### Summary

Spike's sacrifice in the Hellmouth went off without a hitch... Except that the amulet wasn't meant for him at all. Reappearing at Wolfram & Hart, his only thought is of Buffy, and the feeling that something is very, inexplicably wrong.
I will not talk of the great
white moment of death, I will not talk
of the great blue and purple moments
in the prosperity of pain. I will not
talk of the great red or scarlet moments
of quarrels and loss of friends, or
the crimson pleasure of the unexpected,
the mental tints of yellow and orange
that show you should always expect
change, or the feeling of knowing green
because you have been on a long journey.
All the colors are conjurers when our
mysteries are being solved. And if this could
not be his dream then by now it should
be ours…

- Primus St. John

From the moment Spike spiraled back into existence in front of Peaches's desk, he knew something
was missing. And it wasn’t just the screaming agony of having his body crisped from the inside out
(not that getting reformed from a hunk of flaming dust was such a picnic). But everything was all
dulled, being a ghost. He knew he had fingers, such as it was. Could see them and twirl them and
swipe them around (and would have gladly strangled someone for the opportunity to hold a smoke
between them), but he couldn’t really
feel them. He wondered briefly if that was how Buffy’d felt
back from the grave. There, but not really. He thought he’d understood before – that kind of
disconnect. Turned out he hadn’t understood a damn thing. Being incorporeal gave a bloke a whole
new kind of perspective.

And there was something wrong. A kind of emptiness that frightened him to his core. He tried not to
think about it – hoped it was some sort of ghost-y type issue that would make with the ta ta and
farewell when – if – he ever got his solid self back.

So he ignored it for the mo’ and concentrated on the fact that he wasn’t in hell. Well, of the usual
kind. Was certainly some kind of malicious doing that he’d ended up chained to his wanker of a
grandsire in a blatantly evil law firm. And that he couldn’t even pick up a phone.

He spent most of his time thinking about her. Buffy. The queen of piss poor timing. She couldn’t
have decided she loved him before he was jolly well on his way to becoming barbeque? He had part
of a mind to give her a solid tongue lashing for that. Mostly, he just had most of a mind to give her
some tongue.

And that worried him slightly.

He’d managed to squirrel away that part of himself the last year, managed to keep it firmly
entrenched under a century of guilt and traces of insanity and a whole new kind of feeling that
empathy didn’t quite cover. Because – despite what Miss Priss was typically willing to admit –
demons got empathy. Couldn’t love without it. (But then, her not believing the love bit either sort of
fucked over his whole argument. Damn insane bint.) But what demons didn’t do was care about the
empathy. Or, they cared about it the wrong way. They reveled in the screams and cries and coursing blood, and took all of that into themselves, until it became part of them. Their screams and cries and blood. And it was glorious.

After the soul, that kind of empathy had sickened him. He still felt it – the demon didn’t get any less demonic because he decided to be a candidate for mystical surgery – but he fled from it. Held onto the purely human kind of feeling that craved only the warm and fuzzies. Of course, if he’d been a sadistic git in life, he figured the transition wouldn’t have been as awful. But no, he’d been a poncy romantic who’d have sooner walked through mud than let some bird cry.

Well, maybe he hadn’t changed that much in death.

But that part – the part that cried out his guilt and uncertainty and self-disgust … it was quiet.

And that worried him.

He kept to himself for the most part, spending time only to bother the little scientist chit, who had Dawn’s youthful exuberance and Tara’s sweetness and was pretty much his only saving grace at that point. And his only hope of being of the solid variety again, as Peaches sure as hell didn’t care.

The Poof seemed right miffed to have him around, as a matter of fact. Not that the feeling wasn’t entirely bloody mutual. That he had a soul – one not stuffed into him by brassed off gypsies – was a bit of alright he was half-tempted to shove under Peaches’s bent up nose at every turn. But he stopped himself anytime the words came near.

Something was wrong.

And he was far away from Buffy. That was the worst. He clung to her words like a life raft – *I love you* – and tried to forget his own necessary but awful reply to get her to leave. He had the vague inclination she might’ve only said it because he was dying, but he didn’t honestly give a fig. Wasn’t like her not loving him had kept him away before. Of course, there had been a bit more nuance the last year. And he was sort of railroading right over that nowadays. He had a soul – he’d become the kind of man she could love. And he wanted her. So he was going to have her. No more pansy footing around.

And that worried him.

Still, wasn’t much he could do as a ghost, and Angel was keeping a tight rein on the Fang Gang. So he made the scientist – Fred – promise. If he got his legs back under him (without going through something else clearly solid in the process) she’d call Buffy for him. At least this way, he was the only one doing the hard part. The waiting. The Slayer was almost as bad as he was with being patient. If she came now and they had to wait weeks or months or years for him to have a real presence, they’d drive each other right barmy out of frustration.

God, but he needed a smoke.

And then the day came, just a package in the mail and a flash of light.

There was something wrong. It was his first thought as the emptiness clawed at him, some wide open hole in his chest making him gasp for air like a man drowning. As he knelt on the ground, his eyes widened in realization. No. Oh god, no.

The Poof felt guilty. Not that that was anything new. Peaches probably tried to think of ten new ways to feel guilty every morning over his cuppa blood. Probably considered it a failure if he didn’t discover two new kinds of wretched before noon.
Still, the bauble hadn’t been meant for William the Bloody. Not that it mattered now. It was all over.

All over.

It was only several hours later that he realized he’d forgotten to tell Fred not to make the call.

Fuck.

It was all over.

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Buffy dropped the phone the first time and then had to scramble to retrieve it, every inch of her shaking. “I-I’m sorry. Can you repeat that?”

The woman on the other side of the line was kind. Sweet sounding, even. “Spike asked me to call, when he got corporeal again. Apparently the amulet was a Wolfram and Hart intrigue special that he got all sorts of mixed up in. He wanted to talk to you before, when he first came back, but didn’t know when he’d have a body. Something about you both being impatient?” There was a slight pause. “He talks about you all the time, you know. I think you’re the only reason he didn’t try to just wink of out of existence instead.”

Buffy thought her hand might be glued to the handset. “Tell him I’m on my way.”

She went, barely sparing enough time to pack a bag (and just enough time to get a plane ticket).

God, of course she went. It was a siren call. Spike. Spike. Spike. A constant drumbeat in her ears, stronger than the thrum of her heart, stronger than the rhythm of her limbs as she fought and staked and cried every night after his death.


And now he was alive. Well, back, anyway. As alive as he’d ever be. And Angel hadn’t apparently seen fit to tell her. Actually, it sounded like he’d seen fit to decidedly not tell her. She was going to have a very one-sided conversation with her ex when she got to L.A. It would probably sound a whole lot like yelling.

She honestly didn’t remember much about the trip, except that she called the Immortal in between flights and told him that their first date she’d reluctantly agreed to – been shoved into by Willow’s eager chorus that she needed to move on – was cancelled indefinitely.

Ugh, it sounded even worse in retrospect. Move on? Willow didn’t have the first idea of what Buffy even had to move on from. Didn’t know a damn thing. None of them did. But then… that was her fault. She’d never told them. Hadn’t even told him.

Until he was dying.

And she was going to spend the rest of her life making it up to him.

The closer she got to L.A., the slower time seemed to drag, until every step felt like that dream where you run and run and run and the concrete refused to shift under your feet. And the monster got closer and closer. Except hers was getting farther away.

She rubbed the burn marks on her palm, one of two pieces she had left of him. The other, his lighter,
was safely in her pocket.

She practically leapt from the cab, pausing only to dump a pile of cash into the driver’s lap. “Keep the change.” It was on the Council’s dime these days, anyway. Giles could spare it. She’d call it recompense for trying to kill her lover. Her love.

Wolfram and Hart was… unnerving. But it didn’t matter. She wasn’t here to worry about what the hell her ex was doing running an evil law firm. She didn’t even stop to wonder how in the heck Harmony had ended up as a receptionist. She didn’t even want to look at Angel. Not until she’d seen the other vampire. Her vampire.

He was waiting for her in a conference room, his back to her as he stared out the tinted glass into the city below. It still gave her a sharp fright, seeing sunlight on his face. In fact, it was worse now, after seeing the sun burn him from the inside out.

She expected him to meet her halfway across the floor. Not necessarily like some cheesy romance book greeting (not that she was opposed), but like something. Something that reflected all the feelings of impatience and want and need that she knew echoed in her every footstep.

Instead, he just turned slowly from the window, looking at her with such a grim and haunted gaze that she thought for sure she’d somehow walked into the wrong room. Walked into some weird dimension where Spike being whole and sort of alive and here in the same room as her wasn’t the stuff dreams were made of (and she’d had plenty of those in the last few months).

She found herself unable to speak, caught in his terrible gaze.

He spoke for her, spoke first.

“It’s gone, Buffy. My soul is gone.”
After Soul

We are not holy
The wind says in the sails
As he works.
It has never been otherwise
Though we live in the most
Devout of stories like litmus paper
Constantly changing color
Just to prove something
Is happening.
- Primus St. John

She wondered if there was some kind of cosmic joke routine aimed at Buffy Summers and affiliates. Her gaze slid to Spike’s bleak face, to the harsh lines of tension that pulled his back straight and set his eyes hard as agate. A giant, cosmic fucking joke. As if the torture of getting his soul (getting his soul for her) wasn’t enough, as if burning up from the inside to save the world wasn’t enough. They had to go and take away all evidence of his sacrifice, too. At least, the kind that wasn’t a broken pit of Hellmouth spanning several miles near the California coast. No, they’d done worse than hide that cave-in. They’d taken his proof. They, the Senior Partners, who had intended to unleash Angelus by having the vampire’s soul power their amulet, until it was all used up. They, the Powers That Be, who let the whole thing happen anyway, with the wrong vampire. The wrong Champion.

But that wasn’t right. She, Buffy Summers let it happen. She chose Spike. She murdered his soul. The soul he’d gotten for her.

She thought she might collapse.

She’d been angry with herself for plenty of reasons after the closing of the Hellmouth. For letting him die. For not telling him three stupidly simple words before he made with the exploding candle act. For leaving when he told her to. (When had she ever done what he asked? Why in the world had she decided to start then? Stupid. Stupid. Selfish.)

But it turned out that all those reasons weren’t ‘the big reason’. The reality was far worse. She’d chosen him to die, and then inadvertently chosen for him to come back again sans his crowning achievement.

“William–”

“William’s dead,” Spike said flatly. He paused. “No, not even dead now. Obliterated. The ponce I used to be is now in some universe’s refuse pile, in a million tiny bobs of light. The refuse pile that was meant for Peaches.” His mouth drew a bitter line. “Only time I wish the poofter got the glory over me.” He touched his chest, trembling. “Can still feel it, you know. That space. Before… didn’t know a thing. Was whole and fine. Then too full, after. Nearly spilled out of me, it was so swollen. Now it’s empty. Made an indent in my chest. Reminds me what I am.”

She suddenly knew exactly where this was going. Knew every hateful word that she’d thrown his way.

Evil
soulless
dead
thing.

“What you are is a Champion,” she found herself saying sharply, as hot tears welled in the corners of her eyes and sudden tightness nearly choked her voice in her throat. “Y-you did that for the world.”

He looked at her steadily, with a kind of unforgiving, acuminous poise he’d lost last year. Had being souled done that to him? She knew it had. Robbed him of everything hard, until she’d shamed him back into pretending.

“I did it for you. Did it because I love you. And because I knew you might love a Champion.” There was a mocking smile. “Even souled up, I was still a selfish bastard. Right lot of good that did me, eh?” He looked away, toward the necro-tinted windows. “There’s no getting it back, either. Can only do the trials once. And can’t even get myself cursed. Whatever mystical mojo place the soul’s supposed to go in, well… that got burned right out of me, apparently. No place for it to stick anymore.”

“Spike–”

But he wasn’t done yet. “But just because I don’t have the soul, doesn’t mean I don’t remember it. That’s a special kind of torture, as it turns out. The Partners could give Angelus a pointer or two.”

Buffy felt herself trembling. He was in so much pain. And it was all her fault. She scrambled for something, some words to distract from the vibrant knife’s-edge that his voice had become. “W-what will you do now?”

His gaze snapped to her, eyes flashing amber. “Oh, I see how it is. Spike doesn’t have a soul. Must be contemplating the big return to evil, eh? Give a bloke less than zero credit, why don’t you.”

“I didn’t mean… I was just…” Her voice trailed off. God, nothing she was saying was any better.

He seemed to feel the same way. His dark, haunted stare bore her down. “You just don’t trust me again,” he finished for her angrily. Then abruptly, his face fell to a cool mask, and he shrugged. “Stopped being evil long before I stuffed a bit of human back in, even if I wasn’t exactly good. But doesn’t matter. We’re back to square one. Quite a bloody stupid dance, innit? Think imma sit this next one out. Got a bit of weariness in the leg.”

She took a step back. He really thought that’s what she thought of him now? Her voice grew quiet, choked. “I can’t stop loving you just because you no longer have a soul.”

He snorted. “Oh, don’t bother, Buffy. Don’t need any sodding favors.”

If there was a crash and burn express for Buffy wordage, well, she was on it. Spike was apparently under the impression his lack of soul meant they were no longer equals (although, to be fair, when had she ever really let him think otherwise?). And the greatest irony was that the soul had done the same thing as being unsouled was doing now – making him feel less worthy. Except now he didn’t accept it as part and parcel of life. Now it made him angry. And – perhaps a bit worriedly – she much preferred this response. Still, that didn’t mean it was a good one.

It meant he was done. Whatever he felt he owed her… well, he’d paid that debt, in his books. He wanted to go. Get far away from the woman who’d cost him everything and then some.

And once, she might have let him, even if it was the last thing she wanted. Because being the Slayer had always come first. She never had time to go chasing after men (even when she had the
inclination). But now… now she was done, too. Seven years of almost-apocalypses was plenty. The lucky number of destruction. The new Slayers and Faith could handle eight on up.

“So, where are we going?”

There was a long moment of silence, where the words simply hung there.

Finally, Spike raised a brow. “Not sure I follow.”

“Well, I’m guessing you’re not staying with Angel,” she said casually. “So where are we going?”

He just looked at her, and she forced herself not to fidget, not to blink. “There’s no we, Buffy,” he said finally, with a kind of slow gentleness that seemed like that of an adult breaking bad news to a small child. “Your souled-up Spike is gone. You get that, yeah? He’s not coming back. You can’t just hold on to me and hope. You’ll drive us both mad.” He chuckled. “Again.” Sudden anger drew down his brow. “And I sure as fuck don’t need a babysitter, either.”

“I didn’t say it for either of those reasons,” she said sharply, with military brusqueness. Then she winced, took a deep breath, and screwed her courage. Spike was here. Corporeal. That was really all that mattered. And it should have maybe shocked her to realize it, but it didn’t. Not after everything. He was still Spike. And here. And that was a helluva lot better than any alternative, as it turned out.

Self-reflection could do a lot for a girl. The last months without him had been… awful. Especially when she found herself avoiding the entire country of England because it hurt too much to hear the accent. Especially when any other man’s laugh just made her cringe because it didn’t rumble enough or come with an undertone of fang. Especially when she found herself reaching for his arms in the middle of the night and wondering when that had started and why she had never done it before. Especially when they’d hurt each other in the most awful ways and still managed to become each other’s solace and strength by the end.

“I just want to be with you.”

There was a pause. Then he laughed at her, a dark mistrusting sound. “Wow, that’s some line you’ve fed yourself, sweetheart. Let’s not bandy about the bloody bush.” He pointed a finger at her accusingly. “Never wanted to be with me before the soul. Barely tolerated me with it at the first – not that you didn’t have every right, mind you. But let’s not act like this was some grand romantic love. None of that Romeo and Juliet crap for me, pet. I ended up dead – well, deader – and fucked up the arse, and now you’re feeling guilty.”

“No! What we had was real,” she found herself saying tersely, striding up to him, unable to take being so far away from him for another moment. “What we had was broken,” she continued more softly, holding his dark and grieving gaze. “What we had was about twenty kinds of screwed up, most of the time.”

He arched a brow. “Not exactly helping your case here.”

“But what we had was over,” she continued, swallowing heavily. “You’re right. That Spike is gone. But so’s that Buffy. She died the minute the Hellmouth swallowed that Spike whole, the moment she stopped being the One.” Buffy felt something like twisted humor bubble up in her chest and she held out a hand, as if greeting a new business associate. “Hi. I’m Buffy Summers. Pleased to meet you.”

Spike stared at her hand like it was a snake that might bite him. Or some kind of demon that might do the same. Miniature demon mayor, maybe. For some interminable amount of time, he just stared at her hand, and she held it there, long past when the holding motion and nerves started to make her
muscles tremble.

Finally, he looked up, and there was a spark of something there, some kind of amusement she hadn’t seen in… god, way too long.

He shook his head, with a small chuckle. “Christ, Buffy. You’re off your bird.” Then he shrugged and took her hand in a brief hold, and she nearly gasped as the cool familiarity of his skin touched hers. She wanted to strip him naked and press him against her; every inch of him was part of a map that she needed to re-memorize. Instead, she let his hand slip away, back to the safety of his pocket, and waited.

“Name’s Spike.” A beat. “And what the bleeding hell kind of name is ‘Buffy’, anyway?”

Her semi-hysterical laughter rang out into the hallway.
After Introductions

The heart is like a cup, or a coffer, or a cave. It holds the image of the sun within us.
- Primus St. John

He’d done it for her – the thing that a man mustn’t (changed himself entirely, hadn’t he? Become everything he’d once scoffed at). Done it all to never hurt her again. Given himself a leash. Manacles. A sodding yoke set crosswise between his skin and his demon, pulling in the bits of man that had all drifted away. The parts no longer meant to have a place but that then did, in the messy way that you’d grudgingly make room for a third bloke in a two-seated space.

And now that yoke was gone (but not the crosswise indent), and Buffy was still here. It was bloody terrifying.

Terrifying how much he wanted her.

To top it all off, he was almost certain that Buffy Summers was being shy. And – for once – not in the panicked horse kind of way, always half a sodding second from bolting. He’d had plenty of the latter to last him a century, dating from long before the time of their doomed affair. Of course, back then, she’d always carried through on the bolting action. Usually including a kick to the head for good measure. The last year had seen it different, by a smidge. She’d even requested his presence at the end. Will you just… hold me? But even then, it’d been uncertainty that’d made her strong voice quaver. Not whatever this was.

Because this was Buffy taking his hand.

She’d nabbed it a few moments after their barmy re-introductions, in between him scattering his damn insolent curls away from his forehead and setting the hand back against his side. She’d done it with a kind of whiplash speed and iron tightness, ensuring he had no escape. But then she’d blushed red and glanced away, saying lowly, “I need to see Angel.”

Did he mention she was the queen of mismatched signals? Needed to add that one to the ol’ noggin list, at the very bloody top. He nearly pulled his hand back right then and there. Was the woman trying rip his heart out? He’d already lost the soul – he wasn’t about to let go of the other (he could at least pretend he owned the damn thing – that it wasn’t in her fucking pocket waiting to be drawn out and stepped on). But she’d known the effect of her words, it seemed. And wasn’t that new? Or maybe she’d always known, and now she just actually cared. Either way, she held him fast, looking up at him with the pleading green gaze that always undid him entirely.

“I want you to come with me. Okay?”

Still, he paused, mouth twisting. “Not going to give him a hullo with a side of snog, are you, Slayer? Because I’m not about to put up with that bollocks again.”

He never would have meant it last year. Hadn’t, obviously, since he’d nearly pounced on her during the same such scenario, like a disgustingly eager puppy, when she’d tried to leave the basement. He meant it now, though, with the demon so angry and him so fucking hurting. Wasn’t even rightly sure what the him was anymore, point of fact – him the vampire with the man’s shadow but no presence.
But whatever all those pieces were, they weren’t about to share Buffy’s active affection again. Well, certain kinds, anyhow. He’d gladly share the punches, just not the kisses. (Although it was probably too much to hope that she might in any universe actually deck the poofter. God, but that was a pleasant fantasy.) She said she wanted to be with him? Well, then she bloody well better mean it.

Buffy had the grace to look ashamed. “I’m sorry about that. I…” She shook her head, looking down at her little designer boots. Then her gaze flicked back up to him, with a kind of steadiness that was slightly unnerving because it wasn’t filled with cold.

The Slayer stared. The girl Buffy looked away. That was how it’d always been. But here was Buffy. Staring at him. “I obviously didn’t come to see him,” she said finally. “After the Hellmouth. I didn’t ‘shack up’ with him just because you were dead.” She punctuated the ‘shack up’ with a flurry of quote marks from her free hand, although he wasn’t sure if that was because there was no literal shacking up when it came to Peaches or because she found the entire idea absurd. He decided to go with the latter, just because he could. She shrugged, adding, “They weren’t his cookies. I was just scared.”

What the bleeding hell?

“Do I even want to know what that means, pet?”

She smiled at him a bit ruefully. “Just one of my less successful metaphors.” Another shrug. “It was apocalypse time. Not much available creativity in the Buffy brain.”

He decided it was better just to let that drop. “Ah.”

Her fingers curled more tightly against his. God, he’d forgotten how warm she was. Hot as the sun, but without the nasty side effect. He’d felt her then, when he was burning. Imagined he was in her blood, racing through her veins, seeing every part of her beautiful body. He dusted with a smile on his face for that. (It was better than thinking about the feeling of all his organs liquefying and his bones burning straight past charcoal.)

He glanced at their intertwined fingers, at the matching pair of burn marks there. “What is this, Buffy?”

She blinked at him uncomprehendingly. “Wa-huh?”

He rolled his eyes, but couldn’t help the flicker of a smile that bent his lips. Christ, but she had the eloquence of a gobsmacked cow sometimes.

“This whole ‘shy’ act,” he said tersely. “You weren’t even shy when I had the soul. Seem to remember you actually reading me the riot act all right an’ proper for not being monster enough for your use because of it. Which, gotta tell ya, sweetheart, took some bloody balls, considering. And you sure as fuck weren’t shy before that, whether we were fighting or fucking or very violently not talking about feelings. So what’s the deal?”

“Oh.” She worried the bottom of her lip in uncomfortable thought, and his pants tightened almost unbearably. In that moment, he no longer cared about an explanation. He just wanted to grab her and strip her bare and shag her senseless until she was near boneless with the effect of how much he wanted her.

But he didn’t, of course. He’d learned that lesson.

Wasn’t only the man that could feel shame, as it were (wouldn’t have gotten the bloody soul if it was). Wasn’t even the man that felt it most. Ironically, the man was so pre-occupied with the hospital
worth of dead people on his conscience that Buffy pretty much always came in second on the guilt meter. Or several hundred down, depending on how you took the body count.

Still, the differences were just based on shade. The man wanted to worship and the demon wanted to possess. Neither of them wanted to hurt the girl. Well, not the bad kind of hurt, anyway.

Thus the whole bloody soul debacle.

Thus the whole standing there and watching Buffy tease him mercilessly with her lip instead of bending her right over and feasting on the sweetly dripping cunny he still remembered the exact taste of. Fuck. Swallowing roughly, he forced himself to concentrate on her words.

“I just… we’re new people, right? I didn’t want to take, um, liberties.”

He opened his mouth and then snapped it shut. “Did you really just say that?”

“Say what?”

“You sounded like William came back in a bird’s mouth.” He chuckled, shaking his head. “‘Take liberties.’ Bleeding hell. Been spending too much time around ol’ Rupes.”

She stilled then, unexpectedly. “I haven’t, actually.” Her tone was cold. He might’ve even gone so far as to say frigid. Interesting, that.

“No?”

Now it was her turn to look at him with surprise. “What? You think I just forgot about the whole ‘he tried to kill you’ thing just because you died?” Her expression darkened. “Made it worse, actually. He singlehandedly almost destroyed the only reason we didn’t all get slaughtered by uber vamps.”

Spike sighed. Oh, hell. Not having a human conscience should have let him just say ‘sodding right’ and let it go. Instead he found he couldn’t meet her eyes. “Not the only, luv. If not me, Peaches would have done it. Bloody amulet was meant for him, if you’ll recall.” He paused. “And then there was you, if all your vampire lovers failed you.”

Her fingers tightened against his, and suddenly she was almost against him, closing the gap between their bodies, her face questioning and her heartbeat pattering. “Lover?” she whispered, warm breath tickling his cold skin. “Is that what you are still?”

Was the woman entirely mental? “You must be completely daft, Slayer. When have I ever wanted anything but you? Want to shag you on the table right this sodding minute, like I have every minute since you walked in here.”

Her eyes widened. “You do?”

He shrugged. “No soul to kick a heap of guilt at my balls and remind me I shouldn’t – not that it ever stopped me from wanting it. Just stopped me from saying it. Much. And I haven’t even been able to get in a decent – or indecent, come to think of it – wank, what with the ghostliness and all. Hell, haven’t even shagged anyone since…” No. He wasn’t going there.

But Buffy finished the phrase anyway. “Since Anya.”

He frowned at her tone. It lacked bite. “Something I’m missing here?”

“She died.”
“Oh.” A small trickle of regret passed through him. “Sorry to hear that.”

Buffy looked at him for a long moment, with some kind of consideration. Then she released his hand and very determinedly turned and locked the conference room door.

“Whas’ sis?”

“You. Wanting me. Me. Wanting you.” She paused, staring at him all rabbit-eyed. God, was she trembling? “It’s not like before… not for me. I’m not using you for an escape. You know that, don’t you?”

His mouth curved a bitter line. “Didn’t care when you were.”

“Yes, you did.” Her gaze was certain again. “I know you did.”

“Cared more that you came,” he said a bit unsteadily. Then he smirked, curling his tongue behind his teeth, and watched her eyes track the motion. A sudden waft of her arousal followed. Well, wasn’t that neat. “Believe you came all sorts of different ways.”

She sucked in a sharp breath and looked at him with a kind of hunger he could damn near taste. It shocked him down to his toes. It made his prick rock-hard. Sodding hell. He just stood and admired the look for a moment, reveling in it. She smiled slightly, coyly, at his stillness and sauntered forward, stripping off her short leather jacket as she went. It fell to the floor in a soft fluttering of fabric.


He chuckled at that, though the noise half caught in his throat with a low groan. “Gonna take care of me, are you, nurse Buffy?”

She reached him, the thin cotton of her shirt showing hardened nipples. Christ, she wasn’t even wearing a bra. Slowly, she traced warm arms up his chest, making him shiver, her gaze equal parts grave and delighted. “Yes, going to take very good care of you.” She rubbed his chest lightly with her palm, over his heart, over the bits he’d once tried to rip out. “It’s long past due.”

And all at once he was fighting tears like a bleeding ponce. He looked away, grinding his teeth tight against his jaw as a welter of love and fear and aching rose in him. Buffy’s gentle hand cupped his cheek, forcing his gaze back to her. Green eyes regarded him anxiously, the look shifting to understanding after a moment.

“Hey. It’s okay.” She trailed a finger across his lips, tracing the edges of them. “Tell me what you need, Spike. Anything.”

He laughed a bit breathlessly. “Oh, pet. You have no idea what you’re offering.”

She stepped closer, wrapping one warm arm around his waist and letting the other run through the hair at the nape of his neck. It was so gentle. Tender, even. So he just luxuriated in it. God, tenderness from Buffy. His eyes fluttered shut.

Then her lips were at his ear. “What I’m offering is anything you want. Blockhead.”

His eyes snapped open at the affection in her voice and he pulled back to look at her face. She was watching him with some mix of amusement and lust and… “You believe I still love you, don’t you?”

She frowned at him for a moment, then her face grew slack with comprehension. “I believe you.”
His world tilted on its axis. Buffy Summers believed a demon could love. “Really?”

Her shoulders slumped slightly at his obvious, fragile hope. “I believe you,” she repeated softly. A sad smile curved up her mouth. “I’m too selfish to believe anything else these days.”

He took that in like a bolt of sun to the heart. The good kind. “And you love me?”

“I love you.” No hesitation.

That sealed it for him. He took in a needless, gasping breath. “And you like me?”

The flicker of amusement was back. “Sometimes.”

“Bitch.”

Of all the responses he expected to that retort, none of them was her sudden, delighted laughter.

He didn’t dare break the spell by opening up his gob with an inquiry, so he just snaked an arm down low on her waist and sent another to brush her very lonely looking tits.

She gasped slightly at that and answered his unspoken question anyway. “Only you can say that like it’s a compliment.”

He smirked. “That’s because it is.”

She pouted then. Actually fucking pouted. He was going to mess himself in his trousers in no time flat at this rate. “No more talkies.” A flash of seriousness crossed her face. “I want to kiss you.”

“’M not bloody stopping you, pet.”

“But is it what you want?”

He nearly laughed in her face. “Buffy, I want every bit of you.”

“Oh.” She looked thoughtful for a moment. “Well, good then.”

He arched a brow. “Good, eh?”

“Spike, I just flew halfway around the world to get to you. I didn’t exactly stop over to have coffee.”

“Fair point.”

“Duh.”

He narrowed his eyes at her smirking face, then pulled her tight against his chest and flat-out shamelessly mauled her lips. And the most glorious part was that she let him. No, not just let. Joined in.

It was then that he realized he’d never really kissed Buffy before. Sure, he’d touched her lips (and pretty much every other inch of her body) but he’d never had her be on the other side equally as happily there and ravenous as he was. Her lips were like fire, and her tongue scorching wet. Christ, but he’d pay to dust this way again.

Then she was tugging at the lapels of his duster, breaking away momentarily to gasp for breath. “Off. Off now.”
Didn’t have to tell him twice. He shrugged off his duster and flung it to the floor, whirling their bodies in the same motion so that Buffy ended up pinned against the edge of the conference table. There was a phone near the edge and he shoved it to the ground, to Buffy’s amused huff.

“Was that necessary?”

“Abso-bloody-lutely,” he said with a grin, lifting her hips so that she was sitting on the table. He frowned then, looking her golden form over, from her panting thinly clad upper half to her booted and belted lower. “Why in the hell are you wearing trousers?”

“Don’t rip them.” As if to punctuate her remark, she started to wiggle them off. Which really didn’t help her case, in the end. He helped her tug off her kit with a growl and then just stared at her, drinking her in. Her with her perky, rosy tipped tits, and her little bunch of trimmed curls hiding the most delicious cunt, and her slender waist, the deceptively fragile looking thing that it was.

“God, Buffy,” he breathed.

“You know, it’s been a minute since I’ve done this, but I’m pretty sure we both have to be naked for the whole thing to work,” she said dryly.

Another flash of light through his heart. “Been a minute? You mean…”

She flushed, the color leaching down her neck in the way that made her look oh so beautifully bite-able. “Yeah. Of course not.” Then her brow furrowed a bit angrily. “Of course not. Idiot.”

He shrugged. “Was dead. Didn’t expect that you’d turn into a nun.”

She looked a bit sheepish. “Well, I was… was about to go on a date. It was a mistake. But Willow convinced me… I mean, it was with–” She stopped herself abruptly, apparently thinking better of her words. Oh, hell. Meant it was probably someone important.

He clenched his jaw. “A date with who?”

“Um, this guy called the Immortal.”

He felt his face stiffen, near to vamping. “The bloody Immortal?!” Jesus Christ on a cross. Of course it was the bloody Immortal. If not Angelus, it was always the fucking Immortal mucking things up for him and taking his woman. Story of his tragically stupid unlife.

“Oh,” Buffy said with a small squeak. “You know him?”

He snarled and nearly ripped his clothes off. His jeans button went flying, and pinged off the wall. “I’ll take that as a yes.” Her eyes fastened onto his naked body with unapologetic fervor, scanning him from toes to hair tips, although she lingered somewhere in the middle.

Her want made him pause in his sudden fury, and his mind cleared. “Wait a tick. You cancelled it, yeah?”

She was looking at him like he was an imbecile now, but he didn’t care. “Yeah.”

He broke into a toothy grin. “I love you, Slayer,” he nearly crowed.

And without waiting for a reply, he spread her luscious legs and angled his cock at her entrance. Any words in her head apparently fled at that, because suddenly she was gripping his shoulders like he was her port in the storm, nails biting into his skin.
“Yes,” she murmured. “Please.”

He paused then, surprising them both, and slid into vamp face. He felt Buffy’s startlement and stared at her a bit pugnaciously.

“What I want,” he growled through fangs.

It was a test. And he knew she knew it.

The man was gone and the vampire was unchipped. He’d never been allowed to shag her in game face before. Oh, he could bite and scratch all he wanted, but he better have fucking looked like a man while he did it. The one time he let his fangs out (on accident, mind you) she punched him in the face and then left in disgust. All the while indignant that he had ruined her evening. Right. Because he made her so bloody happy all the other times.

Not this time. Not now.

She paused for a long moment – long enough for him to panic a bit and regret the whole thing. Bloody hell. He had Buffy naked and willing and asking and in love with him and he here was about to muck it all up. Sodding demon never knew when to quit.

Then she cocked her head and completely destroyed his terrified inner monologue. “What does your demon love about me?”

His eyes widened, even as Buffy took the initiative and pulled at his unresisting hips until he was nestled against her folds. One quick tug from the Slayer and he was inside her. They punctuated her question with matching moaning gasps, and his head fell to her shoulder.

God bloody Christ fuck.

His prick was on fire. “Buffy…”

She just rolled her shoulder, nudging his head as her legs wrapped around his waist. Her breath was panting like a drum.

“Question, right,” he managed, rousing. He slid home further into her, and let her wet cunt take him right up. She’d always done that so well. Fuck. Her hands dug further into his shoulders. “Loves your strength,” he said hoarsely, recovering and thrusting deeply into her. “Loves that you’re stronger.”

A pleased smile took her lips, all rounded and soft on account of her getting shagged (by him!) at the moment. She pulled him closer, kneading his ass with her heels. “What else?”

He threaded a hand down her body and watched her shiver. “Loves your steadfastness.” He pounded into her a bit, rocking the table. She took it with a moaning grunt.

“Stead… fast?”

He dipped his mouth to pull in a nipple, swirling his tongue about, and she whimpered. He released it with a grin. “Your loyalty, luv.” He grabbed the other nipple.

“Oh-h,” she panted, arching, her head falling back. “W-what else?”

He sent a hand down between them, to where he was steadily pounding in and out of her quim. It was bloody nirvana to watch, all her wet, pink folds taking him, hiding all the Slayer muscles that
grabbed his cock like a vice. He tapped a finger on the swelled button of her clit and drank in her cry. “Loves all the noises you make. All the grunts when you fight and the huffs when you’re brassed and the peal of your laughter and the gasps you make when you’re getting shagged by the Big Bad.”

She managed a laugh even then, although it was husky and low. “What else?”

He tilted his hips, changing the angle to drive in deeper, and her panting grew heavier as she squirmed against him.

“God, Spike.”

He smirked. “Loves the way you move. That you’re always in motion. You never stand still. Such a predator, you are.”

She looked like she might protest that one, but she stopped and just nodded. Then her eyes narrowed and she reached down to fondle his balls with deft and firm fingers.

“Christ, woman!”

“Predator,” was her mischievous reply. “Always in motion.”

“Not going to last if you keep that up.” He was half a nut from busting as it was, and his fingers coated in her juices as he swirled against her clit was making her perfume rise even headier. Her walls fluttered slightly around him in the edges of orgasm.

Buffy leaned forward until her tits were against his chest, her arms looping around his neck until her pulse was against his fangs. “Don’t need to last,” she murmured. “Always next time.”

He didn’t have enough blood left in his brain to make a reply to that. Instead, he found himself entranced by the golden, gorgeous column of her neck. He followed the rocketing pulse through it, smelled the holy grail of blood coursing through her veins. A twinge swept through him. “Sit back.”

But she didn’t. She held on tighter. “Nope.”

She was going to kill him. “Buffy,” he managed between thrusts, “soulless here now, remember? Want to bite you, alright? And right now having a really hard time convincing myself I shouldn’t.”

“Are you going to kill me?”

The serenity of her tone shocked him into stillness and he pulled back to gape at her. Her expression was strangely complacent. “Are you completely off your trolley? Why the bloody fuck would I do a thing like that? Want to bite you, not kill you.” He paused. “Well, alright, so there’s a small bit that wants to kill you, but it’s a damn bleeding small bit.” He heaved a frustrated sigh. “Not even you. Just kill. Demon loves you, remember?”

Buffy just smiled at him. Had she gone entirely sack of hammers? Was he missing something here? “I know. That’s why I wasn’t worried.”

That took a moment to sink in. “You… don’t mind if I bite you?”

“Did you seriously not figure that out yet?”

He growled at her. “You infuriating bint.”

“Yep!” She smirked at him.
He thrust into her viciously and her smile wiped away into a symphony of moans. She tilted her neck to him.

“No,” he said roughly. “Other side.”

“That’s side’s a bit… crowded.”

“Know that, don’t I?” His amber eyes swept down her skin, lingering on the three marks that covered it. She was a bleeding patchwork quilt. Nest’s bite. Peaches’s bite. Sodding Dracula’s bite. “Gonna wipe them all away, if I can.”

He renewed his efforts against her slick little clit and she just managed a nod. “O-okay.”

As her cunt started to tighten around him in earnest, he let his fangs drop in full and nuzzled her neck, breathing in all the scent of Buffy – the scent he’d desperately tried to recreate from memory for the last several months (ghost, after all, wasn’t like he had much else to do); the bits of her that exuded vanilla and citrus from her care products, and tangy richness from her arousal, and a bit of heady must from her sweat, and something so intrinsically her that he wasn’t even sure it had a name.

He sank his fangs in deep and sent them both off the edge. His cock spilled into her, nearly rendering him brainless even as her blood doubled the effect.

The shadow of man inside him wanted to ruin this bit of heaven by reminding him that he was biting someone, taking their life from them, doing what a man mustn’t. Being a monster. Spike ignored it. You let me be a Champion, mate. Now I get to be a monster. But only hers. Only for her.

So he gloried in it; only a few short pulls, but it was more than he’d dared dream. More than his poor dim and evil brain had even thought possible, way back when, when all he’d wanted was her pale corpse and his third notch. But even then she’d taken up his entire world. He just hadn’t expected her to command it.

“I love you, Buffy,” he murmured, withdrawing from her neck with a purring sigh.

“Mhmm,” came her humming and half-conscious reply as she nuzzled into his shoulder. “Love you.”

He grinned wolfishly at that, looking over her golden form. God, but she was so magnificent when she was flushed and freshly fucked. “Now, what was that about finding Peaches?
After Conference

We are always pulling from our past. Fossils are the dream of the sickness of someone you have not met for a long time.

- Primus St. John

When the haze of pleasure cleared, the wheels in Buffy's mind started to turn, like some rusted waterwheel set to motion again. A rush of insecurities flooded in.

She unwrapped her legs from Spike’s waist and slid off the table, his already hardening cock slipping from her and making them both moan.

“There’s probably a lot we need to talk about,” she said softly as she grabbed her clothes, doing everything but look at him. Coward, her brain admonished. She grabbed a few tissues from a side table to wipe off the spendings dripping down her thighs, then tugged on her underwear.

Spike chuckled from behind her. “I go where you go. We shag a ton. Sometimes go kill things. Doesn’t seem so complicated to me.”

“It’s the killing things that worries me,” Buffy murmured. She forced herself to turn and meet Spike’s gaze. His eyes flashed with sudden anger and she winced. “I’m sorry, but I have to ask. You know I do.”

He sighed heavily, making a wide motion with one arm as he started to gather up his own clothes. “Go on, Slayer. Ask away.”

The resignation in his voice nearly undid her. Still, there was no getting rid of the Slayer voice in her head without the confirmation. It would eat her alive with uncertainty until it broke them, even without any reality of something done wrong. Sometimes she was pretty sure having a soul could make you more screwed up than not having one. Spike seemed like a perfect representation of that. She looked him over. So much the same and yet so different. There was no hesitancy in him now. No apology. “You’re not planning to start eating people, are you?”

His lips quirked. “Yeah. As a matter of fact, thought I’d start dining on L.A.’s finest right away. There’s a bint with a yappy poodle down the street that I’m dying to off. Did I mention I’m just itching for the woman I love to drive a bloody stake through my heart?”

“You…”

His dark amusement fled and she was again met with a hard stare. “Buffy, I lost my soul, not my fucking common sense. You think I don’t know the rules?” He ticked them off on his fingers. “Don’t eat people. Don’t even kill ‘em, unless they’re possessed by summat evil like Preacher boy. Don’t be generally evil. Listen when Buffy says no. Pending that, don’t let Buffy stay unshagged for longer than a day.”

She tried to stifle a smile and failed. “I’m not sure the last one is a rule.”

He waggled his brows, breaking the tension. “Is now.” His expression lapsed into something serious again. “Look, pet, you trust me with your heart, yeah?”
She laughed a bit shakily, snatching up her jeans and tugging them on. How did he always find all the places of her that were murky and frightened? She’d given him her heart, yes. That was gone – she’d signed it away over a year ago. It wasn’t coming back. But trusted him with it…?

“God, could there be a more terrifying question?” She looked down at the wrinkled shirt in her hands. “Not exactly had the best luck in that area.”

Spike waited until she met his gaze again. Damn vampire. “It's not like the souled ones were much better than the soulless.”

“Um, Riley didn’t go and try to end the world after I slept with him.”

“I'm not talking about bloody *shagging*, Buffy. You and I shagged plenty before and you didn’t love me.”

There was a beat of silence. “I couldn’t let myself,” she admitted. It was something old Buffy likely wouldn’t have owned up to, but she decided post-Hellmouth Buffy could be a little braver. She hoped. He deserved that much, after everything.

Spike’s eyes lit up, telling her she’d said exactly the right thing. “Regardless,” he continued, a bit more gently, “not talking about your body. Fine piece of art though it is. Mean just your heart.”

Buffy touched the already healing bite mark on her neck. It still stung a little bit. And tingled. Spike’s feeding control was almost astounding, if her past experience of the lure of Slayer blood was any indicator. Even his bite had been almost reverent. Well, as reverent as taking life could be. It had been… caring. And that, really, had always been the heart of him. Of his attention to her. He may have royally screwed up a lot, but he always cared. He was *careful* with her, but not in the sense that he thought she might go astray without proper guidance, like Angel. Not as if she was playacting and he was waiting for to come to her senses about what was really important, like Riley. Spike simply did whatever he could to keep her intact without limiting her range of motion. Even if he sometimes did it in the stupidest ways that, between the two of them, had ended up making everything worse and not better.

Still, he’d managed to be twice the man of her first two loves when it came to being careful with her heart. Even when she hadn’t even given it to him. Even though he wasn’t really a man. (Now less than before, actually; though not less than the time before that.)

She hadn’t been able to let go of that fact once upon a time. The man who wasn’t. *Couldn’t* let it go. She’d needed it to hurt. She’d wanted everything to hurt. Until she hadn’t anymore. And then it was just her entire world hurting instead, constantly on the edge of failure, until she’d let Spike sacrifice everything to make it stop.

But then, that Buffy was gone. All of those Buffys were.

So, the question was, she supposed, what did *this* Buffy want? What was she willing to believe? To risk? Did facts even matter anymore? Her life had never seemed to be ruled by them, in a way that was equal parts comforting and entirely terrifying. She was prophecy breaker and resurrectee and the original One of now thousands of Ones.

She could so give Spike a run for his money with the whole ‘rebel without a cause (or with one)’ routine.

Her fingers traced the bite marks again and she watched Spike’s eyes follow the motion, a turbulent mix of wonder and worry. The sunlight through the necro-tinted windows was lighting up his blue
eyes with incredible clarity. Wow, he was really beautiful in the sun. But then... he was beautiful in
the moonlight, too.

She dropped her hand.

“I trust you,” she whispered. “I trust you with my heart.”

The phrase sounded a bit corny to her ears, like the lyrics of some terrible 80’s pop song (her voice
didn’t have any of the incredible, burning inflection his managed without even trying) but Spike
practically beamed with pleasure and relief. “Then you have to trust that I’m not going to
intentionally hurt you, Buffy. Sure I’ll muck up things here and there. Always have, prolly always
will, but never because I’m trying to.” He gave her a long, searching look. “I’m not a lover that
leaves, either. You should bloody well know that by now. Fuck all, pet. Came back from burning up
and from being a damn ghostie, didn’t I? So, you’re stuck with me now. And I’ll do my best to not
let you regret it.”

The earnestness and passion reflected on his face was almost breathtaking. He said it all like an oath.
Like an immutable state of being. They were sweeter words than love, in the end. Love didn’t
promise that it wouldn’t hurt you.

“I can live with that.” She smiled at him with as much warmth as she possessed and tugged on her
shirt.

He sighed. “Sure we have to get dressed again?”

“Uh, unless you want us to go see Angel naked.”

Spike snarled at that, eyes flashing. And was it wrong that she found it entirely sexy? Well, she’d
decided to love a vampire (um, again), so she supposed it was probably encouraged.

“Wanker’s not seeing you that way again ever.”

She just rolled her eyes. “Well then, we’d better actually wear clothes.”

Spike grumbled for a moment, then begrudgingly pulled on his jeans, swearing lowly as he
remembered the top button was flung somewhere on the floor. He ended up keeping his pants
tightened up with his belt, all the while mumbling something about “can get stuffed” and “brooding
berk” and “paws off.”

Buffy bit down on a smile and unlocked the door, sending a hand to smooth her sure-to-be disaster-y
hair. “Shall we?”

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“What is this place, anyway? I thought it was a law firm.”

Spike snorted, glancing around the makeshift hell he’d called home for the last handful of months.
Good bloody riddance. “Loads of all else happening here too, pet.”

“Evil ‘all else’?”

He gave her a pointed look and Buffy frowned. “Right.” She scanned the offices as they passed, and
he heard her mutter, “So what the hell is he doing running it?”

Damn good question, that.


“What? Like try and end the world?” Spike drawled. “Never.”

He saw the immediate response well on her lips, knew it practically by heart. Something something bloody soul. That was the tune. But then… she stopped and chuckled slightly. Well, wasn’t that new. “Are we saying I should keep a sword handy?”

Spike thought his brows might have lifted up to his hairline. “Right. Who are you and what have you done with Buffy? Think you might recognize the bird. Looks like you, smells like you, but lacks that little bit we call a ‘sense of humor’.”

Buffy smacked his shoulder, with what was clearly less than half her strength. A sodding love tap was what it was. “Ha ha.” Then her amused annoyance faded into wry thoughtfulness. “I didn’t even know it was missing before, you know.”

“Eh?”

“Humor. Making with the funnies.” She shrugged. “Think it got dropped by the wayside somewhere between graduating high school and dying the second time. Being away from a Hellmouth now... well, I wasn’t lying. The old Buffy Summers is gone.”

Spike took her hand and drew it up to his mouth, kissing her knuckles reverently. “Can’t tell you how much I look forward to knowing the new one, pet.”

She blushed, and hell if it didn’t give him a stiffy all over again. Seemed at least her girlish embarrassment had come through. Thank god. He was greatly looking forward to exploring the many different ways he could make her flush, as he was pretty certain she wouldn’t kick him out of bed for it anymore. Christ, he was likely even going to get to do it in her bed. That thought halted him in his tracks.

Buffy glanced over with curious concern. “Spike?”

He shook his head slightly. “Sorry, luv. Just realized... I don’t know a damn thing about your life now. Nothing about the Bit or the bleeding Scoobies.” Bunch of traitors that they were. God, even the Niblet had kicked her to the curb in the end. Not that his own relationship with the youngest Summers up to that point had been outstanding anymore.

“Oh.” Buffy smiled slightly and they continued leisurely down the hallway again. He hadn’t let go of her hand and she hadn’t asked him to. It made him giddy, like a damn schoolboy. “Well, Dawn’s in Rome with me, finishing up school. We’re living with Andrew, if you can believe it.”

Spike blinked. “You’re living with that little ponce?”

“Yeah. He’s enjoying the country almost as much as I am.” She waggled her brows. “Italian men are pretty.”

He couldn’t help the growl that escaped at that and Buffy rolled her eyes. “He’s my official Watcher, okay? Well, Watcher-in-training. But he’s helping manage the Rome Council branch.”
“Lot of responsibilities on those girly shoulders.”

She snorted. “He’s over the moon, as you can imagine. Dawn had to threaten to break all his Star Trek tapes to get him to stop talking our ears off about how he wanted to make tweed part of the official dress code because it’s ‘a great reminder of the stronghold of Council tradition’.” She laughed. “He’s grown kind of a hideous moustache, too.”

“Christ.” Spike shook his head. “He’s gonna be at our bedroom door at all hours, you know. Dodgy little tosser’s in love with me.”

Buffy glanced over at him with sharp speed, her breath catching. “Our bedroom?”

Spike felt his stomach drop slightly. “Uh… right. Guess we hadn’t–”

“No.” Her voice was uneasy. “We hadn’t.”

There was an awkward pause, where Spike didn’t dare even take a breath, his chest a whirling mass of anxiety and confusion. Christ, he was so out of his depth. Did she want them to… date? Do a distance thing? Before, he might’ve been alright with that (would’ve been alright with anything, so long as it included her. Had been, in fact). But now, couldn’t say that in the least. No man left in him to remind him that slow was right and proper. Demon in him didn’t sodding care about slow. Buffy was his and he didn’t intend to stay a single moment away from her side until he dusted again.

“Um… but I guess now is as good a time as any,” Buffy murmured, giving him a sidelong look. “I hadn’t honestly gotten as far as that, you know. Was kind of stuck on the whole ‘get to Spike’ thing.”

He swallowed heavily. “Right. Well, we got past that part, seems like.”

“Right,” she repeated. There was a pause. “I was serious before, you know. When I asked where we were going. We don’t have to stay in Rome.”

He started to breathe again with all the we’s she was throwing around. His demon subsided with its internal growling. “S’pose not, pet. But what about the Bit? About the Council business?”

“I really don’t care about it,” she said flatly. “I’ve more than served my time. It was just something to do. And Dawn… well, if she doesn’t want to come wherever we go, there are plenty of people she can stay with, though it wouldn’t be my first choice.”

The worry in her tone caught him. “Buffy, are you offering to leave just because I might want to?”

She blinked at him. “Well, yeah. Of course.”

His throat tightened with a welling of emotion. She was giving him say in her (their?) life. “S’pose that means you might consider ‘shacking up’ with me, at least?”

She laughed at that, then froze. “Oh. Oh god. Before… you thought I meant…” She smacked her forehead. “Jesus. I’m such an idiot.”

He just stared at her, baffled. “Pet?”

She winced and looked over at him shamefacedly. “Before. I didn’t mean that we shouldn’t be in the same, um, bedroom. I just wasn’t sure that we should be in the same apartment.”

That earned her another blank stare. God, he loved her, but she butchered verbalizing like it was it
was bloody going out of style sometimes. “Pretty sure we have to be in the same apartment to be in the same bedroom, Slayer,” he offered tentatively.

She huffed in irritation, although it was clearly at her own word troubles. “No. I mean, we should maybe get a different apartment. One that Andrew doesn’t live in.”

He chuckled in relieved exhalation. “Would be preferable, luv.” He grinned at her. “Seeing as I plan to have you naked on pretty much every available surface of wherever we happen to be.”

“Uh, there might still be a teenage girl in residence, you know.”

“When the Niblet’s at school,” he amended, pleased that she hadn’t denied any of his desires. He briefly wondered how sturdy her kitchen table was. Did she even have one? Hard to say with Buffy, but he somehow doubted even she would forget that bit of necessary furniture.

His musings kept him occupied until they arrived at Poofter central. Angel’s office. For once, he was sort of disappointed that he couldn’t just go straight through the door. It had been damn good fun to interrupt his brooding grandsire at all times without warning. He rubbed his chest almost unconsciously, to where the kind of emptiness still tugged, like a gaping wound.

Buffy noticed and she laid a soft kiss against his shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“Better than,” he said softly, touching the bite mark on her neck with light fingers, and watching her shiver slightly.

She laid her hand over his with a grimace. “He’s going to notice, isn’t he?”

“I bloody well hope so.” And it’s not like we don’t sodding reek of sex, he wanted to gleefully add, but stopped himself at the last moment. Best not to rock the boat.

Buffy rolled her eyes and pushed the door open. Without knocking, he was pleased to notice.

Peaches was on the phone when they came in, and his eyes widened almost comically. Served the wanker right.

“Uh, I’ll have to call you back,” Angel muttered into the phone. And a moment later, a snapped, “No, this really will have to wait.” He hung up the phone, rising in one swift motion. “Buffy… I didn’t know you were coming.”

“Mmm,” Buffy said with deceptive casualness. “Guess my ‘Spike’s back from the dead’ invite got lost in the mail?”

Angel frowned heavily. It was a shame his face didn’t stick that way. Would save him the trouble of making the motion every five bleeding seconds. He started to come around the desk, and Spike saw the moment his nostrils flared. Saw the look of incredible anger and horror that flashed in the Poof’s eyes. So did Buffy, apparently.

She glared at him before he could even form a word, her gaze all hard and icy. Oh ho, kitten had her claws out. This was going to be right entertaining. He leaned against the wall to watch the show.


Angel’s eyes flicked from her to Spike and back with thunderous shock. “Buffy–”

“I told you he was in my heart, Angel!” she nearly growled. His demon roused with the sound.
Fuck, she needed to repeat that later, where he could shag her senseless. Somewhere assuredly not with Peaches present. As much as he was pleased to rub all evidence of his lovemaking with Buffy under his grandsire’s nose, voyeurism was not in cards. The bastard would probably enjoy it.

“You didn’t think that warranted me a freaking phone call?!” Buffy continued, nearly shouting now.

“Been kind of busy,” Angel said finally, still looking furious. “Didn’t realize an ex… whatever was that important. And he was a ghost up until a day ago, I might add. Kind of thought he might stay that way.”

“Aww, Peaches, tell me how you really feel,” Spike said, with as much dripping sarcasm as he could muster.

Buffy clenched her fists and Spike brightened. Well, well. Maybe she actually would deck the Poof.

“He’s not an ex anything,” she said tersely. “He’s a current… anything.” Then she shook her head at her inept phrasing, frowning, and Spike chuckled. “The current. And only,” she amended, her expression still pinched as she tried to make sense. God love her.

Angel’s angry expression dropped to pleading. Oh, great. Time for the bloody kicked puppy routine.

“You told me I had the cookies,” he said almost petulantly. There was that stupid cookie conversation again.

Buffy’s expression turned positively incensed, her eyes flashing and her face flushed with anger. She was magnificent. “Seriously? Are you twelve?” She glanced away, biting her lip, then said much more softly, “I suck at saying no to you, Angel.”

Spike froze.


Spike exhaled a relieved breath, then shook his head. Christ, she really needed to let that metaphor die.

Angel shot him a dirty look. “But Spike?!”

“Yes, Spike,” Buffy said flatly, and his undead heart skipped a beat.

Angel looked at her a bit uncomprehendingly. Then his expression cleared and suddenly Peaches was smiling. Oh hell, that couldn’t be good.

“Oh. God, Buffy, I didn’t realize. You don’t know.”

Spike was sure he and the Slayer were equally nonplussed at that.

“Know what exactly?” she demanded.

“Buffy… Spike doesn’t have a soul anymore.”

Spike burst out laughing. “That was your trump card, mate? What do you take me for? Like I’d hide summat like that from her.”

Buffy looked equally amused, then her expression darkened. “And if I understand correctly, he only lost it because he saved your ass from not having one.” Well, alright, it wasn’t the most glowing acceptance of his current state, but he’d take it. “And he doesn’t need one, anyway,” she added,
throwing a soft look back at him. His heart swelled with pride and love.

“But—”

“No buts. Deal with it. You’re a big boy.” She glanced around the office, arching a brow. “The big
boy around here, it appears.”

“Oh, he bloody wishes.”

“Shut up, Spike.”

“Oh no, gramps. Your merry ol’ Partners just did me what for and you’re still dancing to their pretty
little tune. Think I’ll keep with the open gob.”

“You have no idea what’s going on.”

“Spent the last few months ‘round here all ghost like. Heard some pretty interesting conversations.
Think I got a lot figured.”

“Obviously not,” was Angel’s answering growl.

“I don’t care,” Buffy interrupted. She heaved a deep breath. One that made her breasts rise and fall
oh so delightfully. “Look. Spike and I are leaving. I just…” she frowned, blinking with some
realization. “Actually, that’s it. Um, we’re leaving.” She turned then and headed toward the door,
pausing only once to give the dumbfounded Angel a hard look. “Try to not do anything that requires
me coming back here in a non-friend capacity?”

There was a long moment where Angel’s face flashed a dozen emotions, finally settling on unhappy
resignation. “Yeah. I’ll try.”

“Thanks.” She turned to Spike, smiling slightly, and held out a hand. “Ready to go?”

His entire being suffused with warmth as he slid his fingers against her. “Ready, luv.”
After What Sounded A Lot Like Yelling

Love is a dream of contraries as far as sweethearts are concerned. To dream that you do not succeed in love is a sign that you will marry and have a happy life. To dream that you are in the company of your lover is also fortunate…

- Primus St. John

They hadn’t walked more than a few feet from Angel’s office when Spike tugged her arm, whirling her against the hallway wall like some out of control ballerina. The beginnings of a laugh escaped, only for the rest to catch in her throat as he pinned her with the full length of his body, his erection pressing urgently into her pelvis. Her breath continued its exhale in a hitched shiver, and Spike smirked at her, blue eyes bright and mirthful. Very annoyingly, he said nothing.

“What–”

She was cut off almost immediately, pressed into a searing kiss. “Brilliant,” her vampire murmured huskily, lips leaving hers to brush the sensitive skin below her ear and nibble along her throat. “You were sodding brilliant.”

“You’re just saying that because I yelled at– ah-h.” She stuttered into silence as his tongue darted out to press against his bite mark. A cascade of heat flooded through her. Wow, did vampire sex bites always do that?

Spike seemed to hear her unspoken thought – or maybe she had spoken the words aloud. She honestly wasn’t sure. Her mind was still whirling with adrenaline from her ‘conversation’ with Angel, compounded by her body’s realization that having Spike once today, after two years of drought, wasn’t nearly enough. He was rain in the desert, continually soaking through and leaving her ravenous for more. She hadn’t been this voracious since the Hellmouth, this happy in perhaps ever, this free in probably never.

“Is the saliva, pet?” Spike growled against her ear. “That jolt. Lovely little drug cocktail, when done right.” He paused. “Would love to show you more sometime.”

She swallowed roughly, her heart pounding as if it was running a marathon. “Never heard about that before,” she managed.

Spike huffed slightly. “Well, why did you think most vamp meals weren’t all thrashing about and raising a ruckus? S’not like most of the undead community is all that up an’ up in the looks department.” At her expression of surprised realization, he raised his eyes to the ceiling in clear exasperation. “Christ. What in the world was Watcher teaching you all those years?”

“How to not die?” She shrugged. “Wasn’t exactly research-y gal. Giles said ‘baddie’, I asked ‘how dead’. The nature of vampire bites wasn’t exactly my highest concern.” She frowned in memory. “I knew… I mean, I knew it did something… nice. Riley… after all. But Angel’s bite hurt. So, yeah.” Actually, it had felt like a red-hot poker searing her neck and simultaneously strangling her, even as everything alive was wrenched out with exquisite agony. But she’d tried to block out that memory
over the years. Tried not to think about crushing metal beneath her fingers in an attempt to transfer the pain to something, anything other than her own internally screaming self, her body already too faded into death to be of any real use. Unconsciousness had been a mercy.

Spike sighed, pulling back from her, and she winced. Right. Two exes in the same sentence did not equal lusty Spike. Wow, she was on a roll. If she mentioned Dracula biting her, she’d really have the whole thing rounded out. She bit down on her lip to keep from speaking.

“First off, you weren’t shagging Peaches at the time,” Spike said tersely. “None of those merry little hormones pattering about for the enzymes to bond to. Need arousal at minimum. Why do you think the suck houses double in whoring? Secondly, Angel’s a complete prat who never gave a flying fuck whether or not his bites hurt. Matter of fact, spent most of his time making sure they did.” He scowled, face darkening further. “And speaking of the git, mind if we tottle off from evil headquarters ‘bout now? Been a tad cooped up for the last several months.”

Buffy swallowed her next question, as Spike’s patience was clearly at an end. For once, she didn’t want to push it. She’d seen enough of his bad moods over the years. Heck, she’d caused a lot of them. And inspiring another one didn’t seem appealing anymore.

“Um, I’m not the one who pushed me against the wall,” she said instead, with a measure of haughty self-righteousness that had always driven him wild.

Spike grinned at her, all frustration apparently dissipating with her words. “Didn’t seem to mind though.” He sighed happily, glancing back at Angel’s office. “God, that was priceless. Oscar worthy, you might even say. Wish I’d had a camera.”

“You’re evil.”

“Only so much as can’t be helped. Besides, thought dysfunctional families were all right and normal.”

Buffy snorted and righted herself away from the wall, straightening the shirt that Spike had somehow manage to sneak up to mid-waist without her noticing. Damn sneaky vampire. “I don’t think you and Angel can be called normal in any sense of the word. And you guys get negative points when you’re stuck in the same room.”

“Yeah. Had a bit of red-headed stepchild syndrome going on these last months,” he muttered, moving forward in the hallway again.

She fell in line beside him, throat clenching. “You could have called me before, you know. I wouldn’t have minded. Ghost you would still have been a million times better than no you at all.”

He threw her a quick, warm smile. “Appreciate the sentiment, luv, but…” His face clouded. “Best you weren’t around for the big reveal anyhow.”

“Which one? The popping back into existence thing or the solid body thing?”

“Both.” His tone was short.

Buffy paused. It was easy to forget Spike only been back in a real body for a day. And only back to life for a few months. But the undercurrent of pain was there, in the slight tic of his eye and along the slopes of his shoulders. And he was desperately trying to hide it from her now that he knew she wasn’t going away. Hide it for her. Save her from the burden of hurt.

He always tried to save her.
She took his hand.

“What was it like?”

He glanced at her sidelong, every inch of him tense. “Which one.”

“Well, both, but… first one first.”

He heaved a deep sigh. “Do we have to talk about this?”

She tightened her fingers around his. “We don’t have to. But I’d like to hear it if you think you can tell me.”

He didn’t reply for a long minute, not until they reached the elevator and let the doors close around them. “For me, was just a blink,” he said softly, staring at the elevator buttons. “One moment was burning to a crisp and the next was feeling everything go back the other way. Thought I’d gone to hell, matter of fact. Saw Peaches, and that was it. Attacked him right off.”

Buffy felt a giggle well in her chest. “You didn’t!”

“Yeah. Shame I went direct through him.” His lips quirked up as he watched her face, and she blushed under the scrutiny.

“What?”

“Just…” He shook his head. “Making you laugh, Buffy. Hard to wrap my head around it. Can’t figure if it’s you loving me, or what.”

“Oh.” The reminder was like a sucker punch to the stomach. A sharp and merciless reminder of how ill at ease they’d been, even by the end. They had been intimate strangers and distant lovers and just barely friends all wrapped into one. And none of it had been easy. She’d just finally fought for it – for him – instead of willing it all away, the way she’d tried to when she first found him crazy in the basement. She fought for *them*. She had to. Souled and guilt-ridden and gentled, Spike had given up the reins. He’d lost the desire for the fight and burn and suffocation of crazy love.

After her resurrection, she’d told him that he could never be what she needed or wanted because he didn’t have a soul. But he still took every bit of her abuse until everything broke entirely. The funny thing was, she was pretty sure post-resurrection her would have eaten souled Spike alive. Two people in desperate pain couldn’t save each other from drowning. Not the way Spike had saved her. He’d let her step on him and shove him under water so she could keep her head above the surface. Over and over and over again.

Of course, that kind of relationship was messy and dangerous. And doomed.

“Buffy?” Spike was looking at her now, concern etched across his face.

“Sorry. Got lost in my head.”

He snorted and smiled faintly, leaning against the elevator wall and closing his eyes. “Can sympathize. Been there, done that. got the bloody t-shirt.”

“Tell me about the second part?”

The elevator doors dinged and opened.

“Later.”
They stopped down to see Spike’s scientist friend before they left. She was a pretty slip of a woman, and so sweet and kind (and obviously absurdly smart) that Buffy felt slight tinges of unwarranted jealousy rise in her. They stroked into full-blown green-eyed monster when Spike wrapped the woman – Fred – into a monstrous bear hug, to her surprised squeal, and whirled her around the room.

“Spike! Put me down!” she said through gasps of laughter, in her stupidly charming southern accent. He did, finally, and gently kissed her forehead, her head cradled in his hands. “Thank you, luv.” Fred blushed bright red. “I didn’t do anything.”


It was a dismissal if she’d ever heard one.

Later.

Long story.

Once, there hadn’t been anything of him closed to her. In fact, he had always told her too much. Including all the things she didn’t want to hear (especially those). But not now. The soul had left its mark. Or maybe it was simply being away from her. Sometimes, to her complete chagrin and amazement, she forgot that Spike had a life before Sunnydale. He’d become so completely hers. Hers to fight with and fuck and hate and befriend, and – now – to love. Hers. Although sometimes she forgot that last part, too. It was especially easy to do, now that he had a life after Sunnydale and away from her. Until he looked back at her, and his gaze was so full of warmth and want and awe that she nearly shook under its power. After the Hellmouth, she’d never thought she’d see that gaze again. Had thought her poor memory was all she’d ever have (and god, why had she spent so much time desperately not memorizing every inch of him?).

She gave the very startled Fred her own hug, careful to do so lightly. “Thank you. For taking care of him.” Fred flushed again. “It was my pleasure.” She paused, smiling warmly. “But looks like it’s your turn now, huh?”

Buffy returned the smile. “Looks like.”

It was a relief when they stepped outside into the night.

Spike took a long deep breath, his face tilted to the sky. Oh yes, he was definitely beautiful in the moonlight.

His eyes flicked over to her. “So, where to, luv?”
“My hotel isn’t far.” She took a deep breath. “And then… I was thinking we’d go to Rome tomorrow? If you’re ready? If you want.”

He pulled her close against him as they walked, an arm slung around her waist. Claiming her. She leaned into his shoulder. “I want it, Buffy.” He smirked at her, rolling his tongue behind his teeth. “But right now, just want you.”

“We should walk faster.”

They made it to the hotel in record time. Spike pinned her in the thankfully empty elevator, wrapping her in a breath-stealing round of kisses, his hands wandering below her waist. Before she even knew his exact intention, he’d ripped her pants neatly in two.

“Hey!”

He just grinned at her. “Got more clothes nearby, yeah?”

“That’s not the point!”

“No, the point is that I’m about to make you scream in the lift,” he said, damningly smug. And then he slid neatly to his knees and pulled one of her legs over his shoulder as she pressed herself against the corner of the elevator, her fingers gripping the guardrails so hard it was miracle she didn’t leave an indent on the metal.

“Oh god, this is so on someone’s security camera right now.”

He waggled his brows. “Hope they enjoy the show.”

Right. Soulless vampire. Then Spike dipped his head down to her slit and she didn’t even care anymore. She desperately pressed the stop button on the elevator.

His lips bathed her with low kisses as his tongue flicked out and swirled her clit in a way that left her keening lowly.

“Oh fuck,” she whispered, leaning her head back against the wall. “Been too long.”

Spike traded his mouth for his fingers momentarily, lazily circling her with the pad of his thumb. His gaze was all dark eyed and intent. “Been making do with your poor self, pet? Or do you have some shiny little toy with ten speeds?”

He’d asked her those questions once before, a long time ago. It had made her blush brighter than Fred. It had made her angry. I have a vibrator, she’d said. Just like you, except it talks less. And then she’d shoved his head back down, shutting him up and continuing the pleasure.

Oh god.

Her stomach roiled uncomfortably, and she stiffened. “Get up.”

Spike’s face flashed a storm of emotions – panic and hurt and confusion and resignation. “Buffy…”

“Get up,” she repeated, more softly. “You don’t belong on your knees. You’re not a toy.”

His face cleared, and he sent his free hand to firmly grasp her leg on his shoulder, rendering her effectively immobile. “Buffy… I appreciate the sentiment. Really, I do. Means… means a lot.” He smiled gently at her. “But I’m exactly where I want to be.” His eyes flicked to the elevator stop button. “And the sooner I make you scream, the sooner the rest of the poor sods who need to use this
can be getting to it.”

“I just–”

“No ‘just’,” he said firmly, renewing his thumb’s ministrations and making her gasp. “That pair’s gone, remember? S’only you and me here, pet. Ruddy newborns, we are. And so far, the only loving we’ve done has been bloody brilliant shagging on a table.”

She laughed weakly, and found she’d run out of arguments. “I love you, Spike.”

He regarded her solemnly for a moment, then smirked. “Think I can make you love me even more in a minute.”

“I don’t doubt it,” she murmured.

His answer was simply a nip against her inner thigh, which made her tremble all the more because it had a hint of fang. Her lover was unleashed and unafraid.

Suddenly, Spike lifted his head, letting go of her clit despite her loud protest. His brow arched. “Everything alright?”

“Um.” She blinked through a slight haze. “Better than. At least until a second ago. Why?”

“Heart rate shot up.”

Oh. She felt the flush run down her throat. Watched Spike follow it with predatory interest. “I shouldn’t say.”

His brow rose higher. “Well, now you’re just teasing me.”

She winced. “This is going to come out really wrong.”

“Probably our specialty, pet. Try anyway?”

Oh boy. “I like that you can bite me and that you want to.” It came out in a rush.

If possible, his brows rose even higher. He stared at her for a long moment. “Uh… not sure what you think, Buffy,” he said carefully, “but that’s about the fucking sexiest you could have ever told me.”

“But before–”

“Would’ve felt guilty about wanting it,” he said softly. “Doesn’t mean I ever stopped. And sure as fuck always hated the chip, souled or no.”

“Oh.”

He grinned. “That all?”

“Mhm.”

“Right then.” He dipped back to her pussy, nipping it lightly, using his free hand to plunge three fingers in deep. She came undone a minute later, with a shuddering cry, her fingers releasing the metal guardrail to thread into his hair like a lifeline. He growled slightly and bit her thigh hard as she shuddered through the after shocks and she screamed as a second orgasm toppled right through her.

He released her gently and set her on her feet, his face bright and covered in her juices.
“You look like the cat that ate the canary.”

He chuckled, licking his lips. “I like eating Buffy cunt better.”

“Could you be cruder?”

“Without even trying.”

She gave him a hard look, but he just grinned. After a moment, he pulled off his duster and handed it to her, reminding her that her pants were entirely ruined. Stupid vampire. She fingered the leather as she buttoned it up. It was soft from age, likely light years away from the glory of its youth, when it had been stiff and clean and… “Nikki’s,” she murmured.

Spike glanced at her sharply. “Yeah,” he confirmed, clearly uneasy.

She looked at a deep scratch on the sleeve, long since mended, but still having left a mark. “If you didn’t have a soul before, with Robin… would you have killed him?”

He opened his mouth and shut it again. “I dunno.” He frowned. “Wasn’t the soul that kept me from killing him, though. I think.”

“No?”

“No.” She didn’t think he was going to add anything to that, but he did. “Wood wasn’t the only one who knew what it was like to lose his mum.”

She considered that, breathing in the deep scent of her vampire. He had never told her exactly what it was about his mother that was the trigger, but whatever it was had apparently been incredibly traumatic. Chances were good that she didn’t want to know. “But would you have cared?”

He drew in a deep breath, clenching his fists. “I don’t know, Buffy.” There was a pause. “Is that a problem?”

“No.” Because I wanted to kill him myself. “I was just curious.” She released the stop button on the elevator. It dinged almost immediately, and they exited into the hallway.

Spike looked over at her as they walked. “I’ll never get away from being a monster. Won’t even have a chance again. Not really. Back to being soulless Scourge of Europe and Slayer of Slayers and ex-bloody eater of things with a pulse. You really do get that, yeah?”

She stopped in front of her hotel room door and slid in the key. “I do.” Then she tugged on his belt loops and pulled him inside.

It wasn’t the best room in the place, but it had a big bed and a Jacuzzi tub. All care of the Council, of course. After everything, Giles seemed content to let her rob the coffers as she wished. She steered Spike straight into the bathroom, but he grabbed onto the doorframe and halted, eyes wild.

“Buffy… what are you doing?”

She stopped tugging at him. “Giving us new memories.”

He swallowed roughly at that, eyes on the floor. “Just because I don’t have the sodding soul anymore doesn’t mean I don’t remember it. Doesn’t mean I don’t remember every bloody awful and true thing my conscience told me.” His voice grew so faint she could barely hear it. “Doesn’t mean it doesn’t still echo back at me and tell me how worthless I am. How evil and bad.” They were silent
for a long moment, then he looked back up at her with a haunted gaze. “I’m terrified.”

She felt paralyzed by his eyes. “Terrified?”

“Got… got the soul to never do it again. You know that. Now…”

“Now it’s gone,” she finished.

He nodded.

She let out a shaky breath. “Spike. You said it yourself: you know the rules.”

He didn’t reply. He was looking at the floor again.

“If I say no, you’ll stop?”

He nodded. Violently.

“Then it’s fine.”

His gaze snapped back up, furious. “No, it’s not fucking fine! How the bloody hell are you even suggesting that?”

“I raped you four times. Do you remember?”

He froze. “Buffy.”

She held his gaze, everything in her trembling and hurting. “It’s true. I’ve had a really long time to think about it, you know. I raped you when I was invisible. That was the first time. You told me to go away. You told me I was cheating by sucking your cock and tried to push me off. I didn’t stop, though, and you eventually just stopped protesting. Do you remember?”

He gaped at her. “Buffy.”

“The second time, you were drunk and in a bad mood. Mad that I didn’t care about you. I didn’t care about that. I just wanted you to screw me. You weren’t even hard at first, you were mad enough. So I beat you up and then squeezed you until you were ready to be my fuck toy. Do you remember?”

His hands were making indents in the doorknob now. “Buffy… stop.”

“That’s not even counting all the times I just straight up abused you,” she whispered, determined to get it all out. Everything. It was poison in her veins. Had been cyanide in her brain, leaching into every thought. “But, like you said, we’re newborns. Right?”

He glared at her for a long moment, then laughed hoarsely. “Right. Use my words against me, why don’t you.”

“Happily.” She touched the edge of his cheek. “Take a bath with me? Love me?”

He broke at that and stepped onto the tile. They undressed each other with almost agonizing slowness as the bathwater heated and filled the tub. When it was ready and full, she sank into it, moaning at the heat. Spike slid in beside her after a moment, and he let her reposition until she was sitting on his lap, his cool hands brushing her nipples in an incredibly erotic counterpoint to the hot water.

They didn’t say anything for a long time, but that was okay. Finally, she turned to face him, her hair
fanning out into the water. “What’s it like, being soulless? Now that you’ve had both.”

He shrugged, eyes glued onto the curve of her collarbone. “Feel like a bloke who got summat amputated.”

Her breath caught. “Do you blame me?”

His eyes lifted to her, brow furrowed. “Blame you? For what?”

“I asked for the bloody thing, didn’t I?”

“You did it for me. You said so.”

His lips quirked up. “And yours truly has never done anything stupid on account of a woman.” He snorted. “Matter of fact, only reason I’m a vampire at all.”

“Wait– what?” Something in his tone told her plainly that he wasn’t talking about Drusilla.

“Just… never mind.”

She frowned, but let it go. Another story for another day. “Okay.” She rubbed a hand down his chest, watching his muscles shiver. “But back to your soul…”

Spike closed his eyes and leaned back against the tub wall, taking short shallow breaths. “I wanted it, Buffy. Fought for it. Wasn’t like Peaches’s cursed soul. This was mine. My soul.” He was trembling.

Buffy laid a steady hand on his arm, then paused. “Wait… what do you mean it wasn’t like Angel’s soul?”

His eyes blinked open and he gave her a puzzled look. “You didn’t know? S’not his soul.”

“What.” God, she’d been reduced to a one word vocabulary.

He continued to look incredulously at her. “Leaving aside that Liam was a bloody awful waste of human skin, gypsies didn’t want him back as whatever he was. Wanted him to suffer, yeah? Curse gave him some innocent beaming bright soul.” He snorted. “Haven’t you ever wondered how he’s able to brood like he invented the bloody pastime? Sure my soul would’ve too, if it’d been saddled with him.”

“Oh. Huh.” She blinked at him. “So… if Angel had died in the Hellmouth, someone else’s innocent soul would have gone kablooey?”

“Reckon so.”

She looked hard at the vampire she was straddling. At the strain tightening his muscles, and the pain narrowing his eyes, and the weariness shaping his brow. “Spike?”

“Yeah, pet?”

“Thank you. And I’m sorry.” Then she wrapped her arms around his waist and held him close. He sucked in a deep breath, then returned her grip fiercely, hands tangled in her wet hair.

They stayed like that until the water ran cold.
After Bathing

The sadness in his dream is a good omen for the future. It is a quest for lasting joy

- Primus St. John

Buffy was asleep beside him on the hotel bed, naked and sprawling, like a wayward mote of sunlight cresting the rumpled sheets. Or like a bit of bloom peeking out from last year’s loss.

For Chrissake.

Apparently newly remade soullessness hadn’t chased off William the Bloody Awful Poet. Not that he’d ever really gone anywhere to begin with, but a vampire could dream. Rolling his eyes, Spike examined his right hand, the one his Slayer had firmly clenched within her own, as if afraid he might toddle off in the middle of the night. The thought almost made him want to break into hysterical laughter.

What a far distance they’d come from Sunnyhell, where his bed had never been somewhere deemed safe and where hers was strictly off-limits. Well, until last year, anyway, when she’d hauled his tortured and pathetic self upstairs, away from the gaggle of bitty almost-Slayers and into the sanctuary he’d once ached for like the air he no longer needed. Of course, by then, everything was tainted by his weakness. Weakness of limb, weakness of mind. He hadn’t wanted her kindness – hadn’t deserved it. He was ashamed of himself for sniffing into her pillow and fighting a stiffy. Everything was drenched in shame.

The memory felt odd now, as if he’d been underwater at the time. Or maybe he was underwater now. Sod it all if he could tell the difference.

Now he simply marveled at the radiant woman in bed with him. They’d made love several times after the bath; slow, slipping unions where wet skin molded against wet to capture all the angles of them in just the right ways. Buffy was like some bloody pretzel, with all the knots and twists she could make in that petite body of hers. It had all been in slow motion tonight – all the bending and coupling and gasping – punctuated by something new: words.

Oh, he’d always spoken plenty. Talked at her. But never anything of real meaning – unless she was in a mood. Every once in a while, like the fucking horrorshow of a night when Captain Cardboard had come back, she wanted to hear the words. Some small piece of her that would periodically get cut open from way back when. The young girl inside the warrior who needed to hear his exclamations of love, even though she was so obviously disgusted with herself for it later.

The last year, when that was all gone, they’d had to fumble through the awkward conversation of ex-enemies and ex-lovers who were trying to pretend they were friends (even though they both knew it was bloody impossible). He’d settled for subservience and felt lucky for it. She… well, apparently she’d gone for love. She’d started trying, in the awful way they both tended to go about matters of the heart. But apocalypse never did a guilt-drenched vamp and a viciously gun shy Slayer any good. They’d said only a few big things that entire year, all covered by a myriad of things so small and useless they hardly counted as things at all.

He still counted them, of course.
And, wonder of wonders, Buffy had looked at him tonight with a kind of fierce determination that told him she was now doing the same thing. That she was taking every scrap as precious, no matter how dull or insipid. And now, finally, she wanted to talk. More than he did, in some ways, which was another notch in the ‘bloody hysterical’ box.

“I wish you’d talk to me like you used to,” she had murmured lowly, shortly after their skin had at last dried from the bathwater, and after he’d already had her twice. “You used to never shut up when we were in bed, especially after we’d just…”

He grinned at her discomfort. “Shagged? Fucked? Screwed?”

Buffy flushed the most delicious color. “Yeah.” Her fingers traced up his arm, a light criss-crossing pattern. “You barely took a breath. I wanted to rip out your vocal cords sometimes.”

“I was desperate,” he admitted. “Thought if I prattled on enough, you’d forget for at least a second that you wanted to leave… Words were all I had to keep you there.”

“But I hated them. Usually,” she said softly. At his look of pain, she’d quickly added, “Well, that’s what I told myself. But then you came back last year. And god, Spike, part of why I was pissed at you was because…” she paused, looking ashamed, “you weren’t enough of you. You rambled, but it was all wrong. It didn’t sound like you.”

“Well, in all fairness to my rambling, was barmier than a box of frogs for that bit, luv.”

She laughed slightly. “Yeah. Guess so.”

He kissed her right along the swell of her breast, making her intake a sharp breath. “Happy to go back to rambling in the sane way if it makes you happy.”

She whimpered as his tongue flicked at her nipple. “Only if you say things that matter,” she managed in a whisper.

He paused, brow furrowing. “Things that matter, eh? What matters to you?”

“I want to hear about you.”

He watched her steadily. He was right proud of himself for hiding the tremble that threatened. “Only if you return the deed.”

“Yes.” Not even a pause.

So he’d told her about whatever she wanted. Random things, as it turned out. Some bad, some not. What was the hell fiasco he’d mentioned? Did he have a favorite ice cream flavor? What did he like best about her? Did he like the idea of pets?

In turn, he’d found himself almost tongue-tied. He wanted to ask her every speck of everything teeming in his brain. Everything that was Buffy. Instead, he stuck to the basics. What was her favorite bit of Rome? Did she still like it when he touched her just there? (“Spike, that’s not a real questi-oh!”) What were her favorite brekkie dishes?

And so on.

They talked sweetly and shagged slowly until Buffy fell asleep nearly mid-sentence. But she hadn’t let go of his hand. In fact, he was pretty sure sleep had made her hold tighter. It made him grin, as he flexed his fingers and she closed her grip like a damn steel vice. He knew she’d never done that with
a human bedfellow. They’d have had to sew the bloke’s mangled bits back on, if they could flatten them out enough. Didn’t seem like he was moving that hand in the near future, as it was.

But never let it be said that William the Bloody didn’t enjoy a challenge.

Keeping his right hand just above her waist where she wanted it, he slid the rest of himself down the bed, shifting apart her knees. She gave way almost immediately, with a sleepy little sigh, and he smirked as he lowered his tongue to her pretty little pink folds. He took his time, with long swipes and careful pressure, slowly building and throwing her gently from sleep. Her sighs turned to moans. He bit her clit lightly, and she gasped herself awake.

“There you are, Goldilocks,” he murmured. She’d asked for it back last night, that name she’d once spurned. It fell from his tongue so nicely now, especially with her hair again so lusciously long.

“What time is it?” Her voice was sleepy, like silk. She opened her legs wider to him.

“Few hours before sunlight.”

“Still? Good.”

He growled agreement and bent back to her, letting the taste of her coat his lips and tongue, all salt and tang and… blood? Spike drew in a sharp breath and jerked away. “Oh fuck. God, Buffy, I didn’t mean to. Didn’t think I… Didn’t bite you hard! Why didn’t you say if it hurt!”

Buffy sat up slowly, blinking blearily. “Huh? Spike, what are you talking about?”

“Still? Good.”

He growled agreement and bent back to her, letting the taste of her coat his lips and tongue, all salt and tang and… blood? Spike drew in a sharp breath and jerked away. “Oh fuck. God, Buffy, I didn’t mean to. Didn’t think I… Didn’t bite you hard! Why didn’t you say if it hurt!”

Buffy sat up slowly, blinking blearily. “Huh? Spike, what are you talking about?”

His nostrils flared with the scent of her and he stumbled back further from the bed. Christ, it was coming strong. “You’re bleeding.”

Her face looked puzzled. “I don’t think you bit me like that.” She extended a finger down to her cunt and it came away with a thin wash of brownish-red. Shockingly, a blush bloomed across her face. “Oh.” She started to crawl from the bed. “It’s not you.”

Confusion edged in against his panic. “Come again?”

She paused at the edge of the bed, biting her lower lip and not looking at him. “Um. It’s my period. It came… It wasn’t supposed to happen for another week.” She looked up at him briefly, with faint, embarrassed humor. “Guess with all the excitement… yeah.”

Everything in him ground to a halt. He stared at her. “You’re on your period?”

Buffy looked sharply at him from where she’d been contemplating the carpet. He knew his voice was hoarse as gravel, and it was pretty bloody obvious that his prick had gotten the notice. It was practically waving at her, all his muscles clenching with sudden want.

He’d never been able to be around her while she was on her girly time. Not in the naked way, at least. He’d braved asking once and she’d brushed him off with an “Ewww, gross. You’re disgusting.” She’d said a lot more after that, about how he was deluded if he thought that it was in any universe an okay thing, but he’d tried to tune that bit out. Long story short, she claimed violent disinterest. But they both knew the real reason it wasn’t an option. It was intimate. And she’d didn’t do intimate. Still, didn’t keep him from fantasizing about lapping up her womanly blood, about devouring the coursing liquid leftover from her body’s desire to bring forth life. Was likely the closest he’d ever get to heaven, the idea of that.

Now Buffy swallowed roughly, but she didn’t escape to the bathroom like he expected. Instead, she
glanced down at her cunt self-consciously then looked back up at him, her eyes wide with understanding. He watched as one of her hands slid toward her neck, stroking the marks he’d made there. Holding his gaze, she slid backwards, back onto the bed, and laid down.

Spike didn’t move. It seemed like an obvious signal, but he was past trusting his instincts. They’d led him to being all sorts of buggered. So he did what he thought his souled self might’ve done, and just stood there. The demon screamed at him.

After a few moments, Buffy raised her head quizzically. “What are you doing?” Her face flashed insecurity. “Did I…. did you not want—”

“No!” It was a panicked bark. He clenched his fists. “I want. God, Buffy, I want.” He wanted to eat every inch of her, matter of fact.

A small frown furrowed her brow, then smoothed. “Spike. Get over here.” A pause. “And eat…” Her face turned bright red, and she took a deep breath. “Eat me.” It was a low, trembling command.

His prick jumped near straight up at the words. Hell, it would’ve been doing flying leaps if it could. Spike dove for the bed.

He slipped into his demon face despite himself. It was impossible to hold the other guise with the overwhelming scent of her cunt and her womanly blood and the general fucking eroticism of getting to eat her out like this. He impaled her on his tongue and she cried out in surprised pleasure at the quick invasion, her fingers scrabbling for purchase on the covers. Her mewls made his already rock-hard prick turn painful, not helped by the Slayer blood and menstrual fluid coating his mouth. He stroked himself with a hand as he lapped at her, keeping his face back just slightly so his fangs didn’t slice her, although he wanted nothing more than to crush her right against him and take everything for his own.

She came with a whimpering gasp, her fingers abandoning the covers to tug at his curls. The delicious pain of it made him want to grow them out longer for the first time in a century. He kept sucking, his cock feeling like it would burst. He stroked faster, driving them both to desperate moans. She thrashed beneath him, every bit of her wide open. Her eyes found his, glazed with pleasure. The acceptance, the desire, in her face was his undoing, and he snarled as his stomach tightened and his cock jerked wildly, spilling his dead seed along his belly and her legs and the bed.

He came twice more by the time they finished. He got her up to eight, when her legs started trembling madly. “Spike! No more. I’m going to pass out.”

He reared back, panting like a wild animal, knowing his mouth was smeared with her. “Could do this forever,” he growled.

Buffy laughed weakly. “I’ll keep that in mind.” After a minute, she lifted her arms so that they hung straight up in the air. “Shower time?”

He chuckled. “Looking for me to carry you, are you?”

“Can’t walk,” she said, a happy sigh of sound. She lifted her head with a mock glare. “And it’s all your fault.”

“Can’t express how not sorry I am about that, pet.” He crawled up beside her, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and forcing the demon back down. “Fuck. You’re delicious.”
Buffy's stomach took the opportunity to growl. “And hungry.” She waved her raised arms like some weirdly flapping chicken. “Shower now. Buffy hungry. Food soon.”

Spike grinned and lifted her up into a sitting position. “Alright, alright. Can’t have you wasting away, Slayer.”

She nodded, her face smooth and dreamy. “Absolutely right, mister.” He watched her gaze clear after a moment and she glanced around the room, the world obviously returning to her thoughts. A damn shame, that was. “And then I’d guess we’d better get everything packed. We’ve got a plane to catch.”
Each grain
Is a small,
Precise form
Of salvation
That has occurred,
A god come to earth
In another form,
A private,
Innate sacrifice.
Providence does not tire.
We are ready to go on

- Primus St. John

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Spike was eyeing the Wolfram and Hart jet with great suspicion, and Buffy fought a losing battle against a smile.

“Must be some catch,” he muttered for the tenth time, scowling. “Peaches trying to help me leave with his supposed ladylove? Not bloody likely.”

“He’s not a complete jerk, Spike.” And he probably wants me out of the way for whatever he’s doing at Evil Law Inc. Note to self: keep an eye on L.A. for regular badness. She tugged at Spike’s hand impatiently. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

His expression smoothed into a grin. “Best idea I’ve heard in ages.”

“You said the same thing about me and you in the shower this morning.”

“Did I say ‘ages’? Meant ‘hours.’”

“Whatever, fang boy. Get on the plane.”

“Bossy bint.”

“You love it.”

“Especially if there’re chains involved.”

“Later.”

“Holding you to that, Slayer.”

***
The flight to Rome was mostly uneventful, despite Spike’s best efforts. Buffy’s scent was driving him to distraction. Now that he had permission, it was a dangerously tempting thought to tie her up in bed and just bury himself between her legs until red stopped flowing how many ever days later.

Or maybe he’d just keep going after that, too. Hell, maybe he’d just stay buried in her pussy forever. He clung to the warm thought like an anchor, and tried to ignore the reality of their destination. Sodding Rome. Where far too many Sunnydale remnants lie in wait. And him unsouled. Would the Niblet make good on her promise and actually set him on fire? He hadn’t hurt Buffy, but he didn’t have the manacles preventing him from it anymore, either. And it wasn’t as if the Bit was about to put stock in his heart alone, nowadays. A piece of him wanted to curl up from the shame, but it was just an echo of something now gone. A larger piece of him was brassed off. The Niblet had betrayed her own sister – stuck her out in the cold when she needed family the most. What right did she have to fucking judge him! His brain went around in circles over the arguments, with no real resolution. For once, the Immortal in Rome seemed like the least of his worries. The woman-thieving wanker.

Buffy uncrossed and recrossed her legs as she delved seriously into some girly magazine next to him. He hoped it wasn’t one of those that claimed burying his prick in acid heightened the pleasure or some rot. It didn’t. He should know, seeing as Dru had tried it once. Just three tiny drops, but he’d been in agony for days. And not the good kind. Bloody hell, he’d take sizzling skin anywhere but there.

Still, Buffy’s motion sent her sharpened scent wafting through the air, and he was again reminded of the desire to bury himself in her for eternity. Was a much better thought than whatever the hell was waiting in Rome. He slid to the floor on his knees in front of Buffy’s chair, hands very purposefully roaming up her golden legs. She’d had the good sense to wear a skirt today, at least. When his hands made it mid-thigh, she gently swatted them away. “Not now.”

He obediently pulled his hands away. *Listen when Buffy says no.* “Why not?” His voice came out low, almost trembling, and he about wanted to stake himself. *Don’t have a soul anymore, mate. Stop being a nancy boy.* “Never mind,” he said abruptly when she seemed about to answer, brow furrowed. He rose and climbed back into his seat.

They didn’t speak for a long moment.

“Spike?”

“Yeah?”

Buffy set down the magazine and gave his nearly crushed chair armrest a pointed look. “Are you okay? I didn’t mean…” She bit her lip. “I’m sorry. I have a lot on my mind. Shouldn’t have been all abrupt-girl.”

He grunted, loosening his hold on the armrest apologetically. “I get that, pet. Same here. Bit nervous, all told.”

Her face softened and she looked down, twisting her fingers in her lap. “Me too.”

His heart caught in his throat as sudden panic filled him. She was nervous? Was she having second thoughts? What the fuck was he supposed to do if she threw him by the wayside now? Sodding hell, if that was how it was going to go, the least she could do was stake him and put him out of his misery before he had to go on without her. Had been his bright and burning hope once – to be unchipped and free of her. After long enough, wasn’t even too worried about seeing her dead. Just wanted her away from him – where her presence couldn’t entirely bugger everything anymore. Now, inevitably, the inverse was true.
“Promise me,” he said softly, not daring to look at her, “if you change your mind about us, that you’ll do me proper. Know it’s not right, to ask you to off another lover after the Poof’s grand cock-up, but…” He paused, a harsh breath escaping. “Could always have one of the bitty-Slayers do it, but that would be an embarrassing end, if I’m being honest. Or suppose I could just wait for the sun. Bit overdone, that one, though figure it wouldn’t matter much at–”

“Spike!”

Clenching his jaw, he met Buffy’s hard gaze.

“Stop that. There will be no staking of you.”

His eyes narrowed. “What? You want me to go eat someone first? Would that make it easier?”

Buffy’s expression turned furious and he braced himself for a blow or – at minimum – some vicious words. His brain was telling him to shut the bloody fuck up. His heart kept him staring defiantly at her. Unexpectedly, her face dropped to something entirely defeated.

“God, Spike…” She laughed quietly, wearily holding his gaze. “So that’s it? No normal break-up in our future? It’s together forever or death?”

The emptiness in his chest bloomed into pain. “Already planning the end, were you? Good to know.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “No, you idiot, I wasn’t.” She bit her lip. “It’s just… that’s a lot of pressure, you know? Not exactly girl with the best love track record here.” She waved her arms a bit. “And what if we get into a fight and you think it’s over, so you go off yourself, when really I was just being PMS-y and stupid? And then you’re gone again…” She trailed off, not looking at him.

Spike felt his sudden anger deflate at the vulnerability in her voice and slumped in his chair. “Christ, I’m being a right git.” He grimaced and bent forward to clasp her warm hands, relieved when she didn’t pull away. “Don’t handle nerves well. That whole lack of blood to the brain bollocks.”

A smile flickered on the edges of her lips as she stared down at their hands. “I know,” she whispered and then looked up at him with semi-teary green eyes. “We’re not exactly the poster-children for conversation.”

He returned the smile. “Shame there’s nothing to kill on board.”

“Yeah. That would have been nice.”

“Wanna shag?”

“Spike.”

“What? It’ll work.”

“We’re not having sex in Angel’s plane, especially with me being all period-girl. He’ll never get the smell out.”

“Kind of the point, pet.”

Buffy picked up her magazine again and shook her head. “Why do I even bother?”

“Because I’m irresistible.”
They had barely disembarked from the plane when Buffy’s cell phone rang. Huh, so his Slayer had gotten herself up and up on technology. She made a little huff as she stared at the screen, and Spike quirked a brow. “The tweedy kiss-arse?”

Buffy stifled a giggle. The girlish sound made his trousers uncomfortably tight. “Yeah.” She sighed and flipped open the phone. “Andrew, unless there’s an apocalypse, I think it can wait until I get back to the apartment.”

“Buffy!” Andrew voice boomed with absurd grandioseness, easy enough to pick up even without vamp hearing. “How was the motherland?”

“Andrew, I’m hanging up now, and I don’t even want to know how you knew I was back.”

“I called Angel,” Andrew said stoically. “Who, by the way, seems to have quite the bee in his bonnet. He said you guys were on your way back.” There was a pause. “So you brought someone from L.A.?”

“Yeah.” Buffy gave Spike a small smile. “I did.”

“Who?”

“Did you call for an actual reason or are you just being nerdy and creeptastic with the Big Brother thing?”

Andrew sighed. “Giles is looking for you.”

“Well, he knows where to find me. I have an address and everything,” she said perkily in that dumb blonde act of hers.

“No, Buffy, Giles is in Rome.”

Buffy and Spike both froze. “Here?” Buffy repeated, sounding ill. “What’s he doing here?”

“Checking in, of course,” was Andrew’s puzzled reply. “Anyway, I told him you’d be in town about now. He’s been waiting at the main offices for an hour. He keeps calling me every ten minutes asking where you are.”

“Well, then that’s his own freaking problem,” Buffy snapped, with a shocking level of vehemence. “I’ve been busy.”

It apparently shocked Andrew, too. There was a long hesitation, then, “So, uh… I’ll tell him you’re on your way?”

Buffy sighed heavily, sending Spike an apologetic look. “Yeah, I’m on my way.” She hung up a moment later, shoulders slumping. It was easy to forget his Slayer had been running practically roughshod since his little fireworks display, training bitty-Slayers and the like. Trying not to miss
him, she’d said. And then she’d dropped everything to go halfway around the world to get to his sorry arse.

“God, I love you.”

To his surprised delight, Buffy blushed a bright pink, smiling almost shyly. “Love you, too.” Her expression faded into resignation. “I have to go meet Giles.”

“I heard, pet.”

“Wanna come?”

He studied her face for a long moment. Serious, but determined. “Sure that’s a good idea?”

She shrugged. “He’ll find out you’re back sometime. Might as well get it over with.”

Spike took a deep, unneeded breath, straightening as he willed his nerves away. Fuck. Watcher had tried to off him with a soul. No telling what he was in for now. Nothing good, that was for sure. “Right. Might as well.”

***

Even after so many months in Rome, Buffy had never really gotten used to being there. The whole ‘people aren’t speaking English’ thing was definitely a factor, but it was also… old. Ancient structures, elaborate offices, crazy carved fountains. She aesthetically liked it all, but it didn’t feel like home. Her apartment with Dawn and Andrew was a little better, filled with normal human things. It was comfortable, at least.

The central Council offices were never comfortable. They were all stony and marble inlaid, and so rich feeling that Cordelia would have likely moved in and never left, if given a choice. Opulent, Dawn had called the space, using the word with obvious pride.

Surprisingly, Spike seemed at ease. He pointed out a column here and a window there, noting architecture style and little tidbits of history in a way she knew left her frowning at him in disbelief.

He eyed her warily. “What?”

“You know all this stuff.”

He gave her a look like he thought she might’ve been eating paint when he wasn’t looking. “Well, didn’t just pull it out of my ear, Slayer.”

“How come you never said things like that in Sunnydale?”

He shrugged uncomfortably. “Didn’t care to. And it’s not like you lot would have listened to me, anyhow.”

Buffy opened her mouth to protest then shut it again. “Probably not.”

They let the subject drop. Fittingly, they were at Giles’s door. Here goes nothing. Plastering on a cheery smile, Buffy shoved the door open and strode in.
“Hey, Giles, look who I found!!”

Giles was seated at an absurdly large desk – like really, who needed a desk that large? – and looked up with clear irritation. “Buffy. I was told you–” The Watcher trailed off, eyes wide.

For a long moment, no one moved, then Giles cleared his throat and very pointedly removed his glasses, cleaning them with a cloth from his suit pocket. When he was done and glasses were resituated, he stared at Spike almost uncomprehendingly. “I must… Well, I’m quite sure that looks like Spike.”

“In the flesh,” Spike said dryly, shoving his hands deep into his duster pockets. Harsh lines of tension tightened his jawline. “’Lo, Rupert. How’s being the big man?”

Giles stood abruptly, his gaze swinging wildly from him to her. He looked almost angry. “Spike is dead.”

“Tell me summat I don’t know,” Spike replied.

Giles ignored him, his entire gaze fixing unblinkingly on her.

Buffy narrowed her eyes. “Well, after he saved the world, Angel’s amulet apparently spat him back out in L.A.”

Giles blinked, his face softening abruptly under her cold look. He looked back at Spike speculatively. “Well. That… is quite something.” He cleared his throat and walked around the desk, still staring at Spike intently. “I, ah, on behalf of the Watcher’s Council, owe you a debt of gratitude, William the Bloody.”

Spike blinked, clearly flabbergasted. “Eh?”

“For your role in preventing our most recent apocalyptic event,” Giles continued evenly.

“Was nothing, Rupes.” Buffy was sure Giles didn’t see the flash of pain that crossed her lover’s face. Spike glanced over at her uncertainly, as if certain that at any moment she’d finish the story.

Buffy just shrugged. “So, long story short,” she said with immense perkiness, “Spike’s back. And we’re together. And if you ever try to kill him again I’ll make sure it’s you that can fit in an ashtray.”

Both men stilled under her chipper tone and Giles swallowed heavily. “Buffy…”

“No.” Her voice was Slayer hard. “I don’t want to hear it.”

Giles watched her for a long moment. Once, their relationship had been almost familial – her love for him surpassing that for her actual father. Her second death and subsequent resurrection had been the beginning of the end for that. Trying to kill Spike… well, that was the nail in the freaking metaphorical coffin. Perversely, Giles seemed to respect her more this way. Or maybe it was just easier. If she wasn’t his daughter, it wouldn’t kill him if and when she died again. But that was the whole problem with most of the men in her life: it was all about what she was doing to them, or not doing to them. Not being normal enough, not loving enough, not staying alive enough. Spike was far from a saint, but he loved her even at her worst. And he always came back to her.

She took a deep breath. “Don’t contact me again unless the world is about to end. For now. And even then, I’m pretty sure Faith and a few thousand new Slayers can handle it.”

Giles accepted that with a small nod, his expression carefully neutral. “Please let me know when you
are done with your… sabbatical.”

“I will.” She turned and headed for the exit, Spike a step behind her.

They didn’t speak until they reached the front door, wafts of the Mediterranean evening rushing in. Spike’s face was tight, uncertain, as they headed into the night. “Why didn’t you tell him?”

“Because it’s none of his business.” She caught his hand and squeezed it. “It doesn’t change who you are.”

He eyed her warily. “Buffy, we both know that’s not exactly true.”

“It’s none of his business,” she repeated, more softly. She turned to look into his blue eyes, piercing and tender. “Ready to face the next wave?”

“Niblet and the ponce?”

“Yeah.”

She watched him grimace and then straighten, accepting the new challenge. “Let’s have it, Slayer.”

She squeezed his hand again. “It’ll be okay.”

He didn’t say anything for a long moment. Finally, she thought she heard him mutter, “Once more into the breach.” And then he was quiet again.

***

Buffy’s apartment was a simple affair compared to the Watcher’s bit of palace, and he could tell the moment they stepped in that she felt at ease for the first time all day.

“Come in, Spike.”

They weren’t in for more than a moment – in which Spike had barely inhaled all the scents of the place, all the vanilla of her and tangerine of the Bit and hard-pressed soap of the little ponce – when Dawn wandered straight into the room with a yawn.

“Buffy, you~”

She trailed off and stared. Was beginning to be a nasty habit today.

“’Lo, Dawn.”

God, when had his bitty Buffy gotten so bloody tall? And she’d cut her hair. It was up to her shoulders now, and layered all adult-like.

She gaped at him. “S-Spike?”

Buffy gave her sister a wry smile. “Turns out even dying isn’t enough to get him to stay away.”

A few years ago, that sentence would have been filled with piss and vinegar. Now it was said all soft and sweet, with a kind of warmth that shook him.
He braced himself for the Bit’s wrath, ready to give as good as he got (verbally) if it came down to it, but instead Dawn squealed incoherently and – next thing he knew – he had a hundred pounds of lanky teenager clinging to him.

“Spike, oh my god, I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean it! I’m sorry!”

Christ, was no one going to react the way he expected today? This was turning into the sodding Twilight Zone.

He patted Dawn’s back a bit stiffly. “Nothing to apologize for, Niblet.”

She looked up at him, her gaze wavering with tears. “Niblet. No one’s called me that in ages. Not even you.”

He swallowed. “Yeah, well. Last year…” He shrugged.

“How are you here?”

Buffy watched them, a bit misty-eyed. “Angel’s amulet of doom spit him out in L.A. He was a ghost until two days ago.”

Dawn’s eyes widened. “A ghost?”

“Yeah.” Spike swallowed roughly and gently detached Dawn from his waist. “Something you should know.”

Buffy clapped her hands suddenly, as if ending a sports match. “What you should know is that it’s way past your bedtime, missy.”

Spike felt unease trickle through him. “Buffy.”

She held his gaze, Slayer hard. “You’re back. That’s all that matters.”

Part of him was tempted to think she was ashamed of him. Worried about what her mates would think, her being with a soulless vampire again. One who she’d had a sideways relationship with. One who’d… He stopped that train of thought abruptly and searched her gaze, looking for embarrassment or uncertainty, but her eyes were simply full of love, and he didn’t know what to make of that at all.

“Right,” he said slowly. “Time for your beddy-bye.”

Dawn glared at them both. “Oh, you are so not serious. Spike comes back from the majorly dead and you want me in bed like two minutes later?!?”

Buffy just grinned at her. “Well, we’re going to bed, so…”

“Ugh!” Dawn backed off, hands held out defensively. “I’ll see you in the morning.” She paused, shaking her head. “When Andrew gets home, we’re going to need earplugs.”

“Find a locked door does the trick just as well, Bit.”

“We’ll hope.” She turned and gave him one last look as she headed toward the hallway, her face soft and uncertain. “I’m really glad you’re alive, Spike.”

“Yeah, me too.”

When Dawn’s bedroom door shut (with very purposeful firmness), Buffy took his hands and tugged
him into the hallway, shuffling them down until they reached the last bedroom on the right. Buffy’s room.

This room was a far cry from her girly little pad in Sunnyhell. This was full of soft fabrics and muted colors, almost Spartan in decorations, and her mattress was covered in a blood red bedspread. He trailed a finger along it. “Doesn’t seem like your usual fare, pet.”

She was quiet for a moment. “It reminded me of you.”

Spike turned back to her, his golden goddess, his queen. “Oh, Buffy.”

She bit her lip, slowly removing her shoes. “I’m not ashamed, you know. Of how you are.”

Spike drew in a sharp breath. “Bloody miserable poker face I have, innit?”

“Terrible,” she agreed, with a slight smile. Her face slid back to solemn. “I’m not ashamed,” she repeated. She flung away her blouse next, letting her skirt shimmy down her legs. Christ, she was a vision. “It’s just… I know how they’ll be.”

He quirked a brow, toeing off his boots. “And how’s that?”

She paused in the middle of unclasping her bra. Precarious situation, that. Her green eyes were steady, knowing. “Like how the Scoobies were when they learned I was pulled out of heaven. Guilty. Worried. Distant.” She sucked in a sharp breath and flung her bra away, to his low groan as her rosy nipples came into sight. “I don’t want them to feel like you’re... you’re broken. Or that you need to be fixed. Or that you’re lacking.”

There was a sudden lump in his throat. “Am though,” he managed to rasp. “Lacking.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works if you’re just going back to how things were… before.”

He chuckled lowly, rubbing his chest almost without thought. “Will never be exactly like it was before, Buffy. In all the ways good and ill.”

“I know.” She sashayed toward him, hands on her hips imperiously. “Why are you still wearing clothes?”

“Bit distracted with the strip tease you’ve been giving.”

“What’s your excuse now?”

“You’re naked.”

She laughed, then fixed him with a stern stare. “Clothes off, Big Bad.”

The purr in her voice made his demon sit up to attention and he grinned devilishly, stripping off his clothes with quick ease. “Since you asked so nicely.”

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They were in bed later that night, with Buffy asleep in his arms. He eyed her golden form with immense satisfaction, gaze lingering on the new fang marks dotting her breasts and thighs and neck.
His. All of her was his. He grinned, rubbing his own neck. For being fangless, she still had a sharp bite. That was his Slayer, through and through.

“Admiring your handiwork?” Buffy murmured, half-rousing, not even opening her eyes.

He chuckled. “Yours, too.”

“Mmm.”

He kissed her brow gently, listening to the slowing rhythm of her little pattering heart as she slipped back into sleep. His own chest was feeling… well, Christ, it didn’t feel so empty anymore. “Buffy?”

“Hmm?”

“Think you’re filling me up.”

She struggled back to wakefulness, her eyes snapping open with a small smile. “Isn’t that my line?”

He grinned at her. “Usually.” He furrowed his brows. “Mean it, though. My chest, it doesn’t feel like it did.”

She eyed him steadily, unreadably, for a long moment, then, “Does that mean you’re like the Grinch? Heart growing six sizes or something?”

“Oi!” He glared at her. “And it was three sizes, you illiterate chit.”

She laughed and snuggled against his chest, pressing her lips right against his unbeating heart. “Only three, huh? I think I can do better.” The swivel of her hips against his made him draw in a sharp breath.

“Sure you can, Slayer.”

“What, no argument?”

He chuckled. “Know better than that, don’t I? Not a thing you don’t get when you set your mind to it.”

Buffy raised her head to look at him, her expression strangely proud and sad. “I wanted you. Wanted you so badly, after.”

He swallowed roughly. “Only proving my point, then. You got me.”

She bent her head back to his chest, leaving a long line of warm kisses. “Yeah, I did.”

“I got you, too,” he whispered hoarsely, then let his eyes flutter shut, surrendering himself to her kisses and gentle touches, glad above measure for all the rot and pain and hardship that had finally led them here. Was worth every bloody second. “I got you, too.”

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