her guilty pleasure fantasy for years now, and while he'd been her enemy it had been safe. A thing she could indulge in without getting into the morality of it because, as she'd learned in Walsh's class, thoughts were just thoughts. Fantasizing about Spike had been like fantasizing about winning the lottery—something that would never happen but was, on occasion, a fun what-if to visit. A Buffy in a different world, with different rules, reacting to a hot, dangerous guy the way she would have once upon a sacred calling.

"I need to go to Giles," she said, lowering the empty bag. "I need to... He'll know what to do."

"He'll try to stake you," Spike replied. His tone was matter of fact but hard. Not a question. Just the truth as he saw it.

"Maybe. Maybe not. He might let me explain before he brings out the weapons. I mean, I have my soul still." Though would he believe that? She almost didn't, herself. It seemed too...good. Too easy. But maybe that was the point. Whatever set the rules of the game in motion, slayers and watchers and vampires, had made certain that the Slayer would retain her humanity if turned. It was a not-small risk in her line of work, and look at how strong she was. The soul a nice failsafe, a way to keep everything in line. Make sure the Slayer didn't become a problem too great for the next slayer to best, maybe even with the expectation that she would walk into the sun of her own accord.

Actually, the more she thought of it, the more sense it made. Like way too much sense.

"And if he doesn't," Spike said, dragging her out of her thoughts, "if he comes at you with a stake, you'll just let him, won't you? Let that be the end."

"If you're asking if I'll fight him, the answer is no." She couldn't. Not like this—not while she didn't know her own strength. "I won't risk hurting him. Or worse."

"Buffy—"

"What happened here..." Buffy shook her head, wiped her hand along her mouth where she could feel the blood crusting. She didn't even want to think about what she looked like, and lucky for her, should she live to see tomorrow, her reflection was something she'd never have to worry about again. Though it seemed her fangs had receded. She didn't know she knew how to do that. Maybe it was instinct. "It's not...okay. What you did. What you were going to do, even if Drusilla hadn't—"

"Look, I—"

"No." She pressed a finger to his lips, trembling. "It's not okay. But I... You weren't

wrong. Back at the decoy lair.”

“Wasn’t a bloody decoy, I—”

“Spike. Shut up.”

“But—”

There was only one way to shut him up, she figured, so she did it with her mouth, swallowing whatever he was about to say and startling him into silence. It was supposed to be just a brief brush of her lips against his, but then something happened. Something unexpected, electric, and for the first time since opening her eyes downstairs, Buffy touched a sensation that wasn’t fear or pain or horror or empty. It was life itself, life as she hadn’t lived since a spell more than a year earlier when kissing him had lit her up from the inside and the world had, for a few hours, made the sort of sense it never had before. And before she could begin to question it or herself, Spike was growling into her, melting, seizing her by the upper arms and turning a simple kiss into something that was anything but simple. Something that was fire incarnate, flames warming her where she was cold, where she was dead, and Buffy surrendered. If she was going to go out and possibly die, then let her last minutes be this, be pure and good and without recrimination or shame, without the baggage she’d been hauling around so long she had absorbed its weight, not realizing it until it wasn’t there anymore. What did the past matter when the future didn’t exist? It didn’t. Nothing mattered except the moment she was living inside right now, and how not everything about her death had to be out of her control. She could have one thing that was hers—she could have this.

“Fuck, Buffy.” Spike tore his mouth from hers with a hard gasp, then began peppering kisses along her jaw and down her throat, along the place where Dru’s fangs had ended her human life, jolting her through another wild lightning spark powerful enough to jumpstart her heart. Buffy whimpered and tipped her head back, clutching him to her, her fingers in his hair, breaking through the gel that held it prisoner, her other hand vising around his upper arm, and the floor was moving beneath her, tumbling back, and then she was pressed against something, a wall, and Spike was still kissing her, his lips skating across her collarbone as he shoved the jacket she’d selected a lifetime ago down her arms. The cool crypt air whispered along her skin but a good whisper, like Spike’s mouth wandering between her breasts as he fisted the material of her shirt. And if there was a time to pull the brakes, it was now. Pressed between a mausoleum wall and a vampire, bucking wildly against the steely hardness at her stomach, knowing what was coming and little else, but it felt too good to stop. To rein herself in. And again, last minutes here, so might as well make the most of them. Might as well wiggle when he tugged at her pants, start fumbling with his belt so she could feel more of that hardness that she had long since tried to forget but couldn’t, because, well, *Spike*, and *yes*, she wanted and *yes*, it felt so good to give in. To not care. To live for herself these last.

“Bloody hell, Buffy,” Spike whispered, her shirt bunched over her breasts and his mouth skimming along the skin just above her bra. “Tell me you want this.” He didn’t give her time to think before the cup of her bra was a thing of the past and his tongue was doing unholy things to her nipple. “Tell me you want *me*.”

“I do. I want you.”

“Sorry, who?” He glanced up at her, grinning as broadly as he could with his mouth around her breast, and god, she could feel it—the want, *his* want, like it was a physical thing. A magnetic force that was suddenly everywhere, throbbing beneath her skin, pulling her deeper into his orbit, and how badly that pull needed its other half. How much it meant to him to hear that it wasn’t reaching out to nothing at all. And that was all he’d asked for before, wasn’t it? Not love and devotion, not a date, not even a kiss, just the admission that something was there, that it wasn’t one-sided, that not only did this other magnet half exist, but she could feel its power, even if she never intended to do anything about it.

*There’s something between us. Heat. Desire. Admit you feel it, too. Admit I’m not alone in this.*

“Spike,” Buffy choked out. “I want you. *Spike.*”

The storm behind his eyes somehow darkened and lightened at the same time. Then he closed those eyes, released her breast with something between a gasp and a sob, bowed his head against her chest for a heartbeat, then another. Then he exploded into motion once more and was suddenly everywhere. His mouth back on hers, along her neck, sucking her nipples, kissing along her shoulders, his hands in her hair, cupping her cheeks, palming her breasts, stroking her stomach, pulling at her slacks, and maybe it was mutual, for Buffy didn’t remember pulling his belt free or unzipping his fly, didn’t remember wrapping her hand around the hard length of him, just looked down a second later and saw him there in her fist, long and thick and good god, no wonder he was such a cocky asshole. A whimper scratched at her throat—he pressed his lips against it the next second as though to soothe her—and she had to feel more of him. She pulled on him and watched—*I am touching Spike’s penis, ohmigod, Spike’s penis is in my hand*—as the skin shifted along the shaft, then rolled all the way back to expose the head, plump and damp and she wanted it in her mouth, which was a thought Buffy Summers had yet to experience when it came to sex, but she *wanted it in her mouth*. And maybe she said something, maybe she whimpered again, maybe she licked her lips, for Spike was groaning anew, like he was in the best kind of pain, and then he was there, slipping over her wet flesh and *holy cow*, she jolted, laughed, shook her head because she hadn’t realized how soaked she was until he dragged his finger along the seam of her pussy and made her want to die all over again.

“Oh god,” Buffy gasped, bucking against his hand, needing more, desperate for more, and he grinned like the villain he was, drew back and nipped along her chin, her cheek, and whispered into her ear that he’d always known she’d be wet for him. How he’d smell it on her, her heat and fire, how arguing with him turned her on and that was one of the reasons he enjoyed it so much. That the day they’d fought in the sun, she’d nearly gotten herself shagged against a light pole because she’d been hot for it then. Spitting nails mad but ready and wanting and *don’t even try to deny it, Slayer, you’re one of us now. The nose doesn’t lie*. And she hated how much she wanted him knowing he knew that, her dirty little secret not so secret after all, and he must have sensed the thought for he chuckled and wet his finger along her folds, then pushed inside of her before she could come up

with a response that wasn't pathetic.

"Christ, love." Spike shuddered, dropping his head to her shoulder and beginning to pump. "The way you grip me."

"Even better when I have more to grip."

"More. That what you want?" He pulled back to catch her eyes, that grin in place once more, then pulled out of her entirely, earning a grunt, to lick her off his skin, earning a mewl, then sucked his middle and ring fingers into his mouth as well, all while holding her gaze, deep and intense, before he was stroking her pussy again, spearing her with two, then three, and sighing when she clenched.

"You're gonna bloody break me," he whispered.

"I don't want to break you."

"Oh Slayer, please try." Spike slid his fingers free again, again made a show of licking them clean, his eyes rolling up in his head, his expression both obscene and so hot her bones threatened to melt. But then he was reaching between them again, covering her hand with his to guide his cock where they both wanted it, taking time to rub the head along her clit, only there was no smirk this time when she whimpered, just a trembling breath and a low groan of his own. He dragged himself down her slit then and finally, finally, was there where she wanted him, where she needed him, and he was telling her again, "Break me," and then she was full of him. One second not, then Spike inside of her, one with her, and swearing a litany into her skin that she both understood and didn't, because it was her litany too. And then he was thrusting, pulling back and pushing in, and something inside of her snapped. Something primal. Something she didn't realize needed to snap until it was gone, and she was clawing at him, scratching at his skin, biting at whatever part of him she could reach with her mouth, bucking her hips to reclaim his cock every time he drew back, fighting him for it, because it was hers. He was hers. He didn't get to give it to her then take it back. And she told him so, snarled it, and he nodded, glassy eyed and earnest, *hers, hers, hers, always hers, forever*, which was not just a word anymore but a promise. Spike pounding into her, slamming her between the crypt wall and the wall that was him, thrusting, fucking, making her tremble and gasp and want to live even more than she already did. Because how fair would it be to die after just realizing this was possible? That she could claw and howl and be a true animal, no more worrying about being too strong, clenching too tight, being too *Buffy*, for every time she tightened around him, Spike nodded and gasped and begged, "More, give me more, oh god, make it hurt," and gripping her so tight she knew he meant it. His hands on her hips, fingers digging into her skin, guiding her in a frenzy up and down his cock as much as she would let him, and loving when she didn't. When she fought for a rhythm of her own.

"Gotta feel it," Spike whispered along her neck, his rough voice somehow reaching her over the wet smacks of their bodies, their mutual whimpers, before he licked her where Dru had condemned her. "Fucking strangle me with that cunt, baby."

"What—"

But then she understood, for her body wasn't just fire anymore—it was a supernova. A blinding freefall of pure fucking ecstasy, blazing hot and endless and *oh god*, and he was

growling into her throat, vibrating the sensation of his fangs, and she was screaming and bucking and clutching and spasming, and he drank and thrust and fucked and drank some more, and each pull of his mouth seemed connected to her clit, her heart, in her everything. It was ecstasy beyond the definition, beyond anything she'd ever experienced, pure and all-encompassing, and she had to wonder, as he moaned and emptied inside of her, if he felt it too. If this was what he always felt. If this was what living as a vampire was truly like, and if so, why no one had bothered to tell her.

*Getting killed made me feel alive for the very first time.*

"Fuck, you're perfect." Spike was licking her neck now, making her shiver anew. "You're perfect."

"Spike—"

"Perfect. My perfect." He stilled for a second, panting, his own body somehow liquid against her and solid at the same time. But that was Spike all over, occupying dichotomies. Making her question, making her crazy, making her want.

Making her feel things she shouldn't feel. Think things she shouldn't think. Do things...

She'd meant to shut him up with a kiss and had ended up letting him fuck her against the wall, and her greatest regret at the moment was it might never happen again, for she was still a vampire, still the Slayer too, and she had to face that, whatever it meant.

"You're gonna try to walk outta here still, aren't you?" he asked a moment later, sounding as broken as she felt.

Buffy pressed her eyes closed, nodded. "I have to."

"Says who?"

"I can't... Spike, I *can't*." She placed her hands on his chest to push him away but thought better of it, not ready to forgo the connection, the feel of him inside of her, not as full as before but not soft, either. "But you were right. Obviously. You were right."

"About what?"

"That there is something between us."

He went so still she couldn't help but steal a peek, for some reason needing to see the *well dub* look on his face. "Yeah," he said dryly. "Caught that when you jumped me."

"I did not jump you. There was no jumping." Only she had and they both knew it. Buffy shook her head. "I just...wanted you to know that I knew. That...I didn't want it to be true because, well..."

To her surprise, he grinned and nodded, then leaned in and whispered a kiss against her lips. "Didn't want it to be true, either," he murmured. "When it first hit me. Did everything I could to fight it. Wasn't like I hadn't had dreams about you before, but..."

"Dreams?"

"Oh yeah. All sorts of filthy dreams." He nudged her brow with his. "Tellin' me I'm alone in that? You never dreamed about beating me with your fists until they were tired so you had no choice but to punish me with that cunt instead?"

Buffy trembled, which made him moan and stretch within her, and made her resolve to walk out the door drift even further away than it had been before. "I might have had

dreams about us like that,” she admitted softly. “Constantly.”

That grin of his should be illegal. “Yeah?”

“Well, when you’re a slayer with a well-established vampire fetish, it’s not much of a stretch.” Buffy rolled her head back against the crypt wall. “It just... It was one thing when it was just a weird little guilty pleasure thing that had no chance of happening. When there was a chance of it happening...”

“Mm-hmm.” Spike nuzzled her throat, the new, throbbly place where his fangs had shot her into nirvana. “Becomes all the more real.”

Another one of those hard, full-body trembles seized her, and she clenched around his cock on instinct, moaned when it twitched and swelled, then moaned again when he began to move. Not much, just slow, shallow thrusts, lazy almost, like they had all the time in the world. And they didn’t. This was supposed to be goodbye—be over. She was supposed to be walking to her potential death, albeit on wobbly legs, with one glorious *fuck it* memory to carry her to the ever-after. She was supposed to be doing anything other than what she was doing.

“Spike...”

“Not yet.” He dragged his blunt teeth over the other side of her neck. “Just a little while longer.”

“That your plan? Fuck me until I forget?”

“Sounds better than yours, doesn’t it?” He pulled back then, all the way back, his cock slipping free of her, and she whimpered without meaning to, reached for him also without meaning to, and rolled her hips at him without meaning to as he dropped to his knees, as though she could catch him on the way down. It didn’t occur to her that *down* was a good direction until he had taken one of her trembling legs and positioned it over his shoulder, bringing his face flush with her wet, aching sex. “If you’re that dead-set on dying, pet, gonna try to give you something to live for.”

“Wh-what?”

“And if I can’t convince you, I’m sure as hell not gonna let you walk outta here without knowing how this pussy tastes.” He slipped two fingers inside of her, made a hook motion that about turned her to jelly, then favored her clit with a long, lavish lick that left them both gasping. “Christ, pet, you can’t condemn me to an eternity without this.”

“I don’t—”

“Tell you what. If you’re so bloody dead-set on marching to your death, I’ll tag along. You might be shy about throwing a punch to save your skin, but I’m not.”

Something in her chest pulled at the thought. “It’ll hurt.”

“It’ll be worth it.” Spike closed his mouth around her clit and sucked, and Buffy would have melted into a puddle if he weren’t there holding her up. Keeping her in place. Working his fingers inside of her and doing more dark magic with his tongue, and for the first time, the first real time, she thought maybe. *Maybe*.

Yes, she needed to face what had happened, but maybe it wasn’t the end. Maybe it wouldn’t mean her real and true and permanent death. Maybe if Spike was with her... Maybe.

“I’ll make it good, Buffy,” Spike promised thickly, looking up at her, his eyes full of heat and love, of fealty that she didn’t understand but had decided not to question anymore. It was just him, who he was, and who he had always been. A devotion to the person he loved that had somehow become hers, and since it was hers, that made it her choice how to use it. “Just let me.”

It would be easier, maybe, to say no, but infinitely braver to say yes.

So she said yes.