

REDEFINITION

HOLLY DENISE



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DAY EIGHT

The most frustrating thing about being a vampire was the vocabulary. Specifically, how to tell the human staff at the human hospital that your human mother was in trouble. That yes, you know she looks fine and her tests are coming back normal, and there's outwardly no reason to believe something is wrong, but check again because something very much is. Sure, it would help if you could name the wrong thing or describe it in any way, but you can't. All you know is something smells off. Way off. But just to you—not to your vampire boyfriend who stands at your side while you scream and rail against the medical staff, supportive and believing you but not smelling the wrong thing. Because when he was turned, he was a normal human like the rest of them. Not a slayer.

Not *the* Slayer.

"I'm telling you, you send her home, and she will die," Buffy said for what felt like the millionth time, her voice hoarse and her throat dry, and every freaking nerve ridden raw. If Spike hadn't been there, she was sure she would have lost the tenuous grip she currently held on her control, vamped out in earnest and started ripping through doctors until she found one willing to listen. And then probably killed that doctor too because of the whole *control* thing. She hadn't been a vampire that long—just over a week—and her senses had not entirely adjusted. Standing in the midst of all this fluorescent awful, the chemical burn of industrial strength cleaner in her nostrils—which was somehow still not strong enough to override the siren scent of blood attacking her from pretty much every angle—was testing every ounce of willpower she possessed. Add to the fact that the staff kept telling her things like, "Scans are normal" and "She's saying she feels fine," and there was every chance she might just chuck someone out a window to make an example of them.

"I understand you're concerned," some nice labcoat was telling her now. Not the same doctor who had initially given her mother the all-clear—he was on vacation, apparently—but a different guy who managed to look the exact same. "It's very common to feel uneasy, or worry after going through an ordeal like what your family just went through, but we would not have discharged her if we weren't confident that the danger was over."

"But you could be wrong," Buffy insisted. *You are wrong*, she added silently—the sort of *silent* she figured Spike could hear loud and clear from the look he gave her. Still, he didn't argue, just favored her with a nod that chased away the admittedly quiet but very present nagging doubt that she was overreacting. "There's a whole list of things in her discharge papers that go over possible post-op risks. I'm telling you, one of those things is going to happen."

"Right," Spike said, startling her out of her rant headspace. "You got malpractice insurance, don't you, mate?"

The doctor stiffened. "What are you implying?"

"Well, that if you discharge the lady against her will while she's complaining about headaches, I reckon that's the sort of thing that might come up in a suit, is all."

"She hasn't complained about headaches," the doctor replied. "She has said repeatedly that she feels fine. That the entire reason she is here is because her daughter had a

premonition and insisted. And while I respect that—”

“She hasn’t complained?” Spike affected a frown and glanced at Buffy. “Could’ve sworn I heard her say her head was giving her fits. What about you, love?”

There were times Buffy was slow on the uptake. This was not one of those times. “Yeah, I think you might be confusing her with another patient,” she said. “Because it was my mother’s idea to come here. She said her head was hurting more than she was told it would. If you’re going to insist that she goes home, well, I think we need to make sure you write down that my mom requested additional tests and you refused. Just so we’re clear if anything happens.”

The doctor didn’t reply—not at first, at least. Rather, he studied them for a long beat, his expression somewhere between frustrated and sympathetic, the latter of which Buffy couldn’t abide. It aggravated the demon that lived under her skin, filled her with all sorts of impulses and sensations she had yet to identify, much less master. So far as she knew, she was the only vampire who had risen with her soul intact, and therefore the only vampire who had ever had to navigate occupying a body that thrived on instincts at odds with her sensibilities.

Case in point—what Buffy wanted to do was tear at the doctor with tooth and fang until he cried uncle and agreed to watch her mom like the proverbial hawk. He refused to just accept that Buffy knew something was wrong without asking stupid questions or wasting time. This whole strategic threat-making business might be effective but it also kept her from her mother’s side. Her mother who needed medical attention and no, Buffy didn’t know how she knew something was going to go wrong, she just did. Just like she’d once known an earthquake meant apocalypse, that her first roommate had been evil, that Sid the puppet had more going on behind his painted eyes. The feeling might not stem from the same place but it carried the same conviction.

Just one of the special new powers she had courtesy of Drusilla.

Her sire.



Day One

She could hear his heartbeat, a steady *thu-thump, thu-thump, thu-thump* that made her mouth feel strangely sore and her teeth itch. Spike had told her this would happen but she hadn’t understood, not really, until she’d been on the other side of the door. Until Giles had been staring at her, first with relief, then with bemusement, and finally with horror when she’d pointedly asked if he could invite her in.

“Don’t go reaching for your crossbow, Watcher,” Spike had said, snagging him around the wrist and holding firm. “She’s all right.”

“All right?” he’d echoed, staring at her with a mixture of dismay and heartbreak that had made every bad thing Buffy had felt since waking up seem even realer than before. “She’s... She’s...”

“Standing right there, for one, and her hearing’s bloody aces.”

Giles had swallowed, the sound offensively loud and wet, drawing her attention to his throat. His very human throat with all that blood rushing just beneath the surface. “How did this happen?” he’d asked hoarsely. “Buffy...”

There had been a reason to bring Spike, and not just because he had volunteered. Or that he was apparently in love with her. He was able to do what she couldn’t—put words to the events of the last few hours. Detail just how quickly her life had turned on its head. More than that. Had ended. Because Buffy wasn’t alive anymore.

Buffy was, however, seated in her watcher’s living room, not on the safe side of the door sans invite. She was holding Spike’s hand, too, less because of what had happened between them before they’d left his crypt and more because she trusted he would keep her from doing something unforgivable, like lunging across the room and sinking her new fangs into the soft tissue of said watcher’s throat. The blood Spike had given her before had taken the edge off, but not much. Not enough that her rampant hunger wasn’t an issue.

“There have been rumors,” Giles was saying now, seated, though with the crossbow within reach. “Within the Council itself, that is, that slayers may retain their souls if they are turned. It’s just not something we have been in a position to confirm since written records began.” His lips twitched as though he were trying for a smile but didn’t get further than that. There wasn’t much to smile about. “The most popular theory suggests that a sired slayer would be damn near impossible to subdue, much less... And as such, a danger unlike most others this world sees. Retaining her humanity would allow her to understand that life as a vampire is not a life at all. She would either meet the sun of her own accord or not resist the Council’s efforts to...manage the situation.”

Manage the situation. A nice, tidy way of saying *put her down*. Humanely, of course, for their own good, of course, better for everyone, of course, never mind what the slayer in question had been through, who she was leaving behind, or anything beyond the scope of her fangs. It made sense that sired slayers would be expected to submit to death. Such was the way of things.

“Which means the Council can never know,” Giles went on. “It would have been slightly easier if we hadn’t just invited them back into our lives, but I believe we can keep this quiet.”

“You do?” Buffy asked, glancing at Spike. Somehow, since she’d awakened, he’d become the arbiter of truth. Another sign that her world was upside down.

“As a watcher in their employ, I keep them apprised of the situation here on the ground, same as I did before,” Giles replied. “In fact, it is a condition of my employment that I let them know should anything arise that in any way compromises the Council’s principles and objectives. However, since they departed, communication with the Council has been much less hands-on than it was in the first years we worked together, I believe due to a combination of their internal restructuring in the time since and their fear that you would again suspend communication with them should they overstep.”

“You just said a lot of words and I don’t think I understood any of them beyond knowing they’re English.”

“Wankers changed up the way they operate since you called it quits,” Spike jumped in. “Probably not hard to change back but they’d have to want it first, and people have a habit of getting comfortable in their routines. It’s what makes them so easy to hunt.”

Giles’s expression darkened. “Yes, well, your monstrous observations notwithstanding—”

“No, I think I get it,” Buffy said. And she did—it made sense. Spike was right. Change was the number one constant in life and still the thing that most everyone resisted in some fashion, even if the change was in a familiar direction. They were used to being left in the dark now, and even though the door had been reopened, that didn’t mean they would immediately acclimate to the light. “As far as the Council is concerned, it’s business as usual on the Hellmouth.” She let the thought sit with all its absurdity, then nodded. “All right. So...what now? Do we tell the others? I guess that’s a stupid question. ‘Say, Buffy, wanna hit the beach? You’ve been looking awfully pale.’”

“It is of course up to you,” Giles said as though it were obvious. But it wasn’t obvious—nothing was to her anymore. “That said, I do not see how something like this can remain secret for long.”

Neither had Buffy, despite however much she might have wished otherwise. There wasn’t enough time in the world for her to adjust to what had happened, grow accustomed to the new feel of her skin, her muscles, her body that didn’t look different but was. But it didn’t need to come all at once. She could start slow, ease herself into letting the world know that Buffy Summers had changed. The most important people first—Mom and Dawn. Then, on her own time, she could reach out to the others and hope their relationships were strong enough to survive what had happened.

That *she* was strong enough to survive it.

She didn’t even have to ask Spike if he’d come with her as she relayed the news to her mom. He was just there, standing when she stood, nodding, ready to follow. Ready to be whatever she needed.

It was nice. And strange. But somehow it also felt right.

Buffy might not know what that meant at the time, but she was grateful. The one bit of her world that wasn’t in a tailspin.

Considering where she’d started the day, she’d come pretty damn far. The rest of the journey wouldn’t be easy, but doable so long as she measured her speed. Gave herself plenty of time to prepare before tackling the next leg.

One step at a time.



Day Eight

It was true that her mother hadn’t been all that enthusiastic about coming back to the hospital, and Buffy couldn’t blame her. She wouldn’t have wanted to come back under any circumstance, herself, especially considering the extremely shaky ground her control was on these days. Little more than a week had passed since Drusilla’s transformative trip

through town and everyone was still trying to figure out how to negotiate life now that it looked, well, like this. There were things that Buffy had gotten used to a lot faster than she would have guessed—like adding blood to her daily meals—and other things that were taking more time than she could bear.

The being around people thing, for one. She could do a single person, maybe two, and only trusted herself if Spike was in the room with her. Not because he had a prayer's chance of stopping her should she go all fangy, but he could probably slow her down long enough that her human senses would have a chance to reclaim the wheel. Coming to the hospital had been one of those things that fell outside of her control—she'd just known what she smelled, even if she was the only person who could, and trusted the gut instinct that screamed at her to get her mom back under a doctor's care.

Even if that meant *this*—these offensive lights and more offensive odors, the industrial-strength cleaning supplies combating the stench of sickness and death. But *death* was what had brought her here—that specific smell had been growing thicker around her mom, and though Spike couldn't smell it, he'd trusted it was there. Said it was likely one of the upgrades that came with being a vampire *and* a slayer, someone who was trained to sense and prevent and cause death, master it the way she had, understanding when it was around the corner.

The fact that the tests they'd run so far didn't indicate trouble on the horizon was incidental. And thankfully, when Buffy returned to her room with the doctor in tow, insisting that her mother had indeed been complaining about severe head pains, Joyce had picked up the thread and run with it. Changed the story from, "My daughter was worried and wanted me to get looked at," to "My head is throbbing, why aren't you taking this seriously?" much to the doctor's exasperation. Maybe sometime down the line, Buffy would feel bad about that. Maybe. She'd reevaluate once the death smell had gone away.

"Buffy, if nothing comes of this, I am going to have a massive bill for no reason," Joyce said once the doctor had left. Buffy was hovering near the door, figuring it was the safest place for everyone in the room. The scents nearer the hall were less appetizing than the warm blood pumping away under her mother's skin. "This on top of the other bills which, let's be clear, are not insignificant. Even with insurance, it's very expensive to be sick in this country."

"How expensive?" she asked, not wanting to know but needing it all the same.

"How certain are you?" Joyce fired back.

"As certain as I can be." Buffy glanced at Spike. "It's hard to explain. Just...right now, with you, I smell something that I only ever smell on patrol. In cemeteries. And it's just you—not Dawn or the others."

"Then it sounds like here is exactly where I need to be." Joyce offered a small smile. "Even if it's the last place in the world I *want* to be."

"I know. Me too." Though for very different reasons. Buffy's stomach churned and the vaguely sick feeling she'd been battling ever since crossing into this building resurged. The option was there not to breathe, and she tried to cash in on it as much as possible, but it was hard to fight human instinct even if she was in an inhuman body. Plus, every time she

opened her mouth to speak, the taste of the place flooded her senses, intentional breathing or no. Then she'd try to focus on the smells that weren't so offensive to keep from losing her lunch, which was no good because *those* smells were attached to the people.

"Need a moment, Slayer?" Spike asked, pushing off the wall by her mom's bed. He just did things like that now—looked at her and understood whatever was going through her mind, anticipated when she'd stretched herself to the limit and when she should step back. It was the sort of thing that would annoy the crap out of her if she weren't so thankful for it. Someone else to hit the brakes and decide when it was time to clear her head and refocus.

"Yeah," Buffy said, rubbing her arms. "Might be good to get some...not hospital air."

"You should call Willow and make sure Dawn isn't driving her up the wall," her mom suggested. "You know how she gets."

"I know how you coddle her, is more like."

"Buffy."

Buffy brought up her hands, full surrender. "Fine, fine. I'll make sure the terrorist isn't terrorizing." And that nothing had come up where Glory was concerned, because now would definitely be the time for the apocalypse clock to start ticking down. Mom in the hospital, Buffy still wrestling with the new set of powers and the aggravating limitations that came with them. If Glory knew half of what had happened in the last few days, she would almost certainly have made a move. Now was the time to do it.

"It's not nice to call your sister a terrorist," Joyce called after her as she stepped into the hallway.

"It's not nice for her to be one, either," Buffy called back, catching the smirk on Spike's face as he made to follow.

She knew where she was going this time—down to the connecting hall, then further down until she found the door that led to the interior stairwell. The hospital wasn't a towering structure, but it had a few levels to it, with Joyce's room being on one of the upper floors. And for that, Buffy was glad, for it added space to the stairwell, made her feel a little less boxed in, like she could move in more than one direction without encountering a wall of smells that tickled her inner monster. And if she really needed to, there was always the nuclear option of hurling herself over the railing so she could hit the ground and therein the sewers within a matter of seconds.

"You all right?" Spike asked the second they were alone.

"My willpower between breaks is going way down," she replied. She didn't turn until she heard the *click* of the door closing—until she was certain there was at least one barrier—two, counting Spike—between her and the more appetizing of the hospital smells. "I don't get it. I don't get how I can be so repulsed and so hungry at the same time. Like...this place... How do you stand it?"

"You're young. Just one of those things you learn to shut off if you last long enough."

"You realize that is the least helpful advice you could possibly impart."

"Not like I have a load of practical experience trying to resist temptation, pet," Spike replied, stepping toward her, and doing that body-rakey thing with his eyes that had once

begged to be answered with a nose punch and now had her pressing her thighs together. Of everything that had changed over the last week, her relationship with Spike managed to somehow be the most and least surprising development. How she'd left her home for the last time still bristling from his attempted love confession and determined to make sure the wall between them was permanent and unscalable. How she'd woken up in his crypt, his screams ringing through the air, Dru coming close, fangs touching her throat, and Spike thrashing against smoking bonds, begging Dru not to do what she had come to Sunnydale to do. Both of them knowing it was no good, that Drusilla couldn't be reasoned with, and then the heavy, inky black that had followed.

Spike's horror and grief had, strangely, made the whole *waking up dead* thing easier to bear. Knowing that he hadn't wanted what had happened, that he had fought as hard as he could, that he understood what it meant to her, becoming the thing she hunted... She couldn't explain it. Just that something in his reaction had grounded her.

It had been a strange in-between, that first hour or so. Buffy disconnected from the life she'd known, the life she'd thought was hers, and navigating this space that was new and frightening, human and not, realizing how badly she wanted to live now that the choice had been stripped from her. The death wish that Spike had taunted her about just weeks prior realized in horrible, ugly technicolor, only she hadn't been ready.

She also hadn't been honest with herself. Or him. And she hadn't known whether she'd get a chance to explain the whole *soul* thing to Giles before he pulled the trigger on his crossbow, so she'd decided to embrace that reckless abandon that had once defined her and leaped into Spike's arms. If she was going to walk to her death, her last memory could at least be a happy one.

Somehow that last memory had become less a memory and more...*this*. Her everyday. Spike looking at her like he wanted to devour her—and he did, he'd proven it—and doing his part to make the harsh corners of her world go soft, her focus narrowing to the point the smells and sensations and worries that haunted her became too fuzzy to consider.

And right now, there was a question in his eyes. A question he already had the answer to, but would wait for her to give him nonetheless.

"Distract me," Buffy whispered, and the next thing she knew, she was against his chest, in his arms, his mouth on her and one of his hands tangled in her hair. And he was all she could smell or taste, feel or breathe, and her back was pressed against the stairwell wall and he was doing things with his tongue that she still thought a little too *super* to be run-of-the-mill supernatural.

"I love you," Spike whispered against her lips before dragging his own down her throat, making her skin sing, making her feel the sort of warmth that she associated with living. "God, how I love you."

Buffy sighed, slipping a hand between them to pull at his belt. "Less tell, more show."

He grinned up at her, his expression pure sin. "Bossy bitch."

"I'm waiting."

"Perish the thought."

And then his mouth was on her again, and whatever retort she might have fired back

flew out of her mind.

He was really, really good at *show*.



Day One

It didn't hit her, not really, the magnitude of what she'd lost until she realized that she couldn't stay in her own house. Not with her mom and sister crowding her with their horror-slash-concern-slash-curiosity, not listening to her—not understanding, really—when she asked, begged, pleaded with them to give her space. There was just no good way to tell someone that they smelled like food, especially when she knew one slip of control could cost her more than the life Drusilla had stolen.

Beyond not understanding that the scent of their rich, pumping blood was wreaking havoc on Buffy's warring instincts, both Dawn and Joyce took the *vampire* news with a lot more grace and a lot less concern than she would have expected. But maybe that was just a byproduct of Spike being around all the time—they didn't see what the big deal was. Well, Dawn more so. Joyce seemed to be brave-facing it. Resigned to the knowledge there was really nothing that could be done and that displaying upset would just make a bad situation worse, and at Buffy's expense, no less.

So that was good. Mom and Dawn not wiggling out helped Buffy feel a bit more grounded, a bit less like she'd just lost everything. Yes, there would be an adjustment and yes, that adjustment would be hard, but harder than any of the other adjustments she'd faced? Harder than going from a carefree schoolgirl to super-strong demon fighter overnight? At least her paradigm hadn't completely shifted off its axis this time. She didn't have to redefine the world, start second-guessing whether there actually had ever been monsters under her bed. She just needed to wrap her mind around the whole *no more sun* thing. The immortality thing. The blood-drinking thing.

But at her own pace. She wasn't about to let herself stay in a situation when she felt this out of control. So rather than draping blankets over her bedroom window, Buffy asked Spike if she could go back to his crypt. The only place she'd been since awakening that felt safe—safe for others. Safe from her.

The door closed them off from the rest of the world, and for a moment, Buffy stood staring at the place where, just hours earlier, she'd admitted he was right. That there was something between them. That she wanted him. That he'd been inside of her, fucking her against that mausoleum wall, letting her experience one last good thing before she potentially walked to her permanent death.

Except she hadn't died a permanent death. And she'd all but insisted on coming back with him. To this place that still smelled of sex. More daunting now than it had been when she'd believed... Well...

Shit.

"Umm, Spike?" Buffy braced herself and turned around. If she was going to do this, she needed to look at him directly while she did. Even if, through a certain lens, all of

this could be viewed as his fault, he'd done nothing but provide support ever since she'd woken up. And she wasn't all that interested in that lens, anyway. Giles probably would be once the dust settled, and that Xander would be was a given, but that wasn't fair to Spike. All he'd done was love her.

And he did love her. If nothing else, the last day had proven it. Might not be love as she understood it, but it was real.

When she met his eyes, she found him regarding her with something between resignation and acceptance. But he didn't speak. Just waited. Not going to go out of his way to make this easy on her. She had the stage.

"With what...happened earlier..." Buffy waved at the wall, experienced the odd sensation of blushing without pumping blood. Phantom heat in her cheeks instead of the real thing. "I... I want you to know that everything I said and...I don't regret that we... What we did."

The corner of Spike's mouth twitched. "Reckon there's a *but* in there somewhere, yeah?"

"Not a *but*. Maybe a *however*?" She tried for a smile that she didn't feel, her chest clenching in the place her heart was used to beating. "I just don't... I don't think it's a good idea to get...involved right now. I am barely holding on and trying on a new relationship while getting used to the idea of being freshly undead is probably just... It's just not a good idea. I don't know what I'm feeling or—"

He sucked in his cheeks and nodded. "I hear you. Not saying never, just not now."

The words were the right words but the tone didn't match. "Exactly."

"And you meant it earlier. When you said there is something there." Spike inclined his head toward the wall. "That I wasn't off my rocker at feeling what I feel. You feel it too."

"I—"

"Not love, but you fancy me. Have for a while now."

Buffy parted her lips to respond but her voice didn't cooperate. It was both true and not true—an oversimplification of feelings too complex and contradictory and overwhelming to begin to parse apart. In the end, nodding was the easiest answer.

It was also the one he was prepared for. "Yeah," Spike said. "It was just a mite easier to mean it when you thought you were heading off to your proper death, I expect."

"That's not fair."

"No, it's not. But it's the truth, innit? You were happy to have me so long as you didn't have to live with it after."

"Spike, that's..." She closed her eyes to ground herself, wishing so hard for clarity that the wish became an ache. "It's just a lot, okay? I'm sorry that it's not what you want. But I can't... I just *can't* right now. I'm not saying that it was wrong or a mistake. It wasn't. That...*you*...saved my life. You really did. But I don't know what life looks like and that terrifies me."

Spike didn't say anything for a long beat—didn't do anything, either. Just stood and regarded her with an infuriatingly inscrutable expression, way too closed off for her taste. Then, finally, he sighed, and something seemed to roll off him. "Sorry, pet," he said,

scuffing the bottom of his boot along the stone floor. "I'm a plonker."

"A what?"

"All this..." He blinked hard and gestured at the space that surrounded them. "My doing, right? All of it is."

"You didn't make Drusilla do what she did."

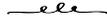
"No, but I'm the reason she came here. The reason she sniffed you out. Put you in my bed." Spike sighed and ran a hand over his head, and she tried—she really did—not to think about how easily the gel had cracked between her fingers, how soft that hair was in truth. "Slayer... I'm not a good man, but I'm your man. However you want me, if you want me at all. I'm yours. Entirely yours."

Oh god, she could not do this now. "Spike...that's..." Too much. Overwhelming. "I don't need you to be mine."

"Not a matter of need, just the state of things." He met her gaze again, his smile sad. "Seems I recall Dru made a mess and I don't wager you'll wanna sleep with grave dirt, so hold tight here and I'll get the bed all nice for you."

She watched him walk away, head toward the hatch that led to the place where she'd died and been reborn. Wondering if she ought to leave but knowing she couldn't. She had nowhere to go. No time to get to LA before the sun rose and she didn't trust herself on the journey, anyway, considering her options were the bus or stealing her mom's SUV, and she wasn't even sure she knew where Angel's new place was. Even less sure she wanted to see him, that she could stand the look on his face when he realized what had become of her.

No, this was her best bet. In this crypt with the vampire who loved her, who *was* hers, no matter how terrifying the thought.



Day Eight

"Tell me you love it," he rasped into her ear, digging his fingers into the flesh of her ass as he leveraged her into his thrusts. "Tell me you love how I make you feel."

Buffy curled her hand around the back of his neck, using the leg she had curved around his waist to pull him deeper. Felt the way he shuddered, the soft moan that rasped against her skin which he chased with a growl. "I love it," she gasped, not meaning to but unable to stop. It was the truth. If nothing else, he had earned her honesty. "I love it."

"What do you love, baby?" His mouth was on her throat now, teasing over the place he'd last bit into her. "You love this cock?"

"Spike..."

"That's my name, not an answer." She could hear his grin even if she couldn't see it, feel the curve of his lips. "Tell me, sweet. Tell me you love the way I fuck you with this cock."

"Oh god."

"Good girls answer questions when they're asked, Slayer. Are you my good girl?"

Buffy tipped her head back with a soft mewl. She was fairly certain good girls didn't do what she was doing, didn't sneak off into stairwells so their boyfriend could fuck all violent, vampiric thoughts out of their brain, but hey, maybe she'd been doing the whole *good girl* thing wrong this entire time. She'd have to circle back to that.

"Does my good girl love the way I fuck her sweet pussy?"

Yes, yes she did, because in those moments she felt alive—felt her veins warm, felt hot all over in ways she'd taken for granted back when she'd had a heartbeat. But it wasn't just this, the sensation of Spike spearing into her, making all the empty places full—it was the things he said. The heat of his words, the passion and need and truth, his truth, pouring out of him in an endless stream. And that was why she didn't answer—why she dragged it out. She never wanted him to stop. She wanted those whispered oaths and desperate questions to continue forever. To revel in his need for her, because as long as that need existed, she could hold onto this.

But that was the thing about Spike that she was still getting used to—the need was always there. She felt it now, in his desperate, pounding thrusts, in the harsh breaths he stole, the scraping of his teeth along her skin, the soft little whimpers and sighs that spilled from his lips. Every bit of her he got seemed to make him ravenous for more. It was beyond heady, being someone's addiction. Being *Spike's* addiction. Experiencing how it truly felt to have a man's complete devotion, a thing she'd thought she'd had before but had realized, no. No, this was a first.

"Tell me," Spike whispered again, urgent now, his voice low enough that, even with her vampire senses, she barely heard them over the wet smack of their bodies. "Fuck, Buffy, please tell me."

Buffy sucked in a breath that tasted of them, jolting when she felt his hand between them, then again at the sensation of fangs at her throat. And if someone had told her a week ago that she'd be here—trying to figure out which thing to tell him because there were so many—she would never have believed it.

"I love the way you feel," she panted at last, clutching him tighter when he moaned and rewarded her with a hard thrust, his fingers barely grazing her clit, and everything in her was tightening, tightening, the pressure so delicious but unmanageable, unsustainable, no matter how much she wanted to make it last. "I love your cock, and your fangs."

Spike trembled, nipped at her throat with just enough bite that she knew they were out. "Want my fangs, baby?"

"Do you want mine?"

"Fuck yes."

"You first."

In the end, it was mutual. The spark of pain before the explosion of pleasure, white hot ecstasy threatening to split her apart, turn her to dust, Spike snarling into her throat as she tightened and clenched and spasmed around his cock, Buffy snarling right back into his as he bucked and pulsed and emptied inside of her. She had never felt so in sync with anyone and that was starting to do something other than scare her. It was starting to feel right, even inevitable.

It was starting to feel like love. And that ought to terrify her too, but strangely, it didn't. After all, the worst had already happened.

The thought didn't get a chance to get comfortable inside her head, though, or anywhere else. Before she could think of unwinding herself from around Spike, much less retract her fangs from his throat, the stairwell door burst open, reminding her sharply of where they were—where they *weren't*—and exactly why she had stolen away in the first place.

“Oh,” said a familiar voice. “I didn't mean... I was just looking for Buffy.”

“Ben!” Buffy pulled her mouth back so fast she tore Spike's skin—something she'd have to make up for later—and forced her feet to find the floor, rushing to right her clothing as much as possible. God, how embarrassing was this? How would she even begin to explain it? “Sorry, we were just...”

But she didn't get a chance to come up with an excuse, for Ben wasn't Ben anymore.

“Hey,” Glory said snidely, her eyes positively dancing. “How come no one told me the Slayer was a vampire?”



Day One

Maybe it didn't have to be terrifying.

Maybe Buffy didn't need to have everything figured out in order to accept Spike the way he accepted her—this her and the old her and whatever her would be here tomorrow. And maybe that was the thing that had her wiggled. The prospect of not facing something alone. Of being with someone who would let her be, whatever that looked like. Whatever she would give.

These were the sort of thoughts you had when you were sleeping in your former-enemy-turned-lover's recently cleaned bed, the place where you had woken up just hours earlier in a world with brand new rules.

Spike was on the floor beside the bed—his idea when he'd caught her expression upon his suggestion that they just mind their sides. She'd felt awful in the moment but still on edge from the conversation upstairs, trying to reconcile the Spike that had lived in her head the past four years with the one standing in front of her, redefining everything she'd thought she'd known. This nice, considerate version of the guy who had introduced himself to her via death threat was brain-breaking, and her brain had already been put through the paces.

Buffy hadn't been wrong, though. It was a lot. Too much. More than one person should ever have to handle, and god, how many times had she crossed that threshold now? She was barely twenty years old and had two deaths under her belt, never mind the numerous apocalypses and the overall having-no-say-in-her-life. That she was in a place where she had to redefine her existence *again* was already beyond the pale. Throw in a lovesick vampire on top of that and how could *anyone* be expected to deal?

Except lying here in the bed that belonged to him, in the crypt that belonged to him,

staring at the ceiling and going over every step of her day to this point had her circling back to the same question. Did she have to have all the answers before she took a chance and seized something for herself?

And that was the crux of the thing, wasn't it? Every time Buffy had seized for herself, the result had been pain. Raw, brutal, soul-crushing, world-rending pain that she'd had to claw and fight her way back from, but never in full. Always with pieces of herself left behind, the guardian of the thing that had hurt so much, always vigilant and always expecting another blow, no matter how much time had passed, for time was fluid and the past was never really past. It was with her through every decision, every battle, every second of every day reminding her of what she stood to lose if she gambled to gain.

But she also wasn't the person she'd been before. And Spike... Well, she didn't know how she felt beyond what she'd already told him. That yes, she knew there was something there—something they had mutually danced around for years. Something electric and risky and fun, and all the more dangerous *because* it was fun, which also made it seductive and intoxicating. Made it easy to dismiss the danger.

God, she was overthinking this relationship before it was even a relationship. And the really annoying part was he was right—he *had* been right when he'd thrown it in her face earlier. She'd been all bones-jumpy when she'd thought the end was nigh but the second she had to actually live with the consequences of her decision, her feet had gone ice-cold and she'd pulled the emergency brake. Not because she didn't want, but because she didn't know what it meant to want. How to regard anything in her new existence. Which wasn't even twenty-four hours old.

And tomorrow would be just like today. And the next day. And the next day. Eventually she'd run out of people to disappoint or disgust or both, and the newness of her new life would be a little less new, and she'd have to figure out how to keep moving forward in this body. Keep living. A life that now stretched so far ahead of her she couldn't see the ending, and how was that for irony? All this time, all Buffy had needed to do to outlive her expiration date was die.

A lot less work than she'd thought.

"No..."

Buffy blinked, uncertain whether she'd imagined the voice or not. It was low and faint, though not so faint she couldn't hear it over the noise in her head. She waited a beat, then another, and when it came again, a soft, "No...Dru..." she had her answer.

Swallowing, Buffy rolled onto her side to peer over the edge of the mattress, where Spike lay prone on the stone floor, a perfunctory pillow under his head and a sheet riding low on his otherwise naked body. Naked except a pair of silk pajama bottoms they'd both been surprised to discover he owned—"Harm," he'd muttered, eyeing the horse pattern with disgust. "Reckon that's the closest she could find to a sodding unicorn that she featured I'd wear."

She watched him for a long stretch, long enough to think that might have been it, before he jerked his chin and whimpered again, brow furrowing. "Stop. Don't. Don't. Please don't," he begged, voice pitching up, a harsh whisper against the still air, and Buffy

knew. Understood in ways she really didn't want to understand.

"Spike," she said before she could stop herself. Then she *did* stop herself, because, well, what was she going to say? *You're just having a bad dream?* Yes, he was, but a dream that had already come true. *It's okay?* It wasn't okay—nothing about this was okay—but it also wasn't on him. He'd already assumed way too much of the blame during waking hours. He didn't need to do it in his sleep.

She was on the floor beside him before she fully registered her intent to move, skating a hand along his arm until her fingers were curled around his shoulder. It was strange touching him like this, skin-to-skin, seeing him all shirtless with the abs and the musculature that she'd intellectually known had to exist but hadn't let herself consider the way Spike was a man in addition to being a vampire. Dangerous territory, that, and for reasons she'd already owned up to. But feeling his flesh under her fingers, knowing he'd been inside of her just a few hours ago, that all of that had really happened—the way everything else had really happened—was heady. Almost overwhelming.

And he was still whimpering.

"Stop," he pleaded softly. "Don't. Don't. God, Dru, please... Buffy..."

"Spike." She dug her nails into his skin and gave him a shake. It didn't seem to do much. "Spike, wake up. It's—"

"Slayer. Don't."

"Spike," she said again, shaking harder now, though with the same result. "Spike, wake up. Dru's not here. It's just us."

"Noooo..." His expression contorted, and the scent of wet salt hit the air, faint but unmistakable. "No, fuck, just kill *me*."

Buffy stared at him, mind racing, then decided, *to hell with it*, and threw her leg over his hips to straddle him at the waist. And whoa, *heady*, though also familiar—this was a view she'd had many times before, though somehow also not, and that thought would be a lot of fun to dissect at some point in the future that was not this point. Right now, she just needed him to wake up.

"Spike." She seized his other shoulder and shook. "Spike!"

"Slayer."

"That's right. Good god, how are you this heavy a sleeper and still alive?" Maybe she ought to pop him in the nose. "Seriously. You're *demon non grata* in town. All anyone would have to do is find you when you're asleep and—"

"Buffy?"

She squeaked and released her grip on his shoulders, starting so suddenly she would have toppled over if she hadn't been astride him. "Oh," she said, her voice pitching up an octave. "I guess you're awake."

Spike blinked up at her, his eyes almost black in the crypt's dim-to-nonexistent lighting. The fact that she could see at all was likely courtesy of her brand-spanking new vampire genes, come to think of it, which she did. Think of it. Right now. It was that or think about the fact that she was straddling him and he was no longer asleep. She hadn't thought any of this through.

“I miss something?” Spike asked, and then his hands were on her hips, and oh, that felt better than it had a right to. The strength in those hands, the grip. “Thought you decided you didn’t want to complicate things. Not that I’m complaining, mind you, but—”

“You were dreaming,” Buffy blurted, once again experiencing that odd sensation that informed her she’d be blushing if she had the blood flow. “It sounded...bad.”

Some of the spark faded from his eyes. “I was talking in my sleep?”

“Yeah. Not quietly.”

“Balls.” He rolled his head back, sighing hard—hard enough to make his throat muscles work, which Buffy definitely enjoyed watching. Almost as much as she enjoyed the sensation of his hands where he still gripped her, or the feel of him between her legs. Particularly one part of him that was waking up pretty damn fast.

She should move. She knew she should. But she didn’t want to. The world she’d known was gone—the next one she lived in was hers to make, hers to define, and she could do it with fear or with... Well, not fear. She had no idea what was going to happen tomorrow or the next day or any of those days, but for now, just for now, maybe it would be okay to be reckless. Selfish. Do without thinking. Seize the day the way she once had.

And Spike had already said it—regardless of what she decided, he was hers. So why not take? Why not *have*?

“You were dreaming about Dru?” Buffy asked when he brought his gaze back to hers. “That’s what it sounded like.”

“Something like that.” He worked his throat, flashed a pained sort of smile that wasn’t a smile at all. “Wager I’ll see it happen every night for a time yet. My bloody brain showing me what I could’ve done if I’d been quicker, more clever. How I could’ve...stopped it.”

“Stopped Dru.”

He nodded. And that was it—the last of her resistance melted, and Buffy’s hands were on his face, his cheeks, and she was kissing him. Not just kissing him, trying to devour him, and Spike whimpered and devoured her right back. Teeth scraping at her lips, tongue exploring, searching, lighting her up from the inside, feeding her back the warmth that had been stripped. It was messy and complicated and the worst idea in the world, probably, but it was also hers, *hers*, something that she could call her own after everything else.

“I want this,” she whispered against his lips when he broke away to explore her throat, the grip he had on her hips so tight she wondered if she’d bruised, sort of hoped she would, and he was holding her against his cock, thrusting up and doing things to her skin with his mouth that had to be the best kind of evil. “I know I shouldn’t—”

“Sure you should,” Spike murmured. “You should do this a lot.”

Buffy surprised herself by laughing. “Uh huh.”

“Girl like you deserves everything she wants. Especially if what you want is me.” He licked a line down her neck, paying extra attention to the sensitive mark denoting where Dru had made her immortal, and *god*, where vampire bites had always been extra-sensitive, now they were downright electric. Buffy threw her head back, wanting more, needing more, and she must have said that or he just understood because she got

more. More of his mouth, his tongue, his teeth, more whispered oaths and soft caresses. She felt wild and untamed and it should have scared her more than it did—the power, the strength—how much of it she could feel under her skin.

How much he made her feel, the way he sighed and whimpered and arched and nodded—*yes, yes, yes*, please, *Slayer*—when she dove her hand under the waistband of his silly pajama bottoms to explore his cock. Feel it again against her palm, in her fingers, admire the silken pull of his skin along the shaft when she began to stroke. The smell of him, musky and deep, *excited*—she could smell his excitement, how cool was that?—overlayed with all the scents that made him Spike. She swiped her thumb over the head of his cock, whimpered when he whimpered, then lifted her hand to her mouth to taste his precum, and the sound that rumbled through him wasn't a growl or a whimper but some guttural combination that she felt down to her bones. Then they were hurrying together, in a race, Spike fisting her panties and tearing and Buffy shifting up to rub herself along his dick, feel him against her wet flesh—*really* wet, holy cow—and tease the slick head of him against her clit before Spike snarled and she snarled back and then he was parting her, pushing into her, becoming her, and she was becoming him, and it was like it had been earlier but also not because now, this time, she knew there would be a tomorrow. She understood that this wasn't a send-off, a nice possibly final memory to erase the bad that had heralded her death. It was the start of something new—the start of something *hers*.

Because that was what he was. Hers. Spike was hers. And she got to decide what that meant. No one else.

“Fuck,” Spike gasped into her collarbone before nipping at her skin. “How good you grip me.”

Buffy nodded, sinking further onto his cock, into the wonderful pressure splitting her in two but making her whole at the same time. “So deep,” she whispered. “So deep.”

“God, yes. Can you take more? Wanna feel you all around me.”

“I can take whatever you give me.”

Spike lifted his head to grin up at her, his eyes shining. “That a promise, Slayer?”

“It's a challenge, *Vampire*.”

His breath hitched and he twisted his hand in her hair. “Then get ready to take it. Gonna fill you up.” And the next thing she knew, she was on her back, the stone floor scraping at her shoulder blades, and Spike was above her, pounding into her at a pace that would have hurt, should have hurt, slayer or not, except she was more than a slayer now. More than a vampire, too. She was something new, something the world had not seen before, at the threshold of discovery.

Spike seemed to know or at least guess. Or maybe it was obvious, on her face, in her body, maybe he felt it with every plunge, the hard, rough cadence of his thrusts and the pain that wasn't pain. He grinned, all fang, still with her hair fisted in his hand, pulling her head back so her throat was bare to him, and then dropping his mouth there, teasing along the place her pulse no longer jumped, again ghosting his lips against the mark, then his incisors, muttering all the while.

“Do me like that, love. Squeeze me like that. So tight. So wet. Has this pussy always been this wet for me? Could drown in you. Let me drown in you, Summers. Let me fucking drown.”

“More,” Buffy whispered back, surging up to meet him every time he pulled his dick away, fighting him for it, for that fullness, and somehow both rewarded and denied, because he always took what he gave. “More.”

“More what, baby?”

“Spike.”

He pulled his head back just enough to grin wickedly into her eyes. “More Spike what? More of Spike’s cock?”

“Just more. You got more?”

The look he gave her was delighted and hot and awed all at once, and she felt it pluck something inside of her, something she hadn’t felt in so long she’d forgotten it was there. But then he was nodding, and kissing her, lips and fangs, and seizing her by the thigh with his free hand to push her leg back, back, fitting it over his shoulder, and he was somehow even deeper inside of her. Filling her, stretching her, and spearing her with his cock, grunting, snarling, the air punctuated with hard, wet smacks and the scrape of skin against stone, and a roaring in her head that felt both inside of her and not, and this was hers. It was hers, and she was going to keep it. Keep him. Keep this because she’d need it, needed something that no one else could touch in order to survive.

It was a combination that had her firing into the stratosphere, surrendering to the exquisite burn, exploding but piecing her together again at the same time. Spike’s words, filthy and loving all at once, Spike’s hands, which were somehow everywhere—her breasts, her throat, her thigh, between them stroking her clit amid the brutal rhythm of his thrusts—Spike’s eyes, fierce and full and focused on her, Spike’s fangs, and the sensation of being sliced open, of feeling him in two places, pushing and pulling, all of it coalescing until the pressure had nowhere to go but out. And she shuddered and clamped and spasmed, and Spike said her name like it was poetry or a prayer, and did as he’d promised—filled her with him. Poured himself into her until there was nothing for him to do but collapse panting against her, his weight a comfort. All of him a comfort.

Her comfort. *Hers*. And she didn’t need to know what that meant for the long run just yet. All she needed was the now.

Which, thankfully, he was more than willing to give.



Day Eight

More than the blood, more than the sunlight, more than the aversion to holy relics, the thing that had required the most adjustment for Buffy was speed. How she could be in one place one moment, blink, and be clear across the room in the next. How thinking about moving was as good as doing it. Not even the added strength had required too much mental rearranging, for that was something she had already done once before. But

moving like a predator in addition to a warrior had thrown her off course, and she still wasn't used to how fast her personal scenery could change.

How she could go from being entangled in Spike, pulsing around his cock as she rode out the last of her orgasm, to plummeting several stories and snarling around a mouthful of hellgod. But when Buffy returned to herself, that was where she was. On the ground floor of the stairwell, surrounded by debris and jagged bits of concrete and dust. Oh, and her fangs were in Glory's throat. Her *fangs* were in Glory's *throat* and fucking pure liquid ambrosia was on her tongue.

Buffy pulled back hard enough that more god came along for the ride, and Glory gave a soft, pitiful cough that sounded about as divine as one of Xander's belches. She blinked bleary, glassy eyes upward, her expression somewhere between shock and indignation and respect, then lifted a hand to the open wound that was her throat.

"Bitch," Glory said, her voice faint. "That's... That's cheating. Who told you...you could...get fangs?"

That was the most she got out before her face dissolved and rather than straddling Glory, Buffy found herself astride Ben. He who she had, at one point, kinda-sorta considered dating, even if she'd never gotten far enough past the kinda-sorta to put anything in motion. Ben was here because he was Glory. Or Glory was Ben. Or...what?

"What?" Ben choked out as though he'd heard the thought, lifting the hand that Glory had pressed to her—his? Their?—throat and jolting when he saw it was smeared with blood. "What...what did you... Oh god."

"You're Glory," Buffy blurted, the last of Glory's—Ben's?—blood draining down her throat, and *god*, she could feel it, strength that was more than strength. That made her insides feel like a bouncy house, like if she didn't watch herself, the speed she already wasn't used to would go into hyperdrive, and she'd be across town—maybe across the state—in a matter of seconds. Forget a plummet down however-many stories to the ground.

"She... You remember." More blinking. "You're a vampire."

"And you're—"

"I'm not." Ben coughed and tried to move but didn't get far. "She's...my sister. We share... They put her in me."

Buffy didn't ask what that meant. She didn't want to know. Suddenly, her thoughts were consumed with her own sister. The one some other *they*—or maybe even the same *they*—had planted in her life. The memories that were not real, only something had changed. In addition to the god blood making her afraid of her own body, Buffy found her head was suddenly crammed full. That things were overlapping, colliding, shattering, and she could see it easily, where the division took place. Where she'd transitioned from two roads into one—the life she'd lived until Dawn and the only life she'd remembered until...

She released a breath, looking down at Ben. Had his blood done this? Had *hers*?

Behind her, Buffy heard the heavy clomps of Spike's boots thundering down the stairs, caught his rushed breaths, and felt something in herself calm at knowing he was nearby.

His presence provided a sort of psychosomatic assurance that she wouldn't lose control. Entirely placebo but also entirely needed.

"She doesn't know," Ben choked out suddenly, his eyes wide. "Glory. She doesn't... She doesn't know. And I won't tell her. I promise."

Buffy stilled. "She doesn't know," she echoed, a statement rather than a question. "Glory doesn't know..."

"About your sister."

"But you do."

If possible, Ben's eyes widened even further, to the point she wouldn't be surprised if they popped out of their sockets. Just whoosh, gone. No more eyes. "I... You... Then why?" The thumping of his heart accelerated almost to the point she would have worried if it hadn't immediately started to slow, blood rushing still from the open wound on his neck, and she knew, *understood*, if she did nothing that he was going to die here. That she would be responsible for that death, his blood on her hands. In her stomach. Still in her mouth.

And then something else—the vibration of hurrying footsteps through the floor and walls. Of course. The crash hadn't exactly been subtle.

"Buffy, love," Spike said, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Gotta move unless you aim to explain any of this to the lab coats."

Another flash, and Buffy was on her feet, the thump of approaching steps and hearts and humans closing in around her. "Where?" she asked wildly, but Spike didn't wait to reply, just seized her wrist and they were running. Or *he* was running and somehow dragging her along with him, however that worked, fueled by some combination of instinct and fear. Running up, up, up one flight of stairs after another; running until those same instincts that told her to run started screaming at her to stop, for she was getting too close to something dangerous. But she couldn't make her legs obey, too juiced on god blood, too determined to put distance between her and the mess she'd left for others to clean up, words and whispers and more than that, and Ben knew about Dawn. Ben knew, and Ben was Glory, and she'd left him to be found and saved, which meant—

"Slayer!" Spike bellowed, sounding far away despite the fact that he was right behind her. "Buffy, pet, stop!"

Stop what? Stop running? No, she couldn't do that. Not until she was out of this building. Not until everything that had just happened, everything she'd just learned, couldn't catch up.

"Buffy!"

Spike managed to tear his hand away the second before she collided with the final door at the top of the stairwell. And then she was sprinting across the hospital rooftop, her eyes filled with a bright, searing light that had something inside of her screaming and straining for freedom. That she knew should have killed her, should have sent her up in flames, but she was there, under open sun, bathed in light she'd taken for granted until last week. There and not dying. There and somehow still whole.

It was that thought that finally convinced her feet to stop, though she couldn't say how.

Only that she had been in motion one second and wasn't the next. Instead, she found herself at the edge of the roof, looking down at the parking lot and street and houses beyond, the world that was Sunnydale in the daytime.

The world that wasn't hers anymore. Shouldn't be hers.

Buffy turned, shaking, to Spike, who stood in the doorway, staring at her like she was something celestial.

"Bloody hell," he breathed out.

And she had to agree with him.



Day Two

"I don't understand."

"I don't know how else to explain it to you."

"You're... This has to be some kind of a joke." Xander made a show of rubbing his eyes. "You're a vampire. And...you're dating Spike? Do we not remember the conversation we just had?"

Buffy glanced at Spike, who, beyond snorting and rolling his eyes, didn't offer any response at all. Probably for the best, she decided. At this point, he could only add fuel to the fire.

"I'm a vampire," Buffy agreed, somehow managing to get the words out without choking on them. Up until she'd asked what the easiest daytime route was to the Magic Box for those who were sunlight sensitive, she'd actually had a pretty nice day. Granted, a lot of that niceness had been contingent upon ignoring her new biological reality in favor of learning just how deep Spike's oral fixation ran, his mouth busy between her legs, filling the air with all sorts of slurping noises that ought to have embarrassed her but hadn't, because any time her mind had threatened to infringe upon the moment, he'd swirl his tongue a certain way or give her clit a hard suck and she'd be right back with him. Writhing and whimpering and thrusting herself against his mouth, shivering when he chuckled and sent exquisite little vibrations over and inside of her, and god, she hadn't known sex could feel like this until now—so amazing and liberating and freeing and if that was the trade off, it was almost worth the new diet.

Those thoughts had been less frightening when she'd been distracted. Now that she wasn't—now that she was staring down her friends rather than learning just how far back she could bend her legs—they became overwhelming again.

"Drusilla turned you into a vampire," Xander repeated. "You were overpowered by *Drusilla*."

"Xander, don't say it like that," Willow admonished.

"Like what?"

"Like Buffy did something wrong. She can't help that she's dead. Or undead. Or that she lost to Drusilla."

Spike snickered and shifted in his seat. "Bloody children, the lot of you."

“Is it because of the vampire thing that you’re with Spike?” Xander asked Buffy, ignoring the comment. “Like, ‘I’m dead now and can’t do any better?’ ’Cause Buffy, I promise you can. Like, Angel. We remember Angel, don’t we?”

Buffy had been doing her best not to think of Angel, actually, for a number of reasons, though strangely none that she could describe all that well. Of course she’d thought about it—the Angel of it all. It would be stranger if she hadn’t. But every time she did, her stomach clenched and her, well, *everything* filled with dread. Like she would have disappointed him somehow by having become what she’d become. And that was stupid.

Except she couldn’t convince herself. There had to have been something she could have done, right? A decision she could’ve made that would have changed her trajectory, changed everything. Kept her from being hit by a cattleprod, from being chained up, from falling into Dru’s enigmatic eyes and losing herself the way she had.

And even if that wasn’t the case... God, she just didn’t think she could do it again. Get her hopes up about Angel. Lose herself in the what-ifs and could-bes just to discover there was some reason, some obvious block, that would snatch everything back. Her being a vampire didn’t make his soul any more permanent, and call her selfish, but in the time since she and Angel had been together, Buffy had discovered just how much she enjoyed sex.

Specifically with Spike, but that was beside the point. She’d had plenty of sex with Riley that had, then, seemed perfectly good. She couldn’t imagine just boxing up that part of herself for the rest of forever. And maybe there was a way for Angel to have a soul attached with something a bit more reliable than sticky tape, but...

She glanced at Spike, not surprised to find him studying her, his expression guarded. She gave him what she hoped was a decently reassuring smile then turned back to Xander.

“I know this is going to be hard for you to get. And I’m not saying that it’s... That this is anything other than what it is. And what it is is new. Very new.” Buffy released a breath, centering herself, or trying to. “But it’s what I need right now. It’s what I want.”

“It’s *Spike*,” Xander said.

“And it’s Buffy,” she replied. “Buffy, your friend who just lost her life and was turned into one of her biggest fears. That Buffy. I don’t know if this is going to last or anything but I’m asking you, if you love me, please just...don’t make a big deal out of this. At least not a bigger deal than the fact that I’m now dead and a vampire. Can you do that?”

For a very real second, Buffy worried the answer was no. Xander opened his mouth, closed it, glanced at Willow, rocking back and forth in his seat. “Of course,” he choked out at last. “Of course, Buffy.”

“How’s your mom and Dawn handling it?” Willow asked. “Was the wig-out massive?”

“Not as massive as you might think. It’s just going to take some time. For everyone.”

Understatement of the century.

All in all, the entire conversation didn’t go as poorly as it could have. Not as great, either, as it seemed to cause Xander real, physical pain to restrain himself from making more pointed observations about her evolving relationship with Spike, but he did put in the effort, which was...something. What it would grow into was anyone’s guess, but

all in all, her second day as a bloodsucking undead thing hadn't been all that terrible. There were still things to figure out, of course, like if she was going to live with Spike while also trying to date him or get her own place. Home seemed too dangerous with her new, carnal instincts at war with her human soul—the smells and temptations and everything else besides. Spike assured her it would get better, and she believed him—if he could stand to be around humans without his chip firing every five seconds, then she could certainly master the same restraint. Separate the Buffy parts from the vampire parts that kept insisting, loudly, she was surrounded by food and why the hell was she letting herself starve?

For now, Spike's place made the most sense, especially since she didn't plan on cutting herself off from that world-altering sex anytime soon. Maybe once the novelty of being someone's addiction wore off, though part of her very much hoped it never did, she'd think about independent living. But that was a problem for the future. For some version of herself that wasn't this version.

"What's that smell?" Buffy asked as she and Spike approached Restfield. It had been creeping up on her the closer they got—a faint odor that wasn't quite decay, that was almost as much a feeling as it was a physical sense. Like her bones were tightening under her skin, exciting a part of her that hadn't existed two days ago, infusing her with a sense of restlessness and desire. Even still, *smell* was somehow the closest description, for it felt like something that carried in the air, wafted in and out depending on which way the breeze was blowing.

"What smell?"

"You don't smell it?"

"Not getting anything unusual, pet," he replied, throwing her a sidelong glance before grinning and bringing his mouth close to her neck. "Cept you smell like a woman well shagged. Got me all over you, don't you?"

"Spike, I'm serious."

"And I'm not?"

Buffy tugged him to a stop, glowering. "No, this is not a sexy smell. It's... It's like... It's everywhere." She shifted, cursing her lack of quality vocabulary, and crossed her arms. "I would say it smells like death but that's too...simple. And it doesn't make sense anyway."

"Doesn't make sense for a graveyard to smell like the grave?" He gave her one of those looks that would have earned him a punch to the nose not too long ago. Might still, even, if he didn't watch himself. "Dunno if I can follow you around that bend, pet."

"No, because I smelled it earlier too."

At this, he quirked his head, the tease draining from his eyes. "Where?"

"I think...at my mom's?" Buffy thought back. They had visited Revello Drive twice since the turning—the first day and earlier today. The grave scent, if that's what it was, hadn't been there this afternoon when it had just been her, Spike, and Dawn; it had been there after her mom returned from her post-op checkup. A slight twinge in the air. A scent that was a sensation.

"Can..." Buffy frowned, not sure how to articulate what she had to ask. Not even sure

what she had to ask until it was there. “Can vampires smell when someone is about to die?”

To her surprise, Spike stilled and frowned as though to truly consider the question. She didn’t know what she’d expected—something quick and flippant, perhaps, in the vein of most every answer Giles had ever provided when she’d been openly speculative. A sort of *pish posh* and a hand wave meant to act as some assurance, even if he inevitably ended up having to eat crow.

The more time she spent with Spike, especially like this—like true equals who were in something together rather than on opposite sides of a battlefield—the more she realized how often she felt sidelined by the others. Her ideas rejected, her instincts questioned, her intuition not trusted.

“Hard to say, pet,” he replied at length.

“Why?”

“Killed a lot of people, haven’t I? After the first few, they all start to smell the same in the end.”

Buffy wrinkled her nose. “Nice. Thank you for that reminder.”

“Reminder? Didn’t think that was the sorta thing you were likely to ever forget.”

She opened her mouth, ready to argue, then closed it again. He was right—or mostly right. Right in the sense that she couldn’t forget, but she did. Spike made it easy sometimes. A lot of the time. He never hid what he was and it didn’t bother him, didn’t weigh on him the way it had Angel, and perhaps that should bother *her*—perhaps it did, in a way—but maybe that also...

Maybe it was just honest. A different, less comfortable kind of honest, but honest nonetheless.

“Wouldn’t be surprised if you could, though,” Spike said a moment later. “Smell it the way I can’t. Death as it approaches.”

“You wouldn’t?”

He shook his head. “Wager it’s a bit like the weather. There in the air, some people can feel it, know when it’s gonna storm, bugger whatever the forecast is and the like. We already know you’re more than a vampire, and even if we can’t smell death before it hits, we sure as bloody hell can smell the dead.”

“Everyone can do that.”

“Yeah, not like us, though. Could be you’re sniffing the rain in the air before it starts to pour.” Spike glanced at her. “What brought that on, anyhow?”

Buffy pursed her lips. Didn’t want to say. Didn’t want to give the thought, the fear, in her head any weight outside of it. Didn’t want to consider that she might be right, after everything.

“Because if what I smell *is* death as it comes,” she said, and gestured at the cemetery, “and I smelled it at my mom’s... Then...”

“Bit of a distinction there, love. That lot’s already kicked it.”

“But there was a funeral today, wasn’t there?”

“Was there?”

Right, it made sense that he wouldn't have realized it. That he wouldn't have been as attuned to the sounds outside the crypt as she was, accustomed to letting them fade into the background, normal noises of cemetery living. But Buffy had heard everything—the bits of the graveside service, the muted tears and less muted sobs of the mourners, the well-wishes and the platitudes given to the bereaved. She'd heard it, and she'd smelled something that wasn't death but wasn't life either. A smell that lingered, that she'd thought she'd carried with her to her mom's, that had become stronger only after Joyce arrived home. That she smelled now again, faint but there, near where she imagined the funeral attendees had gathered, one perhaps not realizing how soon they would join whoever had been lowered into the ground.

Buffy met Spike's eyes again, prepared to present her case, then stopped. There wasn't any doubt there—nothing to suggest he didn't believe her or that he needed to be convinced. "I think we might need to get my mom back to the doctor," she said. "I don't like what I smelled there. Do you think... Do you think that's nuts?"

If anything, Spike looked more confused at the question than he had the statement. "Dunno why I would. You're the Slayer, aren't you? Reckon your instincts are sharper than anyone else's."

"This isn't about being the Slayer."

"Course it is. It's *you*, and you're the Slayer. Don't stop being it just to have whims about your mum."

Well, put like that, and he was right. "Really?"

"I'd be bloody daft to doubt anything your senses are telling you."

"What if I'm wrong and I worry everyone over nothing?"

He lifted a shoulder. "So what? You're still right most of the time. And when it comes to the people you love, no such thing as too careful."

No, there really wasn't. And she didn't think this was the sort of intuition she could just shut off anyway. "You'll help me try to convince her?"

"What, that she needs to listen to her brilliant daughter to save her own skin? Don't imagine that'll take much but yeah, love, I got your back."

Buffy stilled, though something—not her heart, couldn't be her heart—somersaulted in her chest. In her lungs. In her feet. In her whole damn body. "You think I'm brilliant?"

The question seemed to catch him off guard, but only for a second. Then his eyes softened and he leaned close, skimming his fingers along her cheek. "No sodding *think* about it. Most brilliant person I know."

It was the sort of thing that should feel like a line at best, a lie at worst. It didn't. From the mouth of her former enemy, it sounded like the truth. His truth, at least. And...god, that meant so much.

It meant everything.

And sometime down the line, when she looked back at this moment, Buffy would clock it for what it was.

The very second she started to fall in love.



Day Ten

It was the god blood. That much was easy to work out. Buffy had attacked and consumed pints of god blood and that had fortified her vampire body so much that, among other things, she was able to run in the sunlight. No one could say how long it would last—days, weeks, probably not forever but maybe forever—but when she made her next trip to the hospital, it wasn't through the sewers. She walked in and went straight to her mother's room. Sat by her bedside and listened, not unsmugly, as the doctors explained the aneurism that had been bypassed thanks to the myriad of tests Joyce had undergone after complaining about her headaches.

Only of course there had been no headaches. Joyce knew that. Spike and Dawn knew it. Everyone knew it. And though no one had said anything to suggest it, Buffy felt—*knew*—that if she hadn't pestered her mom into listening to her, her mom wouldn't be here anymore. But her mom *was* here, and the death scent was gone. Well, it lingered in the hospital itself, but its potency in Joyce's room had faded to almost nothing. All that remained was the faint hint of past ghosts.

Mom would be coming home in a couple of days. The doctors were so jumpy at having almost walked themselves into a malpractice suit they were being extra cautious and tentative now, much to Joyce's chagrin. She wanted to stay in the hospital about as much as she wanted another hole in the head.

"And I can say that with some authority, considering," she added, tenderly indicating her extremely bandaged and partially bald scalp.

"I'm so sorry," Buffy replied, snickering. "Next time I'll just let you die."

"Brian is never going to want to see me again."

"Brian bought you the entirety of the gift shop." She gestured around her mother's overfull room, balloons, flowers, and stuffed animals crammed into every conceivable space. While she had yet to meet Brian on account of vampirism, Buffy could say she was impressed. Any guy who gave her mother this much attention when she felt her lowest couldn't be all that bad.

And if he was, well, she had fangs for that.

As though the universe had heard the thought, Ben walked past the door to her mom's hospital room, nose buried in a clipboard, though not convincingly. Buffy didn't miss the way his steps slowed, or the sideways glance he threw in her direction before scurrying off. Those had become more frequent—the walk-bys, the look-sees—and as much as she would like to believe otherwise, Buffy knew what he was doing. Who he was looking for.

Who he wasn't finding.

Because Buffy wasn't an idiot.

Dawn hated it, of course, being sidelined while their mother was again in the hospital, but she hadn't thrown a fit when Buffy had insisted that she stay with Willow and Tara under magical protection, even if she hadn't understood why. For some reason that Spike

deduced was related to the magic keeping Glory and Ben in one body, anytime they tried to explain what had happened—that the hellgod was hiding in plain, human-skinned sight—the others just didn’t understand. At all. After a lot of trial and error, Buffy had at least managed to convince Giles that Glory had the means of learning who Dawn was. She couldn’t say how without tripping the magic, but she’d written *magic makes you forget* on several slips of paper for the gang to refer to whenever they started to question. It wasn’t perfect but it worked for now.

Spike thought it likely the spell would end wholesale once Glory was dead. And he had a way for that to happen.

“You kill the boy,” he said when she returned to the house that night, calm but cautious, and studying her like she was a volcano liable to go off. “No sodding way he doesn’t spill what he knows to someone who can tell his godlier half.”

“He said he wouldn’t.”

“And humans never lie.”

“He hasn’t yet,” she pointed out. “He knew already.”

“Yeah, but that was before *you* knew his little secret,” Spike retorted. “Before *she* knew you had fangs and could rip her sodding throat out. You think she’s gonna relent now? You’re off your rocker.”

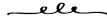
“So why kill Ben? Why not wait for Glory to come after me?”

Spike looked at her for a moment, then lifted a shoulder. “No sodding skin off my nose how you do it. Just thought you white knight types fancied being direct. You wanna take the bitch out without letting him get to say goodbye to this cruel world, that’s your call.”

And that annoyed her, because of course he was right. Ben deserved...something. She kept trying to think her way around the problem, work a way for Ben to live and Glory to leave them alone, but that world didn’t exist. Especially now that, as Spike had observed, Glory knew just how easily she could be ripped apart. It was only a matter of time before she tried to take Buffy out for good.

And Buffy had to be ready. Hopefully with that godblood still in her system. But even that might not be enough—the element of surprise had done most of the heavy lifting before. Glory would know to be careful this time. She would know Buffy was a threat.

She wouldn’t, though, know that she wasn’t the only one.



She’d told him the risks. Told him what it was like to have her mind cracked open, everything she knew rearranged and reformed. That there would be too much there, memories layering on top of memories, some in harmony but most not—most discordant and angry about it, trying to twist back into a place of linear understanding. Dawn either existing or not existing, events from their past featuring her or a world where she did not exist. Seeing all sides now, the life that had been and the life that was.

There was more, too, that she hadn’t told him, but Spike was all right with that. Buffy did everything in her own time and trying to rush her, no matter how desperately he

wanted certain answers, would just blow up in his face.

So he didn't rush, but he told her what he wanted. If she was going to be in the sunlight, if she was going to take out a god, he would be at her side, no matter what it did to his noggin.

And if he just wanted his fangs in her, well, not a sodding soul on this miserable rock could blame him. For there was nothing like being inside her throat when he was also inside her cunt, when she was squeezing and spasming and soaking his cock with all that wonderful slayer strength made even stronger still. When she was screaming his name in screams that were whispers, then flooding his mouth with that pure Buffy ambrosia, blood that was more than blood, and it didn't taste better this time than it had before but it was different. He felt it the second it hit his tongue, jolting through his body, a livewire, spearing through his gray matter and unlocking doors that he hadn't even known were there. Spilling into his thoughts two versions of a life he'd lived, neither right and both right, and Buffy still trembling, still clutching, still clenching him as he fucked and sucked and finally tumbled over into that singular ecstasy. Wondering, dazedly, what it would be like to be with her in the sun. If he'd get the pleasure of watching her bounce on his cock while her skin was bathed in daylight. If perhaps they could recreate that last true fight they'd had before his life had irrevocably changed.

But that was for after. A nice celebration once this rot was behind them.

In the meantime, they had a hellbitch to kill.



It was almost a joke, how easy it was in the end. Glory seeking Buffy out the way Spike had known she would, kicking down the front door to Revello Drive, boasting about how poor Ben had capitulated like the weak plaything he always had been. She had a score to settle with the slayer bitch and then she'd go find Dawn, crack her open, and use her insides to get back to her world.

Glory had prepared for Buffy's strength—she didn't come alone. Brought some of her little sycophants, along with enough holy water to disintegrate a lesser vamp. But her hubris was her undoing—she didn't consider the boost Buffy might have gotten after feasting on her blood. And she certainly didn't consider that Buffy might have been prepared as well. Might have shared her blood with her lover, giving them both immunity from the sunlight. Giving them both the power to take on a god. Power they consumed together after mowing through the poor sods Glory had dragged along as cannon fodder.

What had transpired had been the closest thing to a religious experience Spike had ever gotten. Buffy, covered in gore, at the god's front, Spike at her back, their fangs fastened in her throat, sucking down as much of that bloody sun-returning ambrosia as they could, until Glory hadn't been Glory anymore, had been a man pleading for his life and then panicking when his pleas fell on deaf ears. Finally falling lifeless to the foyer floor. Spike had killed with a woman he loved more times than he could count but never with such singular purpose. Never to save the world.

And never had a woman he loved looked so empty in the after. Staring at the husk that had once been a man and now was nothing. A body they'd have to reckon with—one *he'd* reckon with. And a road ahead that remained uncertain.

Still, she hadn't said anything then. She hadn't said anything later, either. Not about Glory or Ben or what they'd done. She'd welcomed her mum and sis back home, said the danger where Dawn was concerned was over, but hadn't bothered to explain how or why. That was coming, Spike knew. A lot was.

In fact, Buffy didn't say anything of substance until they were back at his place, which was fast becoming their place, and only after she'd shoved him on the bed and ridden him within an inch of his unlife. He hadn't expected sex after everything but wasn't about to complain, happy to let her use him however she fancied best to work through whatever was going through her noggin.

It was there, in the quiet, swimming in the air that smelled like them—his favorite scent—that she said it.

"I love you."

Spike startled, raised his head to look at her, his heart, his lungs, his whole bloody self in his throat. "Buffy?"

"I love you," she said again, turning to meet his eyes. Letting him see hers. Letting him read her sincerity. "But I don't love being a vampire."

And just like that, everything inside him fell again. "I know, baby."

"And... And I don't think I have to be one." Buffy was quiet for a moment, licked her lips. "Will you help me turn back?"

It was the sort of thing that should have been impossible—*was* impossible. He knew it as well as she did. Yet there was something there, something in her gaze, that made the impossible seem possible. After all, they'd walked here and hand-in-hand under a blazing sun that left them unscathed. If that was true, if there was blood out there that could make them immune to death, then there had to be something out there that restored life.

Something Buffy believed in, and her belief was enough. Proof enough. He already knew he'd follow her to the end of the world. What was a trip to the impossible in the face of that?

"I'll help you," he said. "Anything."

And she smiled then, for she knew he meant it.