A Small Boat on the Ocean

by sandy_s

Summary

Buffy and Spike decide to start a family in a realistic way (as realistic as you can get in Buffyverse). Post-NFA, Buffy POV. This is a response to swifthorse’s challenge and is written for the Reunion Challenge on Elysian Fields in October 2017. (Beautiful banner by Carrie Ann...)

Disclaimer: I own nothing. Joss owns all.
I was lucky enough to get interviewed by the lovely ladies from the Sunnydale Fanfic Club podcast. Y'all should check out their podcast! And if you would like to listen to the ep I was on: http://directory.libsyn.com/episode/index/id/6980570/tdest_id/612464

Notes

I really hesitated about writing this story for a lot of reasons. First, the topic is a difficult one because infertility is a personal issue for me. So, writing a fic about Buffy and Spike struggling to have a child hits home on a visceral level. Second, I worried whether I could make this feel like something Buffy and Spike would really tackle together. I wanted the story to feel true to the characters and their journey. My third hesitation was: what if this is a little too real? I mean, it’s not exactly a light topic. My hope is that despite the weightiness, the humor, humanness, strength and love come shining through in the story. If anyone can
face this particular demon, it’s Buffy, right? And in my little fantasy, Spike would be right there by her side.

My hope is that the story shines a little light on the oft undiscussed world of infertility and the emotional, physical, and financial toll on couples as they deal with this issue. This story is for all of you…

As to the reunions in this story, they are not straightforward reunions of people, but there are multiple reunions on different levels woven throughout the story. You’ll see as you read.

I can’t thank swifthorse enough for cheerleading me through the fic so far! This story is for you! Thank you to slaymesoftly and Carrie Ann for betaing the first parts, and thank you to Carrie Ann for the beautiful banner (renders by javajunkie247). Title is from the song, ”Fight Song,” by Rachel Platten.

I’m very nervous, y’all. But here we go…
**Dear baby**

Like being lost in the vast, rolling sea with only a small boat to stay afloat, there is a good bit of loneliness in the infertility journey. It helps if you have someone in the boat with you.

* * *

Who knew a Slayer could have a biological clock? Who knew a Slayer could live long enough to think about starting a family with someone she loves? Who ever thought a Slayer could even consider having a kid when she’s constantly fighting the forces of darkness or averting apocalypses? Certainly, the only Slayer I know who had a child didn’t exactly plan to have him.

I’ll tell you who never thought that the answer to the above questions would ever be Buffy Summers.

Me. Buffy Summers. Your mom. Well, soon to be your mom anyway if you stay in my belly a few more weeks.

Someday you may ask how you came to be, and that is the story I intend to tell. Other people may have a problem with me being so open with you about things, but one thing that I’ve learned in my short time on this planet is that hiding things doesn’t usually end well. So, I plan to be honest (as honest as is appropriate) with you throughout your childhood, and when you’re old enough to understand, you’ll have this.

There is a selfish reason for this. I mean, odds are, even as one Slayer among hundreds, I may still die early, and I want you to remember me, to know that you are loved beyond measure by your father and me, and to never give up in life even when times get hard. Always remember, you were no accident and that no one was wanted more than you.

How did your father and I decide to start a family?

The good news was that around about the time that my biological clock kicked in, there were hundreds of Slayers all over the world, and the infrastructure was in place to divvy up tasks and responsibilities. I finally got the opportunity to take a break from active slayage and well, have something of a life. I could think about maybe having a family of my own.

The only problem was that having a baby with the person I love was impossible. As you know by now, your father is a vampire, so technically, we couldn’t have a biological child of our own.
At first, I didn’t tell him about my desire to start a family for several reasons.

The biggest reason I didn’t tell him (and really the only one worth mentioning) was because I was worried he’d feel like he was depriving me of something that he could never give, and then, he’d feel guilty and maybe even hurt. And given how much I’ve hurt him in the past, seeing that pain in those beautiful blue eyes would break my heart. (I wonder what color your eyes will be.)

So, for a long time, I kept quiet about it. I tried to savor what your father and I have. After our initial confusion about our status as a couple post me finding out he was alive, we really worked on our communication and on strengthening our relationship.

The physical intimacy was easy between us. (Don’t make a face.) But the communication piece was a work-in-progress at first. A lot of that was because of me. Words related to emotional intimacy don’t come easy to me, but I’ve been trying to remind him how much I care through word and deed.

The good news is that five years ago, I finally told him I love him. The disbelief in his eyes still makes my heart ache when I think about it, and honestly, I was surprised that he still loved me in return. I don’t know many guys who would still be sticking around without some sort of verbal declaration. Guess that’s why he alleviates my fear of abandonment. . . the one that’s faded of late since we’ve officially been together in a couple-y way.

I believed we could have a family. Him and me. Well, he is my family, but I mean, I believed we could have a child together. Not in a conventional way, of course, because nothing about your parents is exactly conventional as you’ll know by the time you receive this.

And that leads me to this.

This is the story about how you came to be.

Love,
Mom
“Penny for your thoughts,” Spike asked me, his finger lazily trailing up my thigh as he cuddled me close after our night out patrolling together and the subsequent session of. . . kissing.

Anxiety shot through my chest, and I stiffened before I could stop myself. Damn it. How did he always know when something was on my mind?

He answered this question without me speaking it aloud. I loved him for his perceptiveness though it also drove me crazy. “I know when something’s on your mind, love. You get all quiet like. Stop with the puns and banter with the vamps.”

Shivering in the now cold breeze from the air conditioner, I snuggled closer to Spike, landing my head on his chest, warm from my heat, and pulled the covers over us both. For once, we ended up in our lovely king-sized bed. . . a sea of bed. I sometimes wondered how we missed it so much; it really was quite comfortable. I danced around things as I usually do. I was pretty sure this drove him a little crazy. Good. “Do I?”

He stroked my damp curls, which were probably frizzy. “You know you do. And you were distant with me.”

I detected the faint hint of fear in his tone, the hint he tried to cover up, but I knew it was always there even after all the years we’ve been together. I could wholeheartedly reassure him. I never tired of that. In moments like this, my chest still ached with all the times I hurt him. “I love you. . . only you with my whole heart.”

His chest hitched a little, and he wrapped his arms around me and hugged me tight so that I was enveloped in his strength. “I love you, too, pet.” He held me closer and was quiet for a few more seconds before he returned to, “About that penny.” Of course, he went back. He’s not one for letting things go. Persistence was both a virtue and annoying as hell.

I evaded. “What penny?” He waited instead of snarking back. He’d learned that got him nowhere and usually led to a massive fight. Also annoying when I was trying to avoid something. I took a deep breath. “I want you to know how happy I am. You make me happy. Our life makes me happy. I mean, who could ask for more? We have each other, I have semi-retirement except for an occasional apocalypse or two, and we live next to this mini-hellmouth in the Crescent City that satisfies the need for regular-ish slayage.”
“I’m happy, too, love. Where’s the ‘but’?” There was no hint of fear in his voice this time, but I knew him. It lurked under the surface. I sometimes wondered if I’d ever completely eradicate it for him or if it’s even my job to do so.

“I’ve been thinking a lot lately.” How to say this without freaking him out? “I never expected to live this long, you know?”

“Most Slayers don’t.” He didn’t mince words.

“I never thought I’d have anything like a. . .” I didn’t want to say “normal” because that way carries too much weight and meaning. I tried again. “I never thought I’d have a long life, and now it looks like I’m going to possibly maybe reach middle age.”

“If I have anything to say about it, you will,” he growled protectively.

In the distant past, I would have protested that I didn’t need him to take care of me, but now, older and wiser Buffy was grateful that he loved me that much. Just like he had his fears, I had that little tiny nagging voice that said someday he might leave me like all the other guys did. . . that I’ll be too much for him somehow, not with my Slayer strength and killing of demon folk, but because Buffy Summers wasn’t enough. I knew it wasn’t not rational, but as he so wisely said, feelings weren’t exactly brains and logic. This Buffy-in-this-time kissed his chest

“That’s still not what you wanted to say.” His accent rumbled deep and low in my ear. I loved his voice.

“I never thought I’d want something beyond what we have.” Oh, crap. This was already coming out wrong. I back pedaled. “I mean, I never thought I’d want something with you that’s different.” Not much better, Buffy.

“What do you mean?” He was already sounding defensive and pushing up against the headboard and out of our nightly-after-patrol-cocoon. I shivered in the coolness he left behind.

His bright blue eyes were confused even in the dim light from the kitchen of our shotgun house. I just had to go for it. “I want to start a family.”

The confusion gave way to a swirl of hurt and then to a blaze of anger, and he was out of the bed
and across the room before I could elaborate or explain or fix it. I just wanted to fix it. . . take it back. . . erase his hurt. But I couldn’t.

Tears filled my eyes, blurring everything, a nice equivalent to the unclear thoughts in my brain. “Wait.”

He was pulling on his jeans and not looking at me. The lack of eye contact was killing me. No, that’s not quite right. The lack of his touch was killing me. I felt like my heart was occupying the space in my throat so tightly that I couldn’t get to the air to form words.

“You know, pet, you could have told me that you’d want to start a family before we got in so deep here. I would have respected that. I would have stepped out of your way. Made way for some other bloke who has a pulse.” He slammed open his dresser drawer and pulled out a clean back T-shirt, ringing it over his head. As he tugged on his boots, he added, “If you knew you’d want this, why’d you even bother with me?”

Air rushed forth, but my brain couldn’t catch up and the words came out all wrong. . . not enough, not right. “Because I love you.” God, I sounded like I was begging.

He snorted. “Some way to show how much you love me. Obviously, you don’t think I’m enough. I’ve never been enough.” For anyone. He believed he was never enough for anyone when sometimes I believed he was far too good for me.

He opened our weapons chest and pulled out an ax. He flipped it, studying the blade, making sure it was clean and sharp. Then, he threw shut the lid and stormed through the bathroom to the living room and front door. Shotgun houses didn’t have a hallway. . . or at least our tiny one didn’t. It was just one long row of rooms with doors between. We might as well have been lightyears apart instead of two rooms away.

I scrambled out of the bed and followed him to the edge of our tiny bathroom with its claw foot tub. I kept the sheet wrapped around my body, so I felt less naked, less vulnerable. “Where are you going?” I felt like I couldn’t breathe, and it wasn’t even humid inside with the air conditioning going.

He didn’t even glance back. “Out.”

When the front door whammed against the frame, I sank to the hardwood floor, the boards hard and painful beneath my bare knees, a sob escaping my throat because now I felt like my heart was
shattering.
After a several minutes of ugly crying, I felt my feelings shift in my chest, and something akin to resolution rose up from my fears and sadness. Trembling, I stood and threw aside the sheet so that it fell forlornly to the bathroom floor in a misshapen heap. As I stood there naked in the cold breeze from the ever-blowing air conditioning, my emotions shifted to anger and determination.

Anger that he didn’t even stop long enough for me to finish my bumbling attempts to open up to him, and determination to hunt him down and give him a piece of my mind. A firm scolding at the very least.

Emotion fueling me, I dragged out my dirty clothes from tonight’s earlier patrol and dressed with efficiency. I pulled my hair into a neat-ish ponytail without brushing the long blonde strands that I grew out just for him – his Goldilocks, and I headed to the tiny bathroom sink. My face was puffy. Stupid face. I splashed cool water over my skin and patted it dry before briefly reassessing. A little better. At least my eyes were clearer.

Then, I snagged a stake and stomped to the front door, flinging it open with too much force. The wood hit the wall and bounced back to land in my hand. Oops. There went our deposit.

My heart skipped a beat, and my stupid emotions swept up again, crumbling the fragile outer wall of false anger to reveal a shiny bastion of hurt.

Spike stood in front of me, his blue eyes full of concern and apology. The other harder emotions were still there, too, but he was remorseful. He set aside the ax, propping it against the outside wood panels.

Neither of us moved. Instead, we hovered there, the threshold between us like years ago.

“May I come in, pet?”

I couldn’t stand the parallel to our past selves for longer than a few seconds, and I launched myself into his arms, burying my face in the spot on his neck that always smelled distinctly Spike – like cigarettes and leather and the peppermints he always sucked before he kissed me after a smoke. My laugh was shaky. “What kind of question is that, you idiot?”
“Well, I’ve been a right ass, so. . .”

“My ass. Mine.” I held him so tightly that he groaned but not in you’re-hurting-me-with-your-Slayer-strength way but in a that’s-sorta-uncomfortable way. I could never get over how easy that made things. I brought my lips to his and kissed him hard and long. Relief flooded through me when he returned the intensity.

Before we could get too carried away again, he took me gently by the shoulders and pushed me back. “So, can we start over?” His cerulean eyes were bright with pleading.

“Of course.” He could have as many do-overs as he wanted as far as I was concerned.

He guided me to our well-worn, grey-ish sofa. Pulling me down next to him, he scooped up my hand in his, kissing the back of my fingers. Ever the gentleman.

I scooted closer to him so that our legs were touching, my thigh aligning with his. I was tempted to lay my head on his shoulder, but I wanted to see his face. The dim lamp light cast shadows on the concave of his cheek; he was clenching his jaw as he often did when he was nervous. Other people mistook it for frustration or anger, and sometimes it meant that he was brassed off – as he liked to say, but sometimes it simply meant that anxiety was coursing through him like a raw nerve that had been touched. This gave me the courage to lace my fingers with his and squeeze.

“I worded it wrong before.” I could own my clumsy attempts at communication. I was half-tempted to apologize, but that could lead down a distracted road that I didn’t want to go down, so I simply continued, “I want to have a family with you. No one else. Not ever.” God, didn’t he know how much I loved him, how I wanted to protect his heart?

He regarded me with question marks in his eyes. “How? We don’t exactly qualify for adoption. And last I checked, my swimmers were dead.”

I nodded. “We don’t qualify for adoption for lots of reasons, and yes, I know your ’swimmers’ are dead.”

“And why with me?”

I repeated, “For lots of reasons.” How to explain this to him? “For one, I actually used to want to
have a family before I became a Slayer and before my parents got divorced. I had a lot of hopes and dreams that were sort of lost with all of that. Mostly because I never thought I’d get to have something of a normal life like the one we have now.” I caught the incredulous expression on his face. “Well, we do have a pretty normal life. We have jobs.” It was true. Giles ensured that we both had paying jobs through the newly established Council that was run by a panel of remaining Watchers and Slayers. Spike and I got paid a small salary to patrol the cemeteries and tourist traps of New Orleans. Both were equally full of undead types and demons with nefarious motives.

“Jobs that require late nights.” Spike was countering my points, but he was curious, which was a much easier place to be with him.

“Babies are up at night.”

He lifted an eyebrow at me. “That is not a good counter argument.”

“You’d made a wonderful daddy.”

“How so?” His question was neutral and earnest – not the least bit sarcastic.

I almost said, “Because you’re not like my dad.” But it was more complicated than that. “Because you’re loyal and loving and compassionate. Because I remember how you treated Dawn. She told me how you took care of her when I was gone, you know.” We’ve never really talked in great depth about this. Revisiting that time was something I tended to avoid even now, not because I was hung up on it but because there was no need to dwell on things I’d worked through. . . that Spike and I had worked through.

Spike ducked his head and smiled.

How should I say this next part? “The other reason is that I won’t always be here.” The hurt threatened to raise its head again in his eyes when he peeked at me, but I continued, “I’m going to die at some point.” Part of me knew he was not the leaving kind, but biology automatically made me a member of that particular group. The relief was palpable in the blue depths of his eyes, but sadness replaced it. “Hopefully, not anytime soon. And I want you to have a family when I’m gone.” I didn’t want him to be alone. Even thinking about it made me tear up. I blinked hard to try to swipe away the salty water.

“What makes you think I won’t take a walk in the sun when you’re gone?” I could tell he meant the
words by the husky tone in his voice.

I put my free hand on his forearm and stroke his bare skin, trying to reassure myself that he’s far from dust. “You wouldn’t do that, would you?”

“I very well might.” The set in his jaw indicated that his stubbornness was coming out, but his tears matched mine.

“Not if you have our grandchildren to look after, you won’t. And our son or daughter is going to need you because I’m going to be a crappy mom. In case you haven’t noticed, this kind of stuff,” I gestured between the two of us, “is not my strong suit.”

“Why do you want to have a kid again?” His tone was light, but the question was serious.

My immediate response was to shrug. My resources for emotional discussion were hitting bottom. I ended up with, “Even though I sucked at it at first, I didn’t mind parenting Dawn once I got the hang of it.”

“You were young, love. You lost a lot in a short amount of time.” It’s the closest he’ll go to the details from the past. . . Mom’s death, my death, my resurrection and subsequent depression. . . our failed attempt at connecting.

“Right. So I’ll be better now,” I said with a sunniness that I could tell didn’t reach my eyes.

“Now, meaning how? I mean, it still comes down to the impossible even if I were on board with this.” He ran his hand over my thigh. Thank god. He also thought I was crazy and wasn’t sure about this idea of mine. Not as good.

“I’m working on that part.” I suddenly felt very tired now that he’s here with me again. We did, after all, just take on an entire group of vamps one street over from Bourbon, which was not an easy task to do with all the tourists around. Saturday nights were the worst. “Sleep now? Talk later?”

“That, I can handle.” He started to rise and offered me his hand.
As I tucked my palm against his, I wondered what he meant by his last statement. Overanalyzing. So I teased, not able to hide the edge of exhaustion in my voice, “Better bring in the ax. Don’t know what you were thinking, headed out with an ax, wearing all black and your hair all bleached. In case you haven’t noticed, we live in post-Katrina suburbia.”

Not letting go of my hand, he retrieved said weapon and tucked it between the legs of the coat rack by the door. “It’s not exactly Sunnydale, is it?”

The people of New Orleans were far from oblivious to the dangers after dark, and we were both more likely to run into trouble carrying around our tools of the trade.

“Nope.” I felt a brief wave of nostalgia for the small city that was swallowed by the Hellmouth, and then, I decided that I preferred New Orleans because he was here with me and because our relationship was different. . . the best I’ve ever had.

Spike took one look at my drooping eyes and brought me to bed. His body curled around mine, we both slept.
At my invitation, Spike came with me the next night to CC’s Coffee House on Royal where I worked part-time.

As I pushed open the door to the shop and was embraced by the cool gush of the air conditioning and the heavy roasted aroma of espresso beans, anxiety took up residence in my stomach. What would he think? Would he understand the why a little better? I’d always done better with showing than telling, my actions much clearer and less bumbling than my words.

I afforded him a glance, and as he tailed me inside, he brushed the back of his fingers over my arm to reassure me. He was here with me and open. God, he’d always been open to me. There was a time I hated it, couldn’t stand to view the naked emotion in his eyes, and now, I wanted to snuggle up close with him and never leave.

Wednesday nights were quiet in the Quarter, especially on Royal St. Tourists were getting ready to head to the bars and nightclubs on neighboring Bourbon, and there were usually only a few stragglers and locals that came in and out through the evening hours.

Spike and I both worked because we needed a little extra to supplement the stipend from the Council. Though we could have made ends meet on slaying alone, we enjoyed a few creature comforts. Spike smoked less than he used to, mostly to protect me from second-hand smoke, but he enjoyed a cigarette every now and again, and I still enjoyed splurging on hair care products and the occasional new outfit – girlie stuff.

Spike bartended at the Spotted Cat a few nights a week. The Spotted Cat was close enough to the coffee shop on Royal that Spike and I could meet up for slayage as needed but far enough that we wouldn’t raise tons of attention as the vampire-Slayer duo who took out touring vampires and demons.

Rounding the corner of the coffee bar, I snagged my black apron and tied it on. The shop was empty, but I knew Crystal was shuffling around in the back-supply room. I picked up a damp hand towel and wiped up some spilled milk by the espresso machine while Spike leaned on the counter by the pastry case, peering into the glass on the hunt for his favorite dessert – the one he always had me bring home for him.
Crystal emerged from the back, her dark hair hanging past her shoulders in dreadlocks. Her fair skin glowing from the middle stages of her pregnancy, her belly barely showing. “Hey, Buffy! Perfect timing. Roger just left half an hour ago, and I need to run down to the store for more milk.”

I sighed. “Roger forgot to order again.”

Crystal wiped her hand across her forehead. “Yep. Typical Roger.” She noticed Spike and nodded at him. “Long time, no see.” She barely knew him, had only met him once or twice, but she knew about him. She asked questions, and after I knew her well enough, I answered. She wasn’t clued in on the whole vampire/Slayer thing though.

Spike nodded in return. “Hey.”

“Want me to go?” I offered. She was pregnant after all.

Already removing her CC’s apron, Crystal shook her head. “No. To be honest, the walk would do me good, and I think we just need a couple of gallons. Do you mind watching Leah?”

Leah was why I’d dragged Spike here tonight. Well, technically, there was no dragging. “Not at all.”

Crystal backed up and craned her head back toward the supply room. “Leah! Come up here please!”

There was a tiny sigh and a scuffling noise, and Crystal’s small daughter poked her head out of the storage room. She was frowning, but when she saw me, her face lit up like a Christmas tree. “Buffy!” She ran to me and threw her tiny arms around my legs. Looking up at me between strands of the white blonde hair she inherited from her father, she blinked her big hazel eyes. “Guess what?”

I knelt and hugged her back. “What?”

Leah held up the object she was holding in her hand. “I got a new horse!” The toy horse was dark brown with a black mane. Far from a My Little Pony doll, which Leah abhorred, the toy was a realistic rendition of a horse to match the one clutched in her other hand.

I petted the horse’s head. “Pretty. Did you name him?”
“His name is Frank,” she told me with earnestness in her voice.

“Well, he’s a handsome horse.” I rose. “And I brought someone special with me tonight. I want you to meet him.”

Leah bounced with all the energy of her four-year-old self. “Who?” Then, she glanced to the right and saw Spike watching her, his face unreadable. “Oh! Hi!” She tucked Frank against her chest and waved at Spike.

The expression on Spike’s face went from neutrally disinterested to gentle and kind – the same expression he always had around Dawn since they had gotten close again. The knot in my stomach loosened, and I reminded myself to breathe. He waved back. “Hi.”

Leah skipped around the edge of the counter and beamed up at him. “Are you Buffy’s boyfriend?”

Spike shoved his hands in his back pockets as if he was unsure what to do. He avoided looking at me, then freed his hands from the denim, and finally decided to squat near Leah. “I am.”

“I like Buffy,” she said shyly. “She reads to me on her breaks and makes me hot chocolate.”

Spike’s eyes flicked to me before he centered back on Leah. “Does she now?”

She blinked at him and then nodded – a slightly exaggerated nod. Little flirt. “Yes! Books about horses! And her hot chocolate is the best.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Do you like horses, Buffy’s boyfriend?”

Spike smiled at her, his eyes sparkling in a way that I didn’t know if I ever saw before. “I do. I used to own a horse. I like hot chocolate, too.”

“Did you own a horse like Frank?” Leah asked, holding up her new toy for his inspection.

“Sort of. She was a real horse.”
Leah grinned and reached for his hand, which he gave her after only the briefest of hesitations. She pulled him toward one of the tables. “What did she like to eat? Was she brown like Frank?” Then, as if remembering something, she abandoned Spike and came running back to me. She gave me her best I’m-the-cutest-thing-ever look. “Buffy, can I have some hot chocolate?” She had this down because she didn’t even sound whiny, only sweetly persuasive.

Hoping Crystal wouldn’t mind, I agreed, “Of course.”

“Thank you!” She hugged me again and bounced away, taking a little piece of my heart with her. She was that adorable.

I smirked at Spike over the counter. “Want marshmallows with yours, hun?”

He cocked his head at me in that way that always made my... heart beat faster. “Of course! Do you have any of –”

My mom told me he favored the little ones. I still remembered that clear as day despite my stress about what he might do to her. I should have known better. “We only carry the little ones.”

He grinned wolfishly at me. “Good.” Then, he turned back to Leah who had climbed up on the chair across from him and was trotting her horses across the chipped wooden table top.

Chapter End Notes

CC’s is the coffee shop to go to, according to my native New Orleans friends. And I’ve been to this little coffee shop. When my husband and I rented the condo in the Quarter (the one on the haunted tour where Buffy and Dawn stay in Hello Goodbye), the one Buffy works at in this story is just down the street. I went and got a latte one morning early while my husband was still asleep. And the place where Spike works is on Frenchman St (on the list of places to go put together by my training director when I lived there)...where the locals go to hear live music. And Leah is named for swifthorse.
Leah ran up the sidewalk to our front door, her little brown purse clutched to her side. I knew that her beloved horses were tucked inside and that she didn't want to drop them. She stumbled a bit in the dark on one of the cracks in the broken sidewalk, her shoe making a scraping sound.

“Careful, lil bit!” Spike called as he pulled her small suitcase out of the backseat of our used black Honda Civic. When we picked out the car, I’d insisted on gas mileage and practicality, and he’d insisted on the color and leather seats. Plus, he’d had the windows changed out so that they had the darkest of legal window tinting and were made of glass by the same manufacturer who used to handle Wolfram and Hart’s windows.

Leah turned around as she regained her balance and did a short jig for him. “I’m okay.”

I grinned as I caught up with her. “Always dancing.” Cupping the back of her head, I gave her a hug. “Even at bedtime.”

Leah spun in a circle. “It’s not bedtime.” She leaned toward me and whispered, one hand to the side of her mouth like she was sharing a secret, “It’s a slumber party.”

Spike strode past us. “And that means, staying up late, right?” It was already past ten at night and well past her bedtime.

“Right!” Leah practically shouted, throwing her arms in the air and hurrying to catch up to Spike. As she passed him to reach the steps that led up to the small porch, she let out a little screech and backed into Spike’s leg. Her bag slipping off her shoulder, she turned and clung to him without taking her eyes off whatever scared her.

“What’s this?” he asked, patting her back.

Leah, wide-eyed, pointed an insistent index finger at the concrete, which was lit by the front porch light.
“What?” I peered over to see what they were viewing and why Spike was frozen. That wasn’t like him.

What seemed to be hundreds of cockroaches covered the steps, running around in the dim glow and climbing up and over and on top of one another. I took a glimpse at Spike’s face and saw the tension in his eyes. Then, something clicked in my brain. He’d told me long ago about the trials in Africa. I’d insisted. I wanted to know what he’d been through to earn his soul. Part of me wanted it to hurt, and part of me hated that he had to go through it. In this moment, the horde of bugs was making him trip over the memory of giant scarab beetles infiltrating every orifice in his body. To get him unstuck, I ran my fingertips over his shoulder blade with tender concern. Then, I launched myself at the bugs who enjoyed inhabiting our porch, mostly when we left the porch light on at night. The insects scattered like wildfire as I leaped at them, hardly the scariest creatures I’ve had to manhandle.

All of this occurred in the space of seconds, so Leah didn’t have time to comprehend that something was off. Spike blinked, and Leah snuck her hand into his larger one and stuck her thumb in her mouth, something she only did if she was overtired or scared.

I unlocked the front door and pushed it open, stepping to one side for the sweet girl who would be spending the night with us. “Welcome to our house!”

Leah entered with the innocence of someone who had never had anything to fear other than a bad dream every now and again... and cockroaches. The first thing she did was tug herself up onto the sofa and arrange her purse reverently against her hip. As Spike passed me, he deposited a soft kiss on my lips in thanks, and I let the touch linger just a moment.

“Is Mommy having my baby brother now?” Leah asked, running her hands over the soft plush of the sofa’s cushions.

“She is,” Spike said, lounging in the used but newish-looking recliner we bought from a guy on Craig’s List who’d showed up very stoned to the agreed upon delivery location. His lack of coherence turned out to be handy because he didn’t even notice when I singlehandedly loaded the chair in the truck we’d rented. He was too busy staring at the money that Spike was counting out for him. Luckily, Febreze got out the marijuana stench for the most part though Spike, of course, could still smell it and sometimes pretended to be high when he sat in it, which always made me giggle.

“He’s going to be little,” Leah said, donning a wise expression on her youthful features and miming a small form with her hands. “I’m going to help Mommy and Daddy take care of him.” She paused, wrapping her arms around her ribcage. “Do you think he’ll cry a lot?”
“I imagine so,” Spike speculated. “But eventually, he won’t be quite so fussy, and he’ll notice more than just that he’s hungry or sleepy. Then, he’ll want to play.”

As I kicked off my sandals and pulled my knees up on the sofa next to Leah, I watched Spike in wonder. How did he know exactly what to say to a four-year-old? Did he have younger siblings that he helped raise? I knew there would probably always be things I’d learn about him. It wasn’t possible to share over a hundred years worth of memories with someone new. He and I hadn’t talked about the me-wanting-to-have-a-family with him thing since the one night when we were both so emotional. Still, he’d taken to my introduction to Leah like a duck to water, spending any free night he had at the coffee shop when I was working, and he knew she’d be there. They’d formed quite the bond, so much so that Crystal thought it was a no brainer that we babysit when I offered as she plotted her labor plan one evening.

“Think he’ll like to read?” Leah was watching me with intention. “Will you read to both of us?”

“If you both want me to,” I said, sweeping a lock of hair off her fair forehead. “And if you share your books with him, I’m sure he will learn to enjoy them.”

She smiled at this thought and then twisted her lips to the side and glanced at Spike and then me again.

Spike lifted an eyebrow at me, asking me with one gesture what she was thinking. I lifted my shoulder almost imperceptibly to let him know that I had no idea.

Then, Leah asked, “Are you and Spike going to have a baby?”

Suddenly, I couldn’t meet Spike’s gaze because I didn’t want to face that his lack of mention meant that the answer was no, that he didn’t want to have a family with me. I felt my twisted up, confused emotions unravel in the back of my heart where I had stored them, and my cheeks flushed against my will.

Before I could completely will the earth to open under my feet and swallow me up, I heard Spike stand, the chair creaking with the loss of him. Almost faster than humanly possible, he scooped me onto his lap and settled onto the sofa next to Leah who put her head on his upper arm. He nudged his nose on my cheek, and all my muscles relaxed against him.

Leah peeked up at him and blinked. “You didn’t answer.” She poked him with one finger.
“If Buffy...” His eyes caught mine and held them; I held my breath and stayed still as a statue. “If you want to, I want to. I don’t know how, but we should figure it out.” Stupid tears filled my eyes; I hope I didn’t confuse Leah, especially since I paired the tears with a broad smile – the evidence of my happiness.

“It’s easy, silly,” Leah said, rubbing one eye with her knuckles. “You just have to love her. Then, a baby will come.” She yawned, big and wide. “I’m tired.”

Spike brushed away the errant tear that had tipped over onto my cheek, and then, I saw that his eyes were moist, too. “I thought we were having a slumber party. Staying up all night. We were all ready.”

Leah gave him a look like he was crazy. “I think I’m like Cinderella.”

“How so, lil one?” Spike sounded genuinely curious.

“Turning into a pumpkin. Duh.”

Spike laughed then, a beautiful, joyous laugh.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: The shotgun house where Spike and Buffy live is based on a real house in Metairie where my friend lived during our internship year (like residency but for psychology PhD students). I think it may have flooded during Katrina. Luckily, she was doing her postdoc elsewhere. During that year, she had a very similar experience with the roaches, which she was terrified of. She tried going to get some roach spray but got scared at the store because it was late and there were a bunch of people hanging out outside the store that made her not want to go inside. She tried to hit the roaches with a bungee cord from her car but they wouldn't budge and there were hundreds of them. So she came and stayed at my apartment for the evening.

And sorry I haven’t replied to reviews or posted this part sooner. What I thought was a cold is actually the horrible mutated cold from hell...jk. My son and I both ended up with sinus and ear infections.
My cell phone rang at the most inopportune time possible. Of course.

Spike and I were fighting a seven-headed demon creature from another dimension that a naïve young witch had conjured in Greenwood Cemetery and then run away from in fright. (Emily, the assigned New Orleans Slayer, asked us to help her out because she was taking care of a potential apocalypse at her mini-hellmouth. A few other Slayers had flown or driven in from close by Lafayette, Beaumont, and Gulfport to help Emily.)

The creature breathed fire and was surprisingly adept at weaving in and out of the above-ground graves that made up the whole of the cemetery. After Spike and I had chopped off a couple of the heads and fought for three or four hours, we’d finally cornered it at the front of the cemetery next to a particularly distinctive tomb shaped like a grassy hill with a statue of a horned elk perching at the top. Owner of said grave had some money.

Now, my ringtone was insistent from my weapons bag, which was tucked back from the creature but still within manageable reach. The monster had one of its many slimy thick tentacles wrapped around my waist and two more were winding up Spike’s legs as he hacked away and dodged enemy flames. Spike was the last person I wanted tackling this demon with its flame-throwing tendencies, but he’d insisted I not go alone.

“Phone.” I ducked a tentacle that swung at my head, avoiding some sort of secretions that were likely venomous. I swung my ax at the closest head’s long neck and missed. My blade wedged deep into the grassy mound. Damn it. “Ringing.”

“Bloody fine timing, pet,” Spike growled, his fangs and yellow eyes firmly in the forefront as he leaned back away from a pair of tentacles and swung his sword at the tentacle that gripped his ankle.

Yanking my ax free, I grunted as my tentacle tightened its grip on my torso. Straining, I managed, “We’ve been waiting for it.”

Spike chopped free from his other tentacle, dropped into a roll to avoid more flames, and slashed me loose. “Couldn’t have timed it? Maybe scheduled it a little better?”
“Thanks. And I did schedule it.” Spike and I faced the creature side by side; I loved having him near me even if only for a moment; his vibrancy reassured me that he was still intact. I added, “We didn’t know that we’d be doing this!”

“True enough.” Without even a glance at me, we fell into one of our usual patterns, fanning out and trying to confuse the creature. Likely tired from the fight and irritable that we’d been out here so long, Spike lost his patience and started swinging wildly; I didn’t blame him. “This sodding thing... Will. Not. Die.”

I borrowed his momentum and sped up, whirling and kicking and arcing my ax through the air, managing to slice and dice everything but a neck. “Even without heads.”

Spike was having similar luck. “Ring tone’s the worst soundtrack to this fight. Making my ears bleed.” As he commented, fire singed the sleeve on his shirt, and he quickly tamped it out with the metal of his sword, barely sidestepping another tentacle. “Bloody hell!”

“Leah programmed it.” My phone went quiet for a moment. Damn. I missed the call.

“Why were you letting a four-year-old mess with your ringtones?”

I shrugged and danced around behind Spike for distraction and to stave off tentacles. “Kept her busy during the initial Friday evening rush? She likes Elmo.”

The strains of Elmo’s World sang out jauntily again as Spike finally landed his sword home and another fire breathing head thudded to the ground, the loud shriek of agony rising over the song’s beat. “Ha ha!” he crowed in victory.

My ax cut down the now lackadaisical tentacle sweeping for his head. “Don’t brag too much.”

“It’s slowing down,” Spike observed, now back in the fray. “Answer the phone!”

“You sure?” I spun and ducked and landed a hard kick in the creature’s side wound. It shrieked and aimed its efforts at me, allowing Spike to behead it again.
“Yeah. Go now.” The remaining reptilian faces all jerked back Spike’s direction and hissed at him. “Four down. Three to go. I like those odds, love.”

Accepting his permission, I dove for the bag and the incessant phone. Cutting off the furry, annoyingly-friendly Sesame Street monster mid-word, I answered, trying not to sound too breathless or intense, “Hello?”

“Buffy! Long time no speak.” Willow sounded happy, happier than I’d heard her sound in a long time. She’d been out of reach of cell service for several months as she’d gone on a magic retreat to some place in Asia that Oz told her about. She’d needed the break, her first real vacation in years, and it was with her ex. The trip had to have been interesting to say the least. I’d have to call her later about that. “Giles is here, too.”

“Great.” The beast’s heads roared in unison behind me. Not as great.

“Buffy, dear lord, what’s going on there?” Giles voice sounded tiny and far away. Willow must have put me on speaker phone.

“Oh, nothing. Just fighting a seven-headed hell beastie,” I said, borrowing Spike’s casual term for most demons from other dimensions. “Well, three-headed now. Usual Tuesday evening fare. You know.”

Giles’s confusion shone through. “I thought Emily was taking on the apocalypse. Didn’t Liz, Hana, and Bridgette arrive to help?”

“They did. Katie drove in from Baton Rouge, too. This is a different situation altogether. Witch in over her head.” I watched Spike as he parried and darted and somersaulted around his target, a grin on his face. He was having fun now that the demon was over halfway subdued.

“Say no more,” Willow said knowingly, her voice a bit louder than Giles’s. “We won’t keep you long. Sorry, this is at a bad time.”

“No worries,” I said, squatting to rummage around for my spare ax. Spike had somehow lost this sword to one of the remaining heads.

Spike glimpsed what I was doing, and I barely caught the relief in his eyes. I tossed him the weapon.
Spike jumped and dodged tentacles before the handle landed home against his palm. He nodded briefly and dove back into the battle.

“To make it quick, Willow and I did a bit of research, and – ”

Willow interrupted, “Don’t be so modest, Giles. You did the bulk of it. He’s been working on it for days, Buffy. There’s really not much out there on the topic of humans and vampires having kids and none on Slayers and vampires.”

I winced as Spike almost got burned to ash – literally. My muscles and patience were wearing thin even though I really wanted to hear what they had to say. I gripped my ax. “Bottom line please.”

“I found one spell, Buffy. It may help increase your chances. Willow and I have done a rough translation from ancient Sumerian. Consulted an expert. It is seemingly simple, but it requires the human half of the couple to be very fertile. I would suggest. . . well, I would. . .” Giles trailed off, and I was distracted by Spike racing close by me, a demon neck and head following close behind.

“Hold on,” I called, dropping the phone and raising my ax. I swung hard and with little fanfare, a decapitated demon head landed with a clunk at my feet, its tongue lolling out of its mouth. Some sort of viscous fluid flowed from its severed neck, and its serpentine eyes bulged, looking as if they might pop. Gross.

“Thanks, love!” Spike sang out as the creature continued after him. He threw his head back and laughed, punctuating his taunt by hewing some more tentacles.

“You’re welcome!” I retrieved the phone from where it was wedged between a stake and a bottle of holy water in the bag. “I’m back. Sorry. What were you trying to say, Giles?”

There was a moment of silence followed by some soft but urgent whispers.

“Fine. I’ll do it.” Willow’s tone told me that she was annoyed but also somewhat amused, and her volume told me that she’d taken me off speaker phone.

“Do what?” I asked.
“Tell you that you should get checked out by your OB or a reproductive endocrinologist to check on your chances of conceiving.”

“Oh,” I whispered.

“Buffy?” Willow asked. I could almost picture the concerned lines creasing between her green eyes.

I hadn’t thought of that, but I was thirty. Though the recommendation made sense, the thought that I’d waited too long to try kind of blew my mind. I summoned some energy to infuse in my next words, “I’m here. And that makes sense. Thank you. Better get back to the fight.”

“You’re welcome, and Buffy?”

“Yeah?”

“Let’s Facetime soon, okay? I miss you.”

A wave of nostalgia for girl time with my best friend washed over me. Nowadays, we rarely saw each other. “Miss you, too. It’s a date.”

“Texting you the spell.”

“Thanks, Wil.”

Hanging up, I tossed my phone aside and rejoined my vampire in the fight. His face shifted to his human visage as soon as he saw me, and his blue eyes flashed with concern. I smiled to let him know that all was well.

A gush of fire shot between us, and channeling my mix of bewildering emotions into the skirmish, I joined Spike in his dance as we fought and slaughtered the remainder of the beast. After we conquered our foe, I kissed Spike until he couldn’t see straight and took him home to bed. Willow’s text could wait until another day.
The cemetery is an actual cemetery in Metairie with that hill/elk tomb. And most (if not all) the cemeteries in NOLA have above-ground tombs just because they're basically a swamp and buried bodies would pop up to the surface.
In the early afternoon, I was curled up in Spike’s recliner in the living room. The doors were shut to the bedroom where Spike was fast asleep, and the doors were shut to the bathroom between, providing the best sound blockage I could get. The day outside was sweltering and humid, so going outside was out of the question, and I was still not a good enough driver to take our car on a spin while I talked on the phone. (I’d learned that the hard way.)

I wasn’t trying to hide anything from Spike, but we’d been doing this simple spell thing for six months, and nothing was happening. Well, we were doing something in combination with the spell, and nothing was happening. No babies. No nothing. Just my cycle like usual, which I supposed was a good thing.

I’d always been regular even when I lost weight due to stress. Low weight was not my issue now that the mantle of the world was no longer on my shoulders. I wasn’t super curvy either, but I was nicely average, and Spike seemed to appreciate the softness to my body that hadn’t been there before.

And I’d much rather be snuggled in our comfy bed with him than attempting to make this phone call.

Honestly, the reason I was staring at my phone without dialing was because part of me was embarrassed. Maybe even ashamed? From all the information I’d been researching online, the consensus seemed to be that women bore the blame for not having children. And women who weren’t fertile lost their appeal in collective society’s view.

That brought me to the thing that bothered me the most. If I couldn’t bear children due to getting older, that meant I was passing Spike up. He’d be perpetually young as an immortal vampire, and I was destined to attain wrinkles and grey hair and to be less agile and less attractive. (Though, I wasn’t quite sure if that was true given that I was a Slayer, and Slayers didn’t generally live to be thirty years old.) Would he want me then?

Before I dove further into my brain, the phone rang in my hands, a nice standard telephone ring. I’d recently taken off the Elmo song. Spike would be pleased.

Dawn’s name appeared on the screen, and taking a deep breath, I slipped my thumb over the glass and held the phone to my ear. “Hello?”
“Hey, Buffy! You were supposed to be calling me, right? Is this the right time?” My sister sounded rushed.

“Oh, yeah! Sorry. I was just –” My words came out overly bright. Bugger. Spike was in my head.

Dawn cut me off. “I have fifteen minutes now because my roommate’s car broke down, and she needs me to pick her up at her job, so she can get to her afternoon class.”

“Sorry, Dawnie. That sounds stressful.”

Dawn snorted at my validation, and I could almost picture her expression of frustration. “It is. This is the third time this has happened. Doesn’t she realize that I’m not her chauffeur and that other people have classes and need to protect their study time?” She didn’t bother to wait for me to answer her questions. “So what’s up? Is this about your visit in a couple of weeks?”

Dawn was working on her master’s degree in communication at the University of Denver where she loved the emphasis on culture and the ability to tailor the coursework to her interests. She’d already connected with someone Giles knew who could teach her about demon cultures and communication-things related to said societies.

She gave me the opening, which gave me courage. “Yes. And Dawnie, while I’m there, there’s something I need to do.”

“Something Slayer-y?”

I bit my lip. “Not exactly, but it is something important that I wouldn’t normally take time from us to do. So, I’m warning you in advance.”

“Is it something I can help with, Buffy? You’re okay, right? I mean, health-wise?” Dawn’s mind often skipped to memories of loss and death for good reason.

So, I was quick to reassure her, “I’m fine. Healthy as ever.” I paused. “But I am going to see a doctor.”
“What kind of doctor?” A few seconds passed as I tried to figure out how to tell her, but she beat me to it. “Does it have anything to do with that spell Willow and Giles sorted out for you?”

Wait. What? “How do you know about that?”

“Well, they asked me to help translate it. I am, after all, an expert in Sumerian.” Cocky girl, my sister.

“So, you know about that.” I didn’t bother to hide the irony that of course, she knew. Xander and Andrew and all the Slayers probably knew, too.

“I do, and I’m so excited for you and Spike. Wait, it is for you and Spike, right?”

“Duh.” My heart ached a little for the man sleeping in the next room.

“Oh good. Spike will be a good dad.” She sounded relieved, and I was a little offended that she thought it could be anyone else.

“I know. You were one of the reasons I told him he would be.” Should I have gone there?

Dawn sounded half-surprised, half-pleased that she had been part of the discussion. “Me? Why?”

“Because he took care of you. When I was gone and before and after, too.” He took care of Dawn too many times for me to count even when I didn’t know she needed caring for. I could never repay him for that.

“Oh, right. He did.” Dawn’s relationship with Spike was complicated. She’d justifiably held onto the anger and hurt about him almost hurting me far longer than I had. She hadn’t known the messed-up nature of our initial attempt at a relationship – how “no” often meant “yes” and “yes” sometimes meant “no.”

I could own my piece and see my role much more easily than Dawn could from the outside looking in. In her mind, she could only see that someone she trusted beyond measure had betrayed that trust,
and at the time, she’d had too many hurts and losses in a row. The last few years had been a turning point for them. I’d encouraged him to reach out and keep reaching out with olive branches without forcing the issue until she finally found a place in her heart to forgive and let go. Comments like this one always reminded me that they still had a little way to go.

“You know he did. We both trusted him even if we never admitted it.”

“Even if you never admitted it,” Dawn corrected. Okay, so I sort of led her there, and she was a smart girl – woman. She knew it. “What kind of doctor are you seeing?”

“Well, for the spell to work properly, the human half of the couple has to be ‘especially fertile.’”

“Ugh. Really? That’s how Giles said it?” I was amused that my sister knew exactly who said those words.

“Yes and yes. Ergo, I want to get checked out by a. . . reproductive endocrinologist. And I was reading online th –”

“You’ve been researching online?” She didn’t have to sound so shocked.

I shrugged even though she couldn’t see it. “Yeah.”

“This is really important to you.”

My heart thumped in my chest. “Yes.”

“I’m coming with you.” I could almost picture the stubborn jut of her chin and the flash of determination in her eyes. She really was related to me.

Trying not to talk too loudly but still convey my insistence, I protested, “Dawnie, you have class. . .”

“I don’t care. You’re important to me.”
I shook my head. “This isn’t like with Mom.”

Before Dawn could respond, the door to the bathroom swung open, and Spike entered the room, curls tousled from sleep but eyes clear and blue, a tinge of fear in the barely perceptible squint. “What’s not like your mum?”

My mouth gaped, much to my mortification, and I found that I couldn’t form words or breathe – like a fish out of water. Anxiety made my already rapid heart rate go higher.

Knowing that Spike could hear her, Dawn said, “She’s going to see a fertility doctor when she comes to see me.”

Spike read me like a book, and his fear gave way to kindness. He held out his hand. Without thought, I slipped my fingers over his dry, cool palm and breathed, air rushing into my lungs and easing the painful ache from lack of oxygen. He helped me up and led me to the sofa where we sank down together.

“I’m coming with you, love.”

With Dawn still on the line, I let the phone drop from my ear as a tear rolled over my cheek – evidence of my own fears. A misplaced laugh escaped my lips. Spike merely kissed the top of my head and took the cell from me. As he said goodbye to my sister, I realized that I wasn’t alone in this journey, not like I thought I was.

Chapter End Notes

ETA: I found Dawn's grad program (master's in communication and culture) here: https://www.du.edu/academics/graduate-programs.html

As I was searching, I found this article by one of the current grad students in the program: http://news.du.edu/the-middle-east-feminism-and-vampires/ biggrin

Coincidence? lol
The night of our plane ride to Denver

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So what’s it that we’re supposed to do? And why are we going to Denver to do it?” Spike leaned over the armrest on the old Frontier airlines jet. The plane was virtually empty given that we were on the red-eye flight out of New Orleans to Denver in the middle of the week.

“Well, I picked this place because it’s supposed to be one of the best places in the country, and it happens to be in a suburb of the city where Dawnie’s going to school, and our insurance covers a lot of it, including the lab.” I had been studying the clinic’s schedule for the assessment and held the paper out to him. “The workup takes all day, but I got you the earliest slot. Well, they worked you in before sunrise. I told them you had to work. Guess they’re used to accommodating.”

Spike perused the sheet. “Um, love, why am I giving a sample of the ole swimmers? That’s not going to go over well. And what if they...” Spike looked around; no one was close enough to hear, “take my blood pressure or want to do blood tests?”

I shrugged. “Apparently, they don’t just go by our word. They have to run all their own tests. They’re very thorough.”

He gave me side eye. “Still doesn’t explain how I’m going to go about fooling the medical sensors.”

“That’s why Willow is meeting us in Denver. To give you a little magical enhancement.” I kissed his cheek.

“Don’t rightly like that idea, pet.” He meant the magic. “Why does Red even care about this?” Spike’s query was more about him than about us. Even after all this time, he expected derision and rejection from my friends. It probably didn’t help that we hadn’t really spent time with them in years.

“Wil cares about me. And she cares about us. She only ever wanted me to be happy with the guys in my life. She was always my current boyfriend’s biggest cheerleader.” This was true. I could still picture her face while she folded laundry in my living room while I talked about my impending date with Robin, encouraging me to put myself out there and let someone close even as the First Evil was preparing to take us all down. I also remembered that I thought she meant that I was still in love with Spike. I was; I just hadn’t let myself go there at the time.
“Even Angel and that lame excuse for a military man who got all lost in the sucking and married the first girl he ran across after you?” Spike was trying to sound incredulous and ironic but came off jealous.

I rolled my eyes at his sarcasm and unneeded jealousy but hugged his arm all the same, running my fingers down his forearm to clasp my hand in his. “Even them. But you and I have lasted longer than all of them for many good reasons, and I love you the most-est.”

He lifted my hand to kiss the back of it before playfully nibbling my knuckle. “You better.”

I leaned against him, and he laid his head atop mine. My anxiety fidgeted its way through the muscles in my limbs, and I recognized how much tension was in my back. Spike must have felt it because he rubbed my arm with his free hand. Then, he slipped his arm around my shoulders and held me.

“What’s on your mind, pet?” he whispered. “You’re tighter than one of those wind-up toys that Leah’s fond of.”

I laughed at that. Leah did like her wind-up rabbit I bought her for Easter. Her little hand would frequently sneak over the countertop at the coffee shop, and she’d let the toy go so that it hopped a crooked path, much to the amusement of customers waiting for their orders. “I guess I am.”

“What are you so anxious about? I mean, besides me coming off as human for their tests.”

Should I tell him? I mentally shook my head. Of course, I should. Sometimes I wondered how he was still so patient with me. Well, he wasn’t always patient, but when it came to my soft underbelly, he had been more tolerant than anyone I’ve ever known, especially if I wasn’t poking around at his soft underbelly. I sighed. “What if it’s me?”

“Not following, love.”

I bit my lip, trying to decide how to word my concerns. “I mean, what if I do all these tests and evaluations, and it’s me? What if I’m the reason the spell’s not working and the reason we can’t have a family?” As soon as I said it, I inwardly cringed, and true to my prediction, I felt Spike stiffen next to me. Damn it, Buffy.
How fortuitous that we were on a plane and couldn’t get away from one another or yell without drawing attention from other drowsy passengers like the middle-aged guy dressed in a business suit two rows up. As it was, Spike’s lower volume was more disconcerting. “What do you mean if it’s you? Bloody hell, Slayer, it’s me. I’m the reason we can’t have a child. Vampire here. Or did you forget?” I started to protest, but he withdrew his touch before I could speak. The loss of the physical connection brought me straight back to the first night we fought about this same topic, which threw me for an emotional loop. “The sodding spell that Rupert and Willow found is just a diversion from the truth. I’m the one holding you back from a normal life and a regular family. It’s. Not. You.”

I was a little better prepared this time. “That’s not what I meant.” While not the most eloquent, it wasn’t Buffy putting her foot in her mouth.

“What did you mean then?” His voice was still raw around the edges but slower and less heated. This gave me the space to think.

I made sure he and I were making eye contact. “I don’t want normal. Remember? Slayer here. Not normal. And normal is a poorly defined concept.”

He sighed, slightly dissuaded from his defensiveness. “I know that, pet.”

“It’s just that part of our not normal is that I’m going to age. I’ve already aged. A lot of women start having trouble conceiving at thirty due to age-related factors. And with the Slayer gig, who knows if something is... damaged inside. I’ve taken a lot of hits in a lot of places in that region. Well, all regions really. A-and I died. More than once. Could that do something to my fertility?” I left out the part about whether he’d want me when I started aging well beyond him. He had enough to try to absorb.

“You also have superhuman healing,” he reassured me, bumping his upper arm against mine. “And love, contrary to what I said to you in a fit of anger, you didn’t come back wrong. What’d Glinda call it? A cellular tan?”

“Yeah.” Unconvinced, I didn’t add that said cellular change might have impacted my eggs. They were, after all, cells. I studied my hands, palms upturned in my lap. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that his hand was similarly vulnerable on his thigh. Without overthinking my movement, I snaked my hand into his again.

He squeezed just slightly. “One step at a time, love. That’s all we can do. If – and that’s a big ‘if’ – you turn out to be contributing to our difficulty, then, we will figure out what to do next.”
“Together?”

“Together.” He paused and then added, “It’d be a miracle anyway.” My stomach sank, and I found myself holding my breath. He continued even though he was likely not oblivious to the change in my breathing. “Rupert and Red didn’t find any evidence that this has ever been done before?”

Mute, I shook my head.

“I worry about you getting your hopes up when the odds are against us.” His thumb gently ran over the side of my hand. “Will you be okay if this is all for naught? If you’re not, will we be okay?”

He was asking if us not having a child would tear us apart. At that point, I didn’t know. I was so far into this. . . quest that I didn’t know. I swallowed. Would I get sucked back into the pit of depression, and if I did, would I hurt Spike again? Would I be able to climb out of despair? “One step at a time.”

Chapter End Notes

In case you're wondering, they are headed to a specific clinic in Colorado where I cycled. Will probably post two more parts this week after this one... Thank you again for all the encouragement with the story!
A nurse named Amy, who was dressed in colorful scrubs, her blonde hair cut in a short pixie cut, let us into the underground parking garage well before the sun came up. As she held open the door, keys jangling in her hand, she explained in a way that told me she’d made this speech many times, “When women come in for egg retrievals or other surgeries, we let them come in here, so they don’t have far to go after the procedure, and it’s more private. You’re here bright and early, so this is the only way in. They don’t unlock the front doors until later.”

This was highly convenient, considering Spike was a vampire. I couldn’t help but ask, “Egg retrievals? For IVF?”

“Yes,” Amy acknowledged, her kind eyes crinkling at the outer corners revealing her age despite the youthful glow in her eyes. With an efficient gait, she led us down a hallway from the garage. The clinic wasn’t sterile but was simple in its décor and somehow soothing and inviting. Maybe it was the warm, non-fluorescent lights in the hallway. “But not for you today, right? You’re here for the one-day work up?” (The women in online fertility forums abbreviated it to the “ODWU.”)

I nodded. “Yes.” I glanced at Spike who was putting effort into maintaining a neutral face. “And... William has to go to work, so the people who scheduled us got us in early.”

“Ah,” Amy glanced at Spike, no doubt taking in his black clothes, bleached hair, and very pale skin. She seemed curious but unsurprised by his appearance.

Nerves kept me talking. Stupid nerves. “Thank you for letting us come so early.”

Still walking, Amy slowed and put a firm, warm hand on my forearm. For some reason, this calmed me immediately. “No thanks needed. We are used to accommodating a lot of schedules and situations.”

“I was reading that people come here from all over the country,” I commented, thinking about the women posting in the forums from Washington D.C. to Chicago to Dallas.

“From all over the world,” Amy corrected without a trace of arrogance.
The three of us went behind a desk and into another part of the clinic. Amy led us into a small room with two plastic chairs with cushions, a rolling stool, and a chair with large moving arms, obviously for drawing blood. She washed her hands, put gloves on, and retrieved a small plastic cup from the cabinet. Handing it to Spike, she said, “This is for your sample. There are rooms for your convenience. Just bring it out when you’re done. Make sure you put your name on it with the marker in the room. Then, we’ll do the other tests. It’s not the normal order of things, but you’re in a hurry, and I still have to check in with a couple of other people who are coming in early for other reasons.”

Holding the plastic cup as if it were a vial containing poison, Spike sighed.

Now, Amy patted his arm. I decided she must have to do the encouraging touch thing a lot in the infertility world. “It’s not so bad.” She inclined her head to me, “She can go with you if you like.”

Spike’s eyes glinted, and he sucked in his cheeks just a little so that the sharpness of his cheekbones stood out ever so slightly. Oh, he wanted me to go with. Devilish man, that one. Amy, of course, probably only noticed his charming smirk. “I think I’d like her to come with me.”

“Of course.” Amy waved her hand for us to exit the room.

Within seconds, we were at the door to a tiny room in a row of tiny rooms set up for sample giving. . . supplying. What was the proper term for the. . . sperm giving? There was low mood lighting and a leather recliner inside. A row of cabinets on the right contained a variety of mood-inducing supplies. Spike gravitated to the leather and slid into the seat, hands opened and running over the smooth surface. I swallowed, obviously more nervous than he was though there was really no reason to be if Willow’s spell held up.

As I hovered in the doorway, I suddenly remembered the cooler against my hip, the wide strap slung over my shoulder. “Oh! I almost forgot. The blood for the three-day labs.”

I’d read online about how I should have my blood drawn and spun ahead of evaluation day, so I didn’t have to figure out how to mail the blood back to them. (There was supposedly a kit we could pay for, but any penny I could save was a good thing even if Giles was paying for some sort of health insurance to cover such things. . . even for Spike in case he needed to utilize a demon clinic or hospital.) The blood components had been frozen in vials in our freezer for only a couple of days because the work-up took place shortly after the beginning of the woman’s cycle, which was right after the period ended and before ovulation. Spike had nosed around at the vials but had kept his hands off when I explained what it was for.
Amy smiled and accepted the offered cooler. “Thanks. You’re prepared.”

I nodded, relieved to have the package of ice and blood in her hands and not mine.

“We’ll return the cooler to you later in the day. Is that okay with you?” Amy asked, handling the cooler like it was precious cargo. I really liked her.

“Yes. Of course.” I fidgeted as Amy walked away. With a deep inhalation of air, I awkwardly called out to her right as she rounded the corner. “You’ll tell me if it’s what you needed?”

Amy smiled again with gentle patience. “Of course.”

“Thanks.” I gave her a little wave and then she was gone.

“Pet,” Spike said softly with a hint of seduction in his voice. “Come here.”

Every muscle relaxing, I smiled. I could really use a stress release. Shutting the door and locking it, I pivoted to find Spike perched on the edge of the recliner, legs spread and forearms resting on his thighs. He gazed at me with those bright blue eyes of his, and though his body lacked tension, there was a fierce animal hunger in his expression that always made me long for his touch. My smile widened, and I took a tentative step forward, running my finger with deliberation over the magazines in a small rack next to the silent flat screen TV and powered-off DVR box.

“You don’t want to use any of these?” I asked, trying to sound innocent.

He lifted his scarred eyebrow at me. “Now why would I want to do that, love, when I have you here?”

“You’d use them if I wasn’t? Here, that is?” I asked, reaching him and pushing him back against the chair. He complied with a soft grunt, his eyes holding fast to mine.

He grasped my hips firmly and pulled me back onto the chair with him so that my legs bent around his thighs. “Nope.”
I narrowed my eyes incredulously, nestling closer to him, noticing how much he wanted me. My heart rate picked up steam. “You wouldn’t?”

His lips soft and tender, he kissed me deeply, ending by nipping my lower lip. “Pouty. No. I wouldn’t.”

With the expediency of much practice, I undid his belt and then his jeans, giving him a disbelieving, “Hmph.”

His forehead close to mine, and his breath slightly catching, he murmured, “I would just imagine you, pet. The only woman I want.”

“Good.”

Needless to say, Spike had no trouble providing his sample.

Chapter End Notes

I’m not going to go over the details of what happens for the woman during the ODWU...needless to say, there are a lot more tests for the woman than the man. And some of them are painful.

Spike and Buffy meet with the doctor in the next chapter...and some of the tests will be hinted at. Btw, Amy is the name of one of the founding doctor's longtime nurses at the clinic I went to. Her personality was just as I described here. She met me and my husband in the semi-underground parking area early in the morning before anyone was there. She was so kind when I was incredibly nervous about something really scary that happened during my IVF cycle there.

Also, I have no idea what the guys' sperm sample rooms look like. My husband did not want me to go with him...so I made that part completely up. The rest of the place was so nice that I imagined that the sperm collection rooms were much nicer than the average clinic...but who knows? lol
Spike and I sat in the doctor’s office waiting on him to meet with us. We’d been waiting for thirty minutes, which wasn’t long as waits for the doctor were concerned, but it felt like an eternity for me. (Did I say we were waiting?)

The nurse I was assigned, Elaine, called me after I was already snuggled up with Spike in Dawn’s living room. I even had my pajamas on early after the day of testing. Elaine told me that the doctor wanted to see us that evening. The extra meeting wasn’t on the schedule, and I’d already met with the doctor earlier in the day. He’d asked me the standard questions about why we were seeking the evaluation and reviewed the information he’d already received, which didn’t include all the test results yet.

Now, Spike fidgeted next to me, his fingers playing with an uneven seam on the arm of his chair. His skin was extra pale under the luminescence of the fluorescent lights, especially in contrast to his black t-shirt. “She didn’t say why we had to come in?”

“No. Just that he wanted to meet with us. You heard everything I did.”

Like a kid waiting for the principal, Spike squirmed more, leaning forward in his seat and trying to peer around me into the hallway as if he could will the doctor to appear. “Well, that’s bloody great. I’m sure this isn’t good, pet. Doctors never call for extra meetings without some sort of problematic something or other.”

I considered that Spike might start pacing soon. His visible display of anxiety, oddly enough, was alleviating my own, and I merely shifted in my chair, wincing at the twinge of pain.

Spike caught my flinch. “You okay, love?” He’d been checking on me since I returned to Dawn’s apartment, and I found that I wanted to reassure him.

Reaching for his hand across the gulf between the chairs, I said, “Right as rain.”

“Some of the tests hurt,” he acknowledged, folding his cool hand around my smaller one.
I’d tried to hide it from him but obviously failed and miserably. “Oh yeah. The dye test and the hys. . . hysteer. . .” How had the nurse said this word earlier? I tried again, “Hysteroscopy were the most painful. But honestly, I’m probably quite a bit less sore than other women. Slayer healing comes in handy.”

Spike abruptly sat up a little straighter.

“He’s coming?”

“Yeah. Someone is.” There’d been a few nurses around and no one in the main lobby’s waiting room, which had dimmed with the darkened sky. It was a logical conclusion.

My heart started beating faster, and my stomach twisted, signaling the return of my nervousness. I squeezed his hand and let go. “We got this.”

“As the doctor settled into his chair, he said, “So, you’re probably wondering why I had you come back in so soon.”

I nodded. “Yeah. I mean, did you already get my test results back? Is something wrong?”

Dr. Surrey shook his head. “No. Nothing’s wrong with your test results. We haven’t finished processing all of them yet, of course.” He shook his mouse to wake up his computer screen. “However, the ones we do have back are really promising.” He typed and clicked the mouse a few times before swiveling the monitor our direction. “Looks like your baseline ultrasound and doppler results show that you have good blood flow to your uterus. That’s what we want to see.” The information on the screen all looked like Greek to me, but I’d seen the ultrasound in action at the time of the test, which had been pretty nifty. Dr. Surrey clicked around some more and pulled up a different document. “And your hysteroscopy results looked excellent. Just a couple of really small polyps in your uterus.”
I donned my best curious face and ignored my accelerated heart rate. “What does that mean?”

He nodded at me. “That’s a good question. That means that your uterus looks good for carrying a child.”

Relief flooded me, and the tension in my shoulders eased a fraction. “Oh. That’s good.”

“Very good.” He smiled and then said, “So, the reason that I’m most concerned is that William’s results are indicative that something else is going on.” He sat back in his chair again and regarded us evenly. He was still friendly appearing, so it couldn’t be that bad, right? Had Willow’s magic held up?

I plunged ahead. Why not rip off the proverbial Band-Aid? “What did you find?”

“Well, for one, his... your sperm sample showed that you don’t have any living sperm. This, in and of itself, is not something that caught our attention. We see plenty of men who are in a similar situation.”

They’re dead... undead? Animated by a demon? I tried not to giggle even though this struck me as highly amusing. I bit my cheek and then found myself asking, “So what did you notice?”

Why was Spike being so quiet? That wasn’t like him. I sneaked a glance at him. His face was still, but there was a hint of fear in his blue eyes. This wasn’t like Spike. The only time I’d truly seen fear on his face was when he was terrified of my reaction... of losing me. He generally wasn’t afraid of much... even in a fight when he was outmatched. I scooted my chair close to him and looped my arm with his, rubbing his forearm.

Dr. Surrey seemed to be watching us with patience, and he didn’t seem to be freaking out, so when he said his next words, I was completely blown away. He addressed Spike, “You’re a vampire.”

Spike immediately started to his feet, knocking his chair backward and pulling me up with him.

Dr. Surrey stood, too, hands raised to try soothing Spike. “Hold on. I’m not holding that against you. We see our fair share of demon-human couples who are struggling with infertility. It’s actually more
common than you’d think. . . the couples, not the infertility piece. They generally tend to struggle with conception. But we do help them. And while we’ve never had a vampire come through our doors, especially not trying to conceive with a human, we are willing to try and help.”

Spike’s whole body visibly relaxed, and I hastily righted his seat. We both sat down again and so did Dr. Surrey. The doctor was unruffled, which made me consider what he’d previously experienced in his office. The demon revelation added a whole other element to my admiration for the clinic. How had I not known about demons and humans trying to conceive? I should have known about that, right?

“So, how did you figure it out?” Spike asked, his leg shaking up and down just slightly. I put my hand on his thigh and squeezed, and his leg settled.

“Well, we do have a witch on staff. Since we built our reputation and our clientele diversified to include demons, we figured we should be in the loop on the supernatural. In addition to being an exceptional nurse, she has a degree in demonology.”

“So, she saw through what Willow did?” I asked. I frowned a little as my brain put the pieces together for me. “Amy?”

Dr. Surrey’s eyes sparkled. “Yes. She’s been with us a long time. She helps out whenever we have unusual requests just to make sure things are on the up and up. She could also tell that Buffy wasn’t in a state of. . . what do you call it?” He paused for a moment and then, his eyes lit with remembrance. “Thrall. She noticed how caring you were with one another.”

“What can you do to help us, doc?” Spike’s leg was bouncing again but almost imperceptibly.

Dr. Surrey’s response was firm but gentle. He knew how to deliver bad news. He must have learned how to do it well in his field. I was used to that, too, only my bad news was usually the pointy end of a stake in the heart for the vampire of the evening. “Well, first, we have to figure out what Buffy’s test results show. Then, depending on those, we will recommend a course of action. Right now, I’m thinking IUI or IVF. Unfortunately, our technology does not allow us to reanimate sperm. We do not use magic in our practice. So, you are looking at using a sperm donor.”

All I could think about in that moment was how Spike was right in his proclamation on the plane and in his fear the first time I brought up having a family. My heart ached for him. Of course, he knew this truth. It was self-evident for a vampire. But hearing it said out loud, confirming it, wasn’t easy. Screw where we were. I stood up and sat on the thigh that had been jiggling. I touched his cheek and held his gaze with mine.
“One step at a time,” I reminded him.

He searched my eyes for a moment and then blinked. “Right.” He shifted me so that we both faced the doctor. “So, Buffy and I have things to discuss.”

“Perfectly reasonable,” Dr. Surrey said. “Take all the time you need. We can discuss things further in the follow-up meeting. Because you’re from out of state, it will be on the phone. The ladies in the front will follow up on scheduling the phone call for after all your test results are in. It generally takes a couple of weeks. Sound good?”

“Yes. Thank you.” I was grateful. . . grateful that we’d have real answers, grateful that we didn’t have to pretend to be something we weren’t. The next worry was looming though and that was what Spike thought about a sperm donor.

“You’re very welcome,” Dr. Surrey rose. “Hope you both have a good evening.”

“One more question.” This was a very important question.

“What’s that?” The doctor asked.

Spike spoke up, but I couldn’t tell how he felt about the meeting from his tone. “She wants to know if she can have caffeine again.”

I pointed a finger at Spike. “That’s the one!” I hadn’t been able to have any for twenty-four hours before the test, and an un-caffeinated Slayer did not make for a happy Slayer.

Dr. Surrey laughter was loud but unpretentious, and I appreciated that my doctor had a sense of humor.

“Yes, Buffy, you may have a cup of coffee. . . for now.”

I grinned despite the ominous “for now,” “Perfect.”
Dr. Surrey is an amazing doc. And I thought and thought about how to handle the Spike situation and decided that a world-renowned clinic that has seen everything would have a witch on board in the Buffyverse and they'd totally be in the know about the demon world and have clear parameters and guidelines about working with them (e.g., no violence in the clinic, no coercion, etc.). You do indeed have to go without caffeine for 24 hours ahead of the workup for the purposes of the blood flow test referenced here. And there are a few more tests than mentioned here, including bloodwork to check hormones, tests for STDs for both parents, a dye test to determine if your tubes are open (hurts like a mother), etc...
The night before our follow-up appointment

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What’s with Spike tonight?” Emily asked me as she tucked her stake in her waistband and pulled back her hair into a low ponytail. The breeze that whistled around the rows of tombs kept blowing her long strands across her eyes as we patrolled together. Cooler breezes in an otherwise humid, sticky day were one of the pluses of New Orleans cemeteries. “He’s never grumpy on patrol.”

Spike had been sulking all day, and while this didn’t even compare because Spike was never broody, he was reminding me too much of Angel. My nerves were already frayed because I was anxious about tomorrow’s phone appointment with Dr. Surrey, which was two weeks after our trip to Denver, and Spike was acting like a two-year-old. “I have no idea. That’s why I asked to tag along tonight. I couldn’t stand being in the house with him and his mood.” Now, he’d charged ahead of us, taking the scenic route to the vamp nest.

“Your house is really small,” the young Slayer said. “Nowhere to get away.”

“Not in a shotgun house,” I agreed. Normally, I loved how cozy my home with Spike was. “And slaying always gives us a way to burn off steam.”

Emily gave me side eye. “I’ll just hang back and let y’all have first dibs. Does that sound okay?” Her Cajun accent always made me smile. There was something so laid back and friendly about her voice. I’d seen her use it as a weapon during patrol, too – the same way I used to use puns and quip-age.

“That’d be very appreciated.” I needed it, too.

“And if say, we get there and there aren’t as many vamps as our little tip suggested, I'll just scoot. I need to make some groceries anyway before tomorrow morning. Gotta get stuff for my mom’s birthday. She’s making forty-two this year.” Emily twirled her stake, a little jaunt in her step. She was twenty at most and still had an intact supportive family, which was amazing given the strain having a Slayer in the family caused.

“Your mom had you when she was young,” I observed. Her mom had her when she was twenty-one, twenty-two? That’s how old I was in Sunnydale. That seemed like eons ago.

“Yeah. She was way young, but a lot of girls were having babies right out of college, and my dad’s
older. He’s fifty.” Her dad certainly didn’t look his age, and he was always jovial and welcoming. He owned a seafood restaurant on Tchoupitoulas with the best baked oysters. Better than Acme in the Quarter with just the right amount of cheese and spices. “And it was a good thing my mom had me early. She had a lot of miscarriages after me.” A momentary sadness passed over her face. “I always wanted a sibling.”

A wave of love for my sister washed over me. I missed Dawn and made a mental note to call her after the follow up with the doctor tomorrow. “Siblings can also be a pain in the butt. Always in need of rescue. You know, when said sibling decides to follow you to the cemetery to hide behind a tree because she wants to see a real vampire. When you just need to slay and get to bed because you have a test the next day. . .” I grinned and wove my own stake between my fingers.

Emily laughed. “I take it this is from personal experience.”

“Yep. But I wouldn’t trade her for anything.”

“Well, when I have kids, I’ll have at least two.” She tapped the tip of the stake against her lower lip thoughtfully.

Her words hit me sort of sideways. We lived in a world in which other Slayers could think about having families. Sometimes, it still didn’t seem real.

My eyes misted up before I could stop them or realize what feelings were behind the tears. Crap. Luckily, Emily didn’t notice because Spike came barreling around a large tomb, the damned prickly look still in his eyes. “What’re you two doing? Hurry it up!”

“What? Why?” Emily asked, springing forward with me not far behind.

“You’re the one who left us,” I murmured under my breath, knowing full well he could hear me but Emily couldn’t.

Spike came up short and was about to retort, but a vampire sprang through the air at him, tackling him to the ground. “Bloody hell!” The vampire had been a burly man in life and wore a black suit and likely his best Sunday hat. Spike twisted around underneath the other vampire and tried to shove him off. “This is why,” Spike hissed through gritted teeth as he strained to move his attacker.
I raced past Emily, grabbed the vamp by the shoulder and flung him away from Spike and back into the waiting arms of his posse of at least twelve other growling vampires, their bumpies prominent and eyes glowing yellow. “Great. Thirteen vamps in a graveyard in New Orleans. Are we lucky or what?” I declared as Emily helped Spike back to his feet.

“Well, you were looking for a fight,” Emily joked. “You got one.”

“We got one,” Spike said appearing at my elbow and shifting into his own vampire face. I resisted the urge to growl at him in frustration.

The vampires descended upon us as a group, and soon, Emily, Spike, and I were consumed by flying fists, fangs, and preternatural energy swirling around us. I slid into the fight with ease and was grateful for the feeling of strength pouring through my muscles. The vampires received the brunt of my anger at Spike’s sulking and the whole situation, and I could tell from the extra energy behind his blows that Spike was doing the same around me. Dust flew through the air as vampires began to lose their hearts, and somehow as we got closer to the end of the skirmish, I felt my heart begin to break a little, too.

As Emily kicked and flipped and toyed with her remaining vampire, I slayed the last of mine and whirled, flinging my stake at the large vampire who’d hung back and was targeting Spike again. The wood landed home in the vampire’s back right where his heart was located, and I felt very satisfied when the large body crumbled into dust.

Spike caught my still moving stake in one hand and glared at me. “Watch it.”

I returned the glower from where I was leaning with my hands on my thighs, trying to catch my breath. Fury reanimated my limbs, and I stalked toward him, stopping a few feet away, my fists in balls. I ignored the throbbing in my shoulder where I’d been slammed against the concrete. “What the hell, Spike?”

“What?” he slung out in irritation. “You could have staked me!”

“No, I wouldn’t have, and you know it.” I trusted him to take care of himself in a fight. “I repeat. What the hell?!”

“What are you going on about?” Spike strode away from me and helped a fallen Emily to her feet.
Emily dusted off her hands and retrieved her stake, watching us uncertainly. I didn’t care at this point. I couldn’t take it anymore.

“You know what the hell I’m ‘going on about’!” I shouted.

“Not in front of the lady,” he reprimanded me with an air of indifference.

Tears filled my eyes again. “Emily, we’re going to need…”

Emily’s eyes were full of sympathy, and she edged toward the entrance to the cemetery. “I’m just going to go run that errand I was telling you about,” she said walking backward a little.

I nodded, the damned ball of emotion lodged in my throat. A tear fell over my cheek.

The other Slayer turned and left me and Spike alone among the tombs. The high walls were making me feel trapped, but they also meant that neither of us could rabbit away.

“Fuck you, Spike,” I said quietly when I could manage.

“Well, love you, too, pet.” He started to follow the path Emily took.

Tears poured hot over my cheeks and down my neck. Stupid tears. I was angry with myself for crying. “Wait,” I called as he was almost out of view.

He sighed, still with that edge in his voice. “What is it?”

“I shouldn’t have said what I did. I just. . . I just don’t understand what’s going on with you today.” Give me something to go on. Please. Trying not to sound too desperate, I hardened my voice just slightly. “You’ve been weir. . . not yourself all day.”

“You want to know what’s going on?” An unidentifiable emotion besides anger infiltrated his tone.
I kept my response simple. “Yes.”

Spike was quiet for a moment as if he had expected more fighting words. He stared at the Blanchard tomb as if he were really studying the ornate design on the columns. “Tomorrow, we’re going to talk with that doctor of yours, and he’s going to recommend using someone else’s sperm or some such rot.” He still wasn’t looking at me, but it was something.

“And what about that bothers you?” I asked, not softening because I was afraid he’d buck up against me again.

He briefly glanced at me then, and the light from the full moon gave me a glimpse of the fear in his eyes. “You know, I spent a lot of years... decades with Angelus, Darla, and Dru.” I didn’t respond and waited for him to continue. “They were my family, you know?”

“I know,” I said, infusing my words with new gentleness. I wanted to cross the gulf between us but not yet.

His head in profile, he closed his eyes and pushed one hand into his jeans pocket. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking about them since we decided to start a family.”

“Oh.”

He turned his face farther away. “And I’m terrified, pet.”

The lump in my throat migrated to my heart where I ached for him. “Of what?”

He was silent for several seconds, and I could tell he was trying to sort out how to say the next words. “A lot of things. But mostly that using someone else’s DNA, no matter how well we pick it from whatever database they have, will get us into something we aren’t expecting. And what we have... you and me? It’s the best family I’ve ever had. I don’t want to mess that up. Not again.”

“First of all, if we’re going with the analogy that Darla and Angelus were your adoptive parents, we’re already ahead of the game for a lot of reasons,” I gently joked. He laughed a little then. He approached him and tugged his stubborn hand out of his pocket, threading my fingers with his. “For one, we’re not psychopaths, and whatever baby we have... if we even have one... will be human.”
“Know lots of humans that are pretty twisted. Whether it be through nature, nurture, or a mix,” he countered, but he was still holding my hand, which was a good sign.

“Valid point.” I thought for a moment. “But honestly, how many psychopaths do you know that go to the sperm bank to donate sperm for use at a fertility clinic? And we both had good moms, so if we’re looking at nurture, we know what to do.”

“That’s true.” Spike’s eyes searched for mine. “You’re nervous, too, right, love?”

“So nervous.” I didn’t need to enumerate why. He knew my fears. “I honestly don’t know how I feel about using a sperm donor either. All I know is that I love you. And you’re right. You are my family no matter what. If we haven’t completely messed it up already given what we’ve done to each other, we’ll be just fine.” We’d been good together for so long that I rarely thought about the times we weren’t, but sometimes, the reminder of how far we’d come provided a nice and necessary contrast. It made me appreciate what we had now even more.

He stroked my cheek and kissed the remaining tears away. “I’m sorry, and I love you, too. Walk with me?”

“Uh huh.” I returned his affection with a kiss of my own but by bringing my lips to his. His touch was comforting. Things weren’t completely resolved but at least he was semi-back to himself.

Hand in hand, we took a long stroll through the cemetery, relishing the cool air and bright light from the moon above. As we did, an idea formed in my mind, and I made a mental note to text Giles later.

Chapter End Notes

This isn't the end of the discussion. If you can bear with a couple of more chapters, the tone is less intense. Thanks for all the support and comments... Have a great weekend!
I sighed, dropped my phone on the coffee shop counter, and set my chin heavily in my palms.

“What’s wrong, chica?” Crystal asked as she wiped down the espresso machine.

The Wednesday evening traffic in the coffee shop had trickled down, and her husband had picked up Leah an hour ago. The little girl had been a wonderful distraction, talking about how she played with her friend Alex at the park and how she got to ride a real horse – not a pony, which was an important distinction in her mind – with her aunt last weekend.

Now, I was faced with the message on my phone and figuring out what to do about it.

“Remember how I told you Spike and I went to that clinic in Denver?” I tilted my head to glance back at her, studiously avoiding the text I’d just received from Giles.

“Uh huh. Last I heard, you had a phone call with the doc and got your test results back, and they recommended IVF.” Crystal proceeded to wipe down the space around the machine. She’d just come back from maternity leave and knew only a little about the fertility evaluation from my texts with her in discussing shop hours and scheduling and planning visits with Leah. “Didn’t you say your numbers were all good?”

“Yeah. Fairly good overall. That’s what they told me and it sounds right from what I’ve read,” I said glumly. I had my numbers and all the acronyms memorized: AMH 1.8, AFC 15, estradiol 34, FSH 11.8, and LH 7.0. The FSH was slightly high, but the doctor said he wasn’t too worried about it. I couldn’t keep straight what they all meant and kept having to look them up when I researched online. “And Spike’s were all bad.” Crystal didn’t know Spike’s sperm were basically nil because he was a vampire.

“Right.” She began rinsing the metal cups we used for steaming milk with soap and water. “But you have a plan now? Why the gloom?”

I poked at a tiny trail of sugar on the counter, sweeping the grains into a tiny pile of sweetness. “Spike’s been distant since the phone call with the doctor. And that was a few weeks ago.” He hadn’t been irritable and bad-mood-ish, but he had been quieter... uncharacteristically distant despite...
our blow-up-and-make-up in the cemetery. A couple of nights he’d even stayed at work later than normal. I’d woken up the next morning to him coming in, smelling more strongly of cigarette smoke than usual. I wasn’t sure what to say, so I’d cried in the shower after he passed out in exhaustion on our bed without even touching me.

“Well, can they do anything for his sperm?” Crystal edged past me and into the seating area, starting to straighten the disorderly stack of newspapers on one table.

I watched her even out the edges and wished that this whole process was as simple as lining up sections of the newspaper. “No. Nothing they can do. They suggested donor sperm. He hasn’t talked with me about it since. I know he’s scared; he said as much.”

“Scared of what?” Crystal lifted an eyebrow at me as she tossed the papers into the recycling bin against the wall.

“That we’d end up in over our heads with some random guy’s sperm.” Realizing I should be helping my co-worker, I bent over and found a couple of dry washcloths. Running them under the stream of water in the sink, I squeezed out the excess and passed one to Crystal.

“Thanks.” Crystal began wiping down the tables and chairs. “Don’t they let you pick the sperm donor?”

I ran the damp cloth over the wood in front of me, avoiding the little pile of sugar. “Yeah but still. It’s almost like adopting sperm. And Spike. . . he was adopted at a later age, and while his biological mom was wonderful before she died, his adoptive parents weren’t so great to him. His whole adoptive family was pretty dysfunctional.” Understatement of the century.

Crystal was silent for several seconds as she scrubbed a particularly stubborn stain off one of the tables. Then, she says, “I wonder if it’s not just the adoption piece that bothers him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hmm. Is it the financial cost?”

“No. I have good health insurance from my other job. It covers the clinic’s services and the lab, which are apparently two different entities.” Giles paid for excellent health insurance for me and
even for Spike who now has forged papers that make him a seemingly legit American citizen. “Money isn’t a factor.” For once in my life.

Finished with my first task, I tossed my dirty bit of cotton into the sink and scooped up the glass cleaner and a roll of paper towels to tackled the fingerprint-smudged pastry case, joining Crystal in the main area.

“Does he want a family with you?” Crystal tossed her washcloth at the sink and missed.

I squirted the blue liquid over the clear surface, watching the freed drops trail rapidly over the sloping curve with the pull of gravity. “I think so.” Spike would do anything for me. I knew this. He knew this. Would he resent me for it? I bit my lip. I didn’t want this to come between us. I’m suddenly struck by a powerful urge to abandon my post at the coffee shop and run to the Spotted Cat to hug him tight and make sure he was still mine.

Crystal’s voice drew me back to reality. “Then, I wonder if... and don’t take this the wrong way because I don’t know Spike very well.”

“I won’t.” My arm automatically moved, the paper towel and fluid combination squeaking over the glass.

“I wonder if it bothers him that his sperm wouldn’t be used to make your child... that he’d always be separate somehow. That you’d have a different connection than he would... a deeper one.” She stooped with a small grunt of pain and snagged the wayward cloth, slapping it in the sink next to mine. She rounded back my direction and tore off a paper towel to help me.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Scar from the C-section still stings sometimes.”

She and I made short, noisy work of erasing the fingerprints.

When we finished, she asked, “So? What do you think of what I just said?”
My mind went back to the text I was trying not to think about. Was Crystal right? “I actually have thought about that.” I was afraid to say the next part out loud. Then again, I’d felt so alone with it. I felt so alone a lot lately. I closed my eyes.

Crystal’s arms went around my shoulders, and she gave me a tight hug. This elicited the tears I’d been holding onto, afraid that Spike might hear if I cried too much.

She drew back and rubbed my upper arm. “It’s okay, hun. Let it all out. Dealing with infertility is a really lonely place to be, especially for the woman.” She tore off a paper towel and handed it to me. “Not exactly a tissue, but it’s the best I can do.”

I laughed a little through the tears and then blotted my eyes, mindful of my mascara. “How do you know so much about this?”

Crystal shrugged. “My sister’s been through it. Tried for so many years. Her husband wasn’t exactly open to any fertility treatments or adoption. It was really hard on her when I got pregnant so easily. And twice. I know how much it hurt her. She didn’t talk about it with me until I made her. I wanted her to come to me, you know? We’ve always been close, but the child bearing thing came between us. I hated it.”

I sniffed. “What happened?”

Crystal gathered up the cleaning supplies. “She and her husband got a divorce. She’s remarried now; they’re working on adopting.”

“Wow. That’s good. Good for her. And you.” It was a good situation for Crystal’s sister. Right? My chest ached. I definitely didn’t want to lose Spike over this whole mess. I couldn’t. He was so far in my heart that I couldn’t imagine life without him. In that moment, I honestly didn’t know if my heart would recover if he broke it. . . if I broke us with this persistence about having a child. I swallowed. I had to run by this next bit of insanity by someone. Why not Crystal? “Can I ask you something?”

The younger woman smiled. “Anything.”

“Spike has living biological relatives out there even though he was adopted. He’s never met them. I-I found someone here in the States.” Technically, Giles found said male relative. “And he’s young. . . our age.” Well, he’s my age, and more importantly, he’s alive – not a vampire.
Crystal’s eyes were filled with confusion. “What are you asking, Buffy?”

I squinted my eyes and made a face, feeling a bit like Xander probably did when he confessed to something he knew was wrong but was hoping the other person wouldn’t think he was crazy. “I was considering asking him to be a sperm donor.” At my co-worker’s wide-eyed reaction, I quickly added, “With Spike’s permission, of course.”

Crystal studied me for a long moment, and I waited for her judgment and condemnation. Instead, she put one hand on her hip and said, “Girl, that is almost the craziest thing I’ve ever heard, and we live in the Crescent City so that’s saying something. But you know what? People do a lot of crazy stuff out there, and if it gets you what you want, go for it. My only bit of advice is that if you love that man of yours and want to keep him around, let him in the loop and not just on what you found.” I looked at her questioningly, and she added, “Tell him how you feel, too. All of it. Even if it’s scary.”

I nodded. “Right.” She was right. “And thank you. Mind if I . . . ?” I gestured at the door. I had to talk with Spike and now before I lost my nerve. . . and before I lost him.

She smiled. “You’re welcome. Go ahead. Slow night anyway.”

Chapter End Notes

All those numbers Buffy thought about actually mean something...promise!
The night I confessed to your father...and he confessed to me

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I paced up and down the sidewalk adjacent to the Spotted Cat’s open front windows for half an hour at least, trying to work my nerve up to go inside and ask Spike to take a break, so I could share everything I’d just told Crystal. In stark contrast to CC’s Coffee House, the bar was just ramping up. Members of the local band were tuning up their instruments and calibrating their speakers and equipment, and groups and couples of every age and walk of life were meandering their way inside.

Just when I was about to throw in the towel, I felt the familiar tingle I always felt in Spike’s presence. The tickle always started at the back of my neck and swept over my arms and mid-section to land in a place that usually brought me such pleasure. Tonight, I hugged my arms to my chest and held my breath, stopping in my tracks.

“Pet? What are you doing here?” His voice was soft and gentle, the tone tinged with an intimacy that had recently been missing. The desire to throw myself into his arms made my breath catch in my throat.

I didn’t turn around. I couldn’t. Not yet. “I came to see you.”

“I thought you were working, and you know the manager doesn’t like me to take a break this early in my shift.” The edge still wasn’t there. Thank goodness, or I’d have been off and running.

“I got off early,” I said almost inaudibly, fingers digging into my arms.

He drew me back against him then. “What’s wrong?” When I stayed rigid, he stroked my tight hands and repeated, “Hey there, love. What’s wrong?”

I burst into tears at his tenderness. His kindness was almost unbearable, and I almost didn’t want to tell him anything if he’d just go back to treating me this way for good.

He moved me around to face him, and I was forced to look into his clear blue eyes, which were bright with concern. He briefly searched my eyes and then broke away. A small sob escaped my lips. “Hold on.” He stroked my cheek with his thumb, brushing the tears away. “I’m going to tell the boss that I need the night. Family emergency.” Then, he re-entered his place of work.
The way he said “family” made me cry harder as he walked away, but I was also suddenly acutely aware that people were staring. I swiped at my eyes and turned away from the more obvious gawkers, holding my breath to prevent the emotions from making my whole body shake.

Spike was back more quickly than I expected, and he scooped my hand into his, lacing his fingers tightly with mine. “C’mon. Car’s only a block away.”

He started leading me away, and I felt an unusual fear dart through my stomach. What if he went back to being distant as soon as we got out of public view? What if he got angry with me for interrupting his work? God. So much for the resolve that Crystal engendered in me. I felt like I was twenty-one again when the scariest thing of all for me was sharing my feelings and being truly intimate with someone I cared about. It was honestly scarier than any monster that went bump in the night.

As soon as we rounded the corner and were away from all the onlookers, Spike stopped and pulled me close to him so that my face was buried in his chest. I swear, I thought my heart might explode.

He stroked my hair. “I’m such a berk.” Then, he whispered, “Buffy. Do you still love me?” The quiet fear in his question cracked my heart open for a different reason all together.

I wrapped both arms around his mid-section and held him so tightly that he grunted a little. I almost asked him if he was crazy, but I couldn’t do that, so I settled on reassuring him. “Of course, I love you. I’m not going to suddenly stop loving you. Once you’re in my heart, you’re in.”

Now, he was crying. He wasn’t sobbing like I had been earlier, but I felt his tear on my scalp when he laid his cheek on the top of my head. “Thank god. I love you, too. And I know I’ve been distant these past weeks, and I know that’s hurt you. Part of me wanted to hurt you. I’ve been right pissed that I’m in this position. But after thinking about it, my anger’s not at you, and I’m not really angry. . . I-I needed to get my head straight.”

In that moment, I realized that Spike had likely been feeling as lonely as me. “I suppose you owed me one or five. . . or twenty.” I would never forget how much I’d hurt him before.

“No, pet, you didn’t deserve it.” He stepped out of our embrace and took my hand again. “Talk more in the car?”
Facing our car, I bent our arms up and kissed the back of his hand. “Yes.” My determination was rising again.

Once we were seated inside (him in the driver’s seat and me in the passenger’s), both of us facing forward, Spike spoke. “I want to start. If that’s okay, love?”

Hands folded in my lap, I noticed that the ashtray was full of cigarette butts. He must have been emptying it before I got in the car and smoking with the windows rolled down because the car didn’t reek of smoke. “Of course.” The twisted bit of pain was tight in my chest again.

“Haven’t exactly been together with you of late. I mean, I know we said we would be. In it. Together.” He sighed. “This whole thing is not what I expected. Not at all. And it’s a lot.”

He meant the doctors, the possible treatments. “You think it’s what I expected?” The question popped out before I could stop myself. I bit my cheek before I could burst out with more. I blinked away the sheen of tears and stared hard at the growing condensation of humidity on the windshield, trying to hold onto the reality of the physical as my emotional buoy.

Spike reacted, “No! I don’t think you did, and that’s just it, pet, we should have thought it out better ahead of time. So it wouldn’t come down to this.”

What was he trying to say? “What? Down to what, Spike?” My words came out snippier than I intended.

His answer was firm. “To us not talking. To us being at odds with each other. This is a familiar path we’re treading, pet, and I don’t. . . I can’t go down it again with you.”

Fuck this. The tears welled and spilled over before I could stop them. The loneliness and raw hurt swelled in my chest. “Oh, you can’t go down it? Well, good for you because you don’t have to.”

I reached for the door handle, intent on leaving him to his non-path-walking self, but his hand jumped across the center console to grip my forearm, and just as I tried to shake him off, he let go. “Buffy, love. Wait.” His voice broke on the last word, and I settled back down in the seat.

I was silent, refusing to look at him, in that moment feeling like I could never tell him how I felt again even though I knew it was irrational.
He drew a deep breath and said, “That’s not how I meant it.” I was too anxious to ask what he meant, but he answered my unspoken question anyway. “I don’t want to go anywhere without you.”

“Me either,” I whispered, focusing on the roundness of the radio dials.

“And I don’t know how I feel about this IVF thing. It’s risky and the odds are low that it would even work. And if it doesn’t work the first time, where’s the line? Do we try again? What will happen to you. . . to us if it doesn’t work?” There was that question again – the one he’d asked on the plane, and we’d never answered.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t know how I’ll feel if it doesn’t work. We can’t afford more than once anyway, and,” I realized that despite my motion to leave the car, I wasn’t going anywhere, that I was on the path with Spike no matter what. I reaffirmed what I’d said after our fight in the cemetery, “I’m committed to you. I love you.” I still hadn’t heard the answer to my next question. He said he didn’t know, but I suspected that he did know and needed the opening to answer. “How do you feel about IVF?”

His immediate response told me that I was right. “I don’t like the idea of it, pet. You’ve all but said you want to go for it, but I don’t like the idea of you pumping yourself full of drugs and hormones to produce a bunch of eggs. You’re not a bloody chicken.” He’d done his research. “And as much as I’ve been smoking lately, I want to protect you. And there’s some evidence that those drugs can be linked to cancer. I’d like to keep you around as long as possible.”

He was worried about my health the way I worried about losing him to a stray spark or a ray of sunshine. “Same goes for you, you know.” My hand found the top of his, and he flipped his palm up to meet mine.

“I know.” Running his thumb over my smaller one, he continued in a much lower tone, “And the donor sperm. I’ve put a lot of thought into that aspect of it all, and what bothers me. . . it’s more than what I said about Angelus, Darla, and Dru.”

“What is it?”

“It’s selfish, I bloody well know it is, but I want the baby to be connected to me, too.” Crystal was right! “And that spell we tried. I got it in my head, pet, that it might work. That we might have a child of our own related to you and me. I-I never thought that I’d have that. I thought that dream died the night I became a vampire.” I saw him turn his head to gaze out the window and felt him grasp my
As I freed my hand from his, he winced. Before he could think I was leaving again, I climbed into his lap, Slayer atop vampire, and laid my head on his shoulder. “I’m so sorry.” Wedging my arms between his ribcage and the smooth leather of the car seat, I held him. “I’m so sorry you’ve been alone with all these feelings.”

He stroked my back, and my body relaxed into his. “You’ve been alone, too, eh, love? I never meant to make you feel alone.” He was damned good at reading me. I trembled at his validation of my experience. “Yeah. I’ve been feeling pretty lonely, too.”

“Well, I’m here. And Buffy?”

Now, I just wanted to fall asleep in his arms, in the front seat of our car. If only, he’d tilt the seat back. “Mmm?”

“I have living relatives,” he stated, leaning his head back on the headrest.

Well, that woke me up! “You do?” Playing dumb was not a good Buffy move. I’ve never been remotely good at bluffing.

“And it sounds like you know it, too.” There was good humor in his words.

I shrugged. “I asked Giles.”

“Rupert?” Spike sounded surprised.

“Watcher’s Council had a lot of records that weren’t blown up, and it’s easy enough to track people nowadays. I think some scholar or other was interested in your family. Maybe because you’re pretty unique for a vampire.”

“It’s because I’m with you.” Spike drew the same conclusion I had though I didn’t think it was as simple as he made it sound. “In any case, I kept track of my family over the past decades. Ever since Angelus split off from us.”
“Why?”

“Wasn’t sure he wouldn’t go after my family the way he did his own. My immediate family died, but my mum and dad had several siblings, and I had many cousins. Haven’t contacted them before now, but I’ve kept tabs on them for a long time. Not sure exactly why. They’re my blood... my kin, I guess.” Spike’s hand roved over my hip. “I have a distant cousin, related to my mum’s favorite brother. He lives in Norfolk, Virginia. Teaches English at a university there. He’s about the age I was when I was sired.”

I pushed up on his chest. It was my turn to search his eyes. “Why are you telling me this?”

The corner of his mouth lifted. “Figured it wouldn’t hurt to ask him for a sample. I mean, if you’re okay with that.”

Somehow, we’d ended up on the same page, and though I wasn’t sure how we got there, I was relieved that we’d talked things out and that I had my Spike back. I responded to his revelation by kissing him thoroughly.

Chapter End Notes

I figured that there was no way that Spike wouldn’t keep track of his family even if he didn’t actually communicate with them and that he didn’t think to do it until Angelus split away. My thought was if Angelus had hurt Spike so much, he might worry that Angelus might hurt his family as another way to cause Spike pain. At least if Angelus was with the group, Spike knew somewhat what he was up to. I hope that makes sense.

Thanks so much for the support and kind feedback! Up next is another trip out of town.
The night we flew into Norfolk

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I’m not driving the hamster mobile.” Spike set his jaw and crossed his arms, letting the roller bag he was dragging fall back into an upright position in the middle of the rental car lot.

I was too tired to argue. Our plane had arrived late to Norfolk after flights were delayed for several hours at the Baltimore airport due to lightning and heavy storm coverage. We had limited time to get to the hotel before sunrise now. Though if the dark clouds stayed in place, we wouldn’t have to worry about the sun.

Hanging out in the airport tested my nerves but really got to Spike who was already anxious about the trip to begin with. We were meeting his cousin the next evening, and he’d been more irritable as we got closer and the meeting became more of a reality. I thought the old lady who ran over his foot with her extremely heavy suitcase and then proceeded to yell at him while he was trying to sleep in an uncomfortable airport chair was the last straw. Apparently, I was wrong.

“I’ll drive the hamster mobile,” I offered, tugging my long hair into a bun. “The green color’s not so bad. It matches my eyes. And it was the only one with the darkest window tint that they had left. Plus, I think the Kia Soul is kinda cute.”

Spike snorted. “You would. And your eyes are a much nicer color than that.” He gestured at the car condescendingly.

“Says the guy who drives a Honda Civic. And thank you.” I tilted my head and batted my eyes at him.

“Hey, our Civic is well-constructed. Durable.” Never thought I’d hear Spike utter those words.

“And what we could afford.” I yawned, my jaw stretching wide. “So tired. Can we get going?”

He nodded at my hand. “You have the keys, love.”

“Oh, yeah.” I stared at the fob. Which button unlocked the car? I very rarely drove at home.
Spike peered over my shoulder as I studied the symbols and pressed the button to unlock the car. The doors and trunk unlatched, and Spike swung up the trunk door before piling my bag and then his inside.

“How did you know. . . ?”

“Figured they must be connected.” He slammed the trunk closed.

“Oh. That was majorly unclear.”

Spike smirked and rolled his eyes at me. At least, my lack of car knowledge entertained him.

As soon as we got inside the car and shut the doors, I fastened my seatbelt and then lifted both eyebrows at Spike. “Don’t want to lose you to a car accident. And if we have a kid, might as well get used to it.”

Sighing, he kissed my shoulder. “Fine.” He clicked the strap into place across his lap.

Then, the bottom fell out of the sky. Rain pummeled the windows and top of the car, sounding like someone was hurtling a whole dump truck full of marbles on top of us.

“Guess we have good timing,” I noted as I bent to one side and tried to figure out where to insert the key in the dark. Finding my target, I started the car. Then, I put the car in drive. Each step was exhausting, and I was sagging a bit. The hotel bed was calling my name.

“Um, love.”

“Yeah?” I blinked wearily at Spike.

“You need lights and windshield wipers.”
“I knew that,” I said trying to sound chipper. Fumbling around the levers and buttons, I managed to turn on the windshield wipers, which began rapidly swiping rain from the glass in front of us. Then, I turned some levers until bright lights swept out, barely making a dent in the darkness, but hey, it was something. I grinned triumphantly at Spike.

“Nice, pet,” he said with sarcasm.

“You know it is,” I returned.

Focusing on the path before us, I followed the row of barely visible car bumpers, straining to see where to go and avoid hitting anything. It would suck to wreck into one of the vehicles. Who knew what the rental company would charge me for wrecking a SUV or fancy sports car? When we got to the end of the path, I leaned forward and strained to see to the left and right.

I made a face. “Which way?”

“It’s not very well marked.” Spike emulated me in trying to sort out our dilemma.

I slumped back in the seat to help him see around me. “No arrows, no signs, no nothing.”

“Try left. There’re red and green lights that direction. Might be an exit.”

“Score one for enhanced vampire vision. Thanks!” I leaned over for a kiss, which he gladly gave me.

As we drove in the direction Spike indicated, I glanced in the rearview mirror. I was so focused on going forward that I forgot to check behind me. It was probably okay for the rental car lot – not so much for the highway. “Hey. I can’t see behind me. The back windshield is too straight.”

“It has its own wiper,” Spike explained, now sounding impatient. He was probably wishing he was driving at this point.

“Oh.” I stared down at the levers and buttons again. Well, crap.
“Buffy, love! Stop before you look down!” Spike growled.

Oops. I slammed the brakes on. Then, Spike reached over and fiddled with the gadgets around the steering wheel. The tiny wiper in the back sprang to life, and viola, the rain was cleared away. When he slid back into his seat and made a big show of putting his seatbelt on again, I drove on without a word, now feeling more exasperated and tired.

Spike was right. The exit to the rental car lot rose up before us, the red and green lights – blurry from the precipitation – signaling open and closed exit lanes. Well, technically, there was one green light and one open exit lane. Although there were booths by each of the exits, a hunched form hovered by one of the green lit lanes, his body covered in a very ineffective-looking poncho, a clipboard in his hand.

I suddenly remembered something – something very important.

“You’re going to kill me,” I prefaced as I slowed down before rolling up to the poor drenched guy.

Spike responded to this by modifying his level of grumpiness. “What now, pet?”

“I put the paperwork for the car in the front pocket of my suitcase with my cell for safekeeping,” I said with an apology in my voice.

Spike rolled his eyes again. “Of course, you did.”

The seatbelt flew back into its resting place, Spike climbed over the middle console into the backseat. He made small noises of frustration as he reached over into the back and fumbled around with the suitcases. Mine was under his. I heard a zipper and paper being pulled out of something. Then, Spike turned and dumped the paper and my phone in my lap before clambering back into the front seat.

“Thanks,” I said sheepishly.

Spike gave me an eyebrow lift and didn’t put his seatbelt back on. I didn’t say anything and drove up to poncho man, only I didn’t do very well and was too far away from him. The poor drenched guy remained rooted in place. Setting my phone in the cup holder, I unlatched my safety belt, held onto the paper and rolled down the window. Goose bumps flew over my skin as cold rain immediately poured through the new opening. I held out the paper to him, but the man didn’t move. Instead, he
held out his hand from far away. Annoyed at Spike and at poncho guy, I emitted a frustrated sigh and leaned out the window, stretching toward him.

Without warning, poncho guy darted forward and grabbed my arm, dragging me roughly out of the rental car and into the rain. Adrenaline flowed through me as panic set in, and then, I knew.

Poncho guy was a vampire, I was now drenched and freezing, and I didn’t have a stake. Damn it.

To confirm my suspicion, poncho vampire growled, and his eyes glowed yellow as he backhanded me. I fell against the car with a grunt, and I heard him mutter, “Slayer,” as he continued to hit me. I braced my body on the metal behind me and tried to bring my legs up to kick him off, but he had me pinned to the slippery surface and hard.

“Hey!” Spike shouted as he leapt over the front of the car and launched himself at poncho vampire, tackling him off me.

They tumbled to the concrete as I bounced to my feet, and then, in the bright car headlights, I saw the rest of the vampires appear, one out of each of the exit booths. Oh boy. I was awake now.

I heard Spike punching the vampire behind me and glanced quickly around for anything to use as a weapon or stake. Through driving rain, I spied a pile of broken wood near the metal fence surrounding the lot. Not very smart of the vamps. I dove for the potential weapons, and the vampires followed.

Fingers fumbling through the wood, I adopted a sharp-looking piece as my new Mr. Pointy and snagged a second equally nice-looking scrap to toss to Spike, I pivoted and launched myself at my fanged pursuers. Spike was holding his own with two vampires, and I shouted his name. He turned briefly the moment he had space and time and caught the wood I threw at him before staking one of the vampires.

With both of us now armed, we made short work of our foes until finally only poncho vamp was left. He’d hung back after the initial scuffle with me and Spike, and now he was a fair distance away. He stared at us, and as I flung my makeshift stake at his heart, he dropped into a swift roll, effectively dodging the wood. Then, he was off and running into the night. I considered going after him and almost darted away.

“Buffy, no, love,” Spike said, coughing a little, his voice barely rising over the sound of the rain.
I glanced back and then recognized the sharp pain in my leg. Glancing down, I saw dark liquid slowly covering the front of my jeans. “Oh.” At least the blood wasn’t gushing.

Spike caught me in his arms as my leg gave out, and he helped me to the passenger seat. With gentle fingers, he examined the wound in the low interior light, ignoring that rain was continuing to come down hard around him. “Didn’t get a main artery. But better not chance it.” Opening the door to the backseat, he rummaged in the back again and found our first aid kit.

As he tended to my wound, my heart rate slowed down. I already felt better with his ministrations and watched him tend to my injury with efficiency. When he finished, he caught me studying him and smiled before kissing me long and deep.

Suddenly, I felt anxious with him standing vulnerable in the rain. Who knew what other vampires might be out there about to descend on us. “Let’s go. Get in.”

He caught my tension and didn’t question my words. After making sure I was safely inside with the door shut, he strode up to the exit gate, and with effort, forced the metal arm up. Then, he joined me, slamming the driver’s side door. We were temporarily shielded from nature’s downpour. I locked the doors. Not that that would help us if we were overrun by an army of vampires. Without another word, he put on his seatbelt and began driving. As he drove, I pulled up the directions to the hotel on my phone and slid my hand into the open palm that he’d lightly extended over my bandaged thigh.

Chapter End Notes

My husband I rented a Kia Soul on our fertility treatment trips...it had the funniest honking noise when you lock the doors and it made us crack up every time.

Also, I’ve been to Norfolk a grand total of once. I went in January 2004 for psychology internship interviews at the med school there. It snowed, and I was stuck in the Baltimore airport so my flight was delayed. They didn’t have any cars left, so they rented me a SUV. And there were no smartphones so I relied on the car rental guy to help me get to the hotel. He sent me to the site of the interview. So I was completely lost. I didn't know how to turn the lights on the car on or how to turn on the back windshield wiper. I drove through town at midnight with only my low lights on. And no one was out because it was snowing. Luckily, I found a cute little bar (an oasis in the snow) and the drunk patrons, who were very friendly, gave me directions to my hotel. (And I eventually figured out the lights and the wipers.)

Also, swifthorse went to school in Norfolk, so Spike's relative lives there. It was serendipitous. biggrin
And Norfolk has a vampire problem...as you will see!
Spike and I were wedged into one side of the high-backed booths at Rajput Indian Cuisine, the place his cousin chose as a meeting place after his night class at Old Dominion University. It made sense; I’d pick a public place to meet people I’d never met, too. The location and time were also convenient for Spike.

Placing a steady hand on Spike’s thigh, which was bouncing up and down from his anxiety about coming face-to-face with his long-lost family member and also the insane amount of wood that the restaurant’s interior decorator used in the chairs, tables, and even the walls. As soon as we’d entered, he’d whispered that the place was a “sodding death trap for vampires.” I was nervous, too, but like in the doctor’s office in Denver, Spike’s anxiety kept me calm.

I picked up the menu off the table. “I have no idea what to order.” Willow, Xander, and I used to watch old Bollywood movies together, but Sunnydale didn’t have Indian food, and I didn’t eat it when I was younger either. All I knew was that the spices when we entered tickled my nose in an unfamiliar way, and I was curious to know if my love of the movies would equally translate to a love of the culture’s cuisine.

Spike seemed to pick up on my light-heartedness. “That’s okay, love. I’ll help you order; you’re going to love it.”

“You like Indian food? How am I just now figuring this out?” I was destined to always be learning new things about my vampire. He had so many more years of being on planet Earth than me.

He shrugged. “Dru and I took a short trip to India. Fell in love with the food.”

We no longer freaked out about mention of our exes, which was no small feat in and of itself.

I touched the cold condensation on my water glass. “What about it?”

“They’re known for their spices.”
I knew Spike too well. He was known to sometimes put half a bottle of Tabasco in his gumbo. “Spices as in spicy spices?”

He grinned, and mindful of my still sore thigh, he slid one hand over my hips, pulling me close. With his free hand, he ran a finger down the menu. “So for you, I’d suggest the tikka masala with chicken.”

I snuggled closer. “Mild, right?”

“Right. I’m going with curry with lamb.”

“Hot for you!” I pointed at the menu’s highest heat level.

“Bloody hell, no, pet!” His words were intense but his volume low, his breath over my ear so that I shivered. “When they mean hot, they mean hotter than even vampires can take. I’m going with medium.”

I laughed. “Finally found something too spicy, huh?”

The restaurant door opened then, and Spike and I lost complete interest in the food. Although we were among only a handful of late evening customers, Spike slid out of the booth. I couldn’t see anything and simply held my breath. As soon as his cousin rounded the edge of the tall booth, I was glad I had air to breathe out because I would have gasped.

Despite the distance of time and space and the mixing in of other genes, Spike’s cousin looked more like a brother than a cousin at first glance.

“You must be William,” the cousin said, shaking Spike’s hand.

“Yeah, mate. Nice to meet you finally.”

I hastened to my feet as the cousin turned to me. He and Spike were even the same height. I held out my own hand. “Hi. I’m Buffy.”
The cousin’s blue eyes were bright with life and a trace of humor as he grasped my hand in both of his warm ones. “I’m Shane. Nice to meet you.” He even had a British accent, only his sounded more like Giles’s.

Once we were all seated, Shane offered a brief smile at our waiter who brought him a menu and glass of water. As he perused the food options, I studied him. He had sandy blonde hair that leaned toward light brown, and he kept it short, shorter than Spike did. Shane’s skin was slightly tanned from being in the sun, and though he had a little more weight on him, he had the same sharp cheekbones. The only thing he lacked was a scar over his eyebrow, a heart that didn’t beat, and a craving for blood.

Shane caught me watching him and smiled almost shyly. “What are you ordering?”

“Sp- William suggested the tikka marsala with chicken.”

“Ah. A beginner,” Shane said with a note of teasing. Was he flirting with me a little bit? Whatever it was felt familiar and a little flattering. I noticed that he wasn’t wearing a wedding ring.

Spike shifted next to me, and I suddenly felt guilty for noticing anything remotely attractive about Shane. “That she is. How is the curry here?” There was a slight bravado in his voice that probably only I picked up on, and my heart tugged a little. I hated him feeling a moment of hurt because of me. I knew that was because of our past, a lingering little nuance of us. I reached over and gently squeezed his leg just above the knee.

Shane grinned at Spike. “A man after my own appetites. It’s the best I’ve had, and I’ve had a lot.”

Spike pushed his leg up under my hand, and the low-key bluster evaporated in his next words. “All right then.”

After the waiter took our food and drink orders, Shane regarded Spike. “So, I guess it’s kind of obvious that we’re related, but I’ve never heard of you until recently. I can’t believe you found me and my daughter on ancestry.com. I set up my account on a lark when my mum asked me to show her how. She wanted to document our history, especially since we immigrated here. She didn’t want me to lose track of our relatives. How did you say you were related to Great Aunt Martha?”

“I’m her son’s son.”
“Ah. Remind me what you do again?”

Spike immediately froze and hesitated. Oh, crap. He sucked at lying. This particular trait was one of the reasons I loved him, but oh, boy, he didn’t have a poker face even though we rehearsed our story ahead of time and more than once. “Oh, um, I . . .” he glanced at me, “she and I live in New Orleans.” Well, that was the truth at least.

I decided that Shane didn’t need to know that Spike worked at a bar, and I worked in a coffee shop. “We’re in the restaurant business. You know New Orleans – it’s known for its food industry.” Oh, Buffy, that was bad, too. I reminded myself to tell Spike we should never go to Vegas, and if we did, we had no business near a poker table. No wonder that shark came after him in Sunnydale.

“What kind of restaurant?” Watching us closely, Shane sat back in the booth, losing the relaxed stance that came with leaning toward us.

Well, at least, he wasn’t dumb. If we were going to ask for a sperm sample, a professor was of the good in terms of genetic links to intelligence. Let’s just hope the potential kid didn’t get my ability to form sentences like next one. “What kind of professor?” I knew the answer, but I was trying – and trying poorly – to deflect. Spike elbowed me in a way too obvious manner.

“English,” Shane said slowly, eyes narrowing. “What’s with you two? I mean, meeting you was already a little weird, but – ”

The front door of the restaurant banged open, wood cracking sharply on wood. The hostess screamed, and my ears detected the familiar sound of a vampire growl.

Spike and I exchanged an oh-shit look as an unfamiliar voice called, “Where’s the Slayer?”

I snagged my phone out of my purse and scrambled out of the booth as Spike stood near his cousin to protect him.

Over ten vampires had entered the restaurant and were fanning out around the virtually empty space. There was some relief in the lack of innocent people to protect. All the present human patrons and workers were frozen in place. I ignored the lead vampire and started texting.
Acting nonchalant, I read my text as I typed it. “Hey, Xan. Thought you should know that Norfolk has a vampire problem. I know there’s not an assigned Slayer here, but you might want to send the ones from Baltimore and DC to clean house.” Xander oversaw organization of the Slayers on the East Coast; I wasn’t sure where he was now, but he should really know about this.

“What?!” the lead vampire snarled and licked his lips, his tongue lingering on his descended fang. Totally Vampire 101. He was so going down.

I raised my hand as one of the humans made a small whimper of fear in response to the advancing vampires. “Hold on. Xander’s writing me back.” The three dots blinked on the screen.

I continued reading the texts aloud, “What are you doing in Norfolk, Buff?”

I typed back, “Visiting family and then headed back to NOLA. Send Slayers ASAP.”

Xander sent a quick text in return, “On it.”

I tossed my phone to Spike who smirked at me. “All right. I’m the Slayer. What do you want?” I crossed my arms and lifted both eyebrows at the lead vamp who had a mop of messy curls that cascaded to the top of his shoulders like the member of a bad ’80s band.

“To kill you,” mop-head hissed before he sprang at me.

As he moved, I moved, lunging to grab a nearby chair by the leg and creating a makeshift stake from the wood. Passing the chair to Spike so he could make his own weapon, I launched myself at the vampire leader. The other vampires moved as one, and Spike and I soon found ourselves lost in the skirmish. At least, it wasn’t raining this time, and the veritable “death trap” was handy for weapons.

Mop-head was powerful but was too attached to his minions because he kept flinching when one was dusted. I used the tell to my advantage and quickly dispatched him. He was genuinely shocked by the fact that he had a piece of wood in his chest. Spike and I made short work of the rest of the vampires and whirled to see Shane cornered by the door to the kitchen where he’d led the humans.

A blonde-haired female vampire shoved Shane against the wall, growled, and ducked her head at his neck. Wide-eyed, Shane’s arm shifted, and the female burst into dust that followed the pull of gravity to the floor. Bringing his hand to his unharmed neck, Shane dropped the stake Spike had likely given
him. The wood clattered to the floor in the renewed silence.

Shane was staring at Spike, who was in game face, “W-what are you?” His eyes flicked to me and then back to Spike where they remained fixed. “What’s a Slayer? And what do you want with me? I believe I deserve the truth, cousin.”

Chapter End Notes

So, the restaurant is swifthorse's favorite Indian food restaurant in Norfolk. It does indeed have a LOT of wood. I looked at that pics and was like...whoa! And swifthorse made the food suggestions as Indian food is not something I've had a lot of. (I may need to remedy that...).
The night we went to Shane's condo

Before either Spike or I could answer Shane’s questions, the manager of the Indian restaurant, a lean middle-aged man with a balding head, tentatively poked his head out from the kitchen. I could tell he was trying to sound unafraid and confident because his words were slow and measured. “I’m afraid we’re closing the restaurant early.”

Spike slipped back into his human face. “Right.”

The man nodded his head. “Thank you for understanding.” He motioned with his arm behind him, and the nervous-looking hostess peeked at them. “Avani has your food to go.”

They were still cooking even while we were destroying their restaurant? That was dedication. “Oh, no. That’s okay,” I said with an apologetic tone in my voice.

“No, no. We insist.” The manager nudged Avani forward. She silently held up two bags to me while the manager explained, “These are the two orders of curry, and this is the tikka marsala and some naan.”

“Thank you.” Guess I was trying Indian food after all. I looped my hands in the plastic handles as Spike reached for his wallet.

The manager caught Spike’s move and shook his head. “No, sir. On the house.”

“But why?” I asked, tilting my head in curiosity.

The man looked me right in the eye, his dark eyes serious. “Because the vetala keep coming back and disrupting my business and many businesses in our city. That one that you. . .” He trailed off as some emotion overtook him. He brought his hand to his mouth until he could say, “He killed my sister. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I said with solemnity.
A less than five-minute drive later, Spike and I were climbing the blue-carpeted steps to Shane’s condo. Spike’s cousin hadn’t said a word during our brief exchange with the restaurant manager, but he’d accepted the food from me, and he’d slowed his vehicle for us to follow him as he drove out of the parking lot.

Shane unlocked the door and entered his home, setting the bags of food to the side and turning to us. He gave Spike a hard look. “I can tell that we’re related, but bloody hell, man, I have to ask you to stay on the other side of that threshold. I have – ”

A young girl’s voice sang out, “Hey, Dad! You’re home! I need help with my essay for – ” The girl, who appeared to be about ten-years-old, peered into the dimly-lit foyer. With one hand, she swept her dark curls off her forehead and blinked green eyes at Spike and me. “Hey, that guy looks just like you! Is he like your long-lost brother or something?”

Shane gritted his teeth, an expression so familiar that goosebumps popped up on my arms. “Charlotte, I need you to go to your room right now. Close the door and stay there.”

Her eyes blazed in defiance. “But – ”

She glanced at me, and I smiled. “It’s okay. We’re not here to do anything to you or your dad. But he’s right. You probably should go just for now.”

Charlotte studied me and then Spike, probably trying to determine if her father was going to be okay with us. Then, she said, “Okay. I’ll be nearby if you need me.”

“Thanks, Char.” Shane pulled his daughter in for a hug.

When she bounded away, her wise-beyond-her-years talk replaced by child-like energy, Shane tried to invite me further inside, but I shook my head. “I’m worried about leaving Spike alone. More of them could have followed us here, and I . . .” How did I explain how I couldn’t lose Spike? How my heart would be smashed if he were killed while I was trying to explain our situation to his relative? “They could dust him.”

Spike didn’t say a word, not even to protest that he could handle himself; I knew he was waiting for Shane’s response.
Shane was silent for what felt like forever but was probably only a handful of seconds. “Is that what you call what you did to those vampires?”

I nodded and bit my lip. The healing wound on my thigh protested all the standing, but I hid the pain.

He continued, “And you think more will follow you here?”

“Yes. Spike and I... we’re going to stay until my friend sends reinforcements. Norfolk seems to have a very big vampire problem or at least one that’s been following us around since we got here. There are more people... women like me who can help. We just didn’t have anyone assigned here before.”

“I knew about the mysterious deaths. It’s been all over the news for the last few months, so the problem predated your arrival,” Shane admitted. “I—I’m surprised but not surprised at the same time. Are all Slayers women?”

I nodded. “And girls. I was fifteen when I was called... when I became a Slayer. There used to be only one Slayer at a time, but now, there are many all over the world.”

“Fifteen? That’s... Charlotte’s eleven.”

“I was young, but slaying makes you grow up fast.” I suddenly realized what he was worried about. “Oh, no. We... well, there won’t be more since my colleagues and I... well, suffice it to say, your daughter won’t be a Slayer.”

Shane breathed a sigh of relief. Then, seeing that I wasn’t moving away from Spike, Shane regarded the vampire behind me. “So, your name isn’t William? It’s Spike? And you’re a vampire.” The last words were a statement and not a question. “And your girlfriend... wife? She’s a...?”

“Vampire Slayer,” Spike said softly.

Shane relaxed a fraction and seemed to be trying to put all the pieces together. “Why are you together? It seems like she should be trying to kill you. Though judging from the fight I just witnessed, you’re on her side – killing other vampires?”
“It’s a long story, but the short of it is that I fell in love with her.” Well, that was the simplest summary of our complicated romance I’d ever heard.

“He’s very different than most vampires,” I added. I yearned to touch him, but I didn’t move. “We’ve been through a lot. Maybe more than you can imagine, and we’re,” I smiled over my shoulder at him, and he cocked his head sweetly at me, “we’re settled. Happy.”

“What? You both hold down nine-to-five jobs and pay a mortgage? Drive a sedan? Kill vampires on your nights off?” Shane smirked and half-joked. Then, a dreamy expression crossed over his face. “Though as a lover of literature, I can appreciate the beautiful irony of a romance between mortal enemies.”

I grinned. Maybe Spike wasn’t the only one in the family with the ability to be succinct. “Uh huh.”

“Something like that, mate,” Spike agreed, leaning against the door frame. “I wouldn’t trade anything for what we have. It’s not perfect, but it’s perfect for me.” My heart melted a little.

Shane crossed his arms and emulated Spike’s leaning – only against the small front table. I couldn’t get over how even the smallest mannerisms were similar. “So obviously, you didn’t find me on ancestry.com, and you’re here for a reason other than connecting with distant relatives.”

“Right,” Spike agreed.

“So why are you here? I mean, I’m just an English professor at a modest-sized public university in a town with not even a quarter of a million people. I’m not fighting vampires or – and this is me assuming – other evil forces in the world. I’m just trying to raise my daughter and have a quiet life.”

“And we want you to continue having that life,” I reassured him. “We’re not here to pull you into something as big as fighting supernatural forces. It seems like you have enough on your plate raising your daughter alone. I know what that’s like. My mom was a single parent.”

“You have to do all the worrying of both parents and hope nothing slips through the cracks.” Shane’s eyes misted over. “Charlotte’s mum had cancer. She passed two years ago. She... we had what you have.”
“I’m so sorry.” I briefly touched his shoulder with compassion. Because he looked so much like Spike, it was easy to feel for him even though I barely knew him.

Shane shook his head like he was trying to shrug off the emotions. “You said there is a Slayer in Baltimore?”

“And one in DC,” I said. “Why?”

“Well,” he sighed, “I guess you two should come inside and shut the door. It’s going to be at least three or four hours until someone gets here even if they left shortly after you texted your friend. No use standing in the doorway the whole time.” He paused, seemingly to emphasize his next words, “But only if you tell me the truth about why you’re here. The unedited version.”

With those words, Spike stepped inside and slipped his hand in mine. A weight lifted off my shoulders. “Thanks, mate.”

“We will tell you anything you’d like to know.” I squeezed Spike’s hand, and he returned the gesture. My stomach growled, informing me of the need for nutrients. “As long as we can have some of that Indian food while we talk.”

Chapter End Notes

Forgot to mention that the school where Shane works is where swifthorse studied: Old Dominion University.

Also, she and I had a long discussion about possible places for Shane to live, and we found this one: https://www.zillow.com/homes/for_sale/Norfolk-VA/pmf,pf_pt/79227328_zpid/6210_rid/IN-HISTORIC-GHENT_att/globalrelevanceex_sort/36.979655,-76.151219,36.810521,-76.370945_rect/11_zm/

Interestingly, it's about a mile or so from the restaurant... that wasn't planned! lol

Special thanks to swifthorse for the brainstorming on locations in these chapters!
The night we got stuck in the Baltimore airport again

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“S’pose it was a long shot anyway, pet.” Spike took a swig of his beer.

Spike and I were stuck in the Baltimore airport again – this time because of storms over New Orleans. The only bar open late was Obycky’s, and we both decided we needed a drink. Since we lived in New Orleans, I’d learned to at least fake a passing enjoyment of alcohol because it was such an ingrained part of the culture there, so I was sipping a citrus cosmopolitan.

“I guess you’re right.” I stared at the wood grain on the bar where I was leaning, my legs swinging free. Sucked being short at a bar sometimes. “Which part do you think made him say no? The first set of vampires we dusted in front of him while demolishing his favorite Indian restaurant or the second set that waited outside his home for us?” The arrival of Kathleen, the DC Slayer, had ferreted more vampires out of hiding, and Spike and I had joined her in a second impromptu slayage fest.

Spike took another drink. “Nope. I think it was the fact that his hundred-and-fifty-something-year-old cousin showed up on his doorstep after lying about caring a fig about family trees or some such rot.”

“Maybe it was a combo of things?” I suggested without much gusto, taking a taste of my cocktail. I wrinkled my nose a little. At least, it was fruity.

Spike’s fingers ran over the small of my back to my hip, and he leaned over and kissed my temple. “You’re still cute when you do that.”

I leaned into his touch. “Thanks.” My despondency at a mission failed was heavy in my tone.

“Don’t be so sad, love. We still have each other,” he said, obviously trying to fix it.

Fingering the damp cocktail napkin underneath my glass, my eyes welled with tears. “Yeah.”

“Oh, with the enthusiasm,” he teased, still trying to lighten my mood.
“I wanted this with you.” I closed my eyes and willed the tears to slip back into my skull. It was a major fail as one lone drop escaped. “So much. And I think I got my hopes up.”

Spike grabbed hold of my stool and pulled me closer so our thighs were touching. He hugged me close and I laid my head against him. “I know you did, love. I wanted it, too.” He sighed and shifted a little, so I knew he had something else to say, some insecurity that was coming up for him, probably because we’d just rehearsed our history to Shane. So, I wasn’t completely surprised when he asked, “Seeing Shane with his daughter. . . do you wish that you were with someone who– ”

“No! God, no. I’m with you.” I ran my hand possessively over his leg. “I didn’t always know it, but it’s always been you that I was meant to be with. Just had to get through all the other. . . stuff to figure it out.” I tilted my head up to him. “I love you for so many reasons but most of all. . .” I trailed off and thought for a moment. “You want me for me, right?”

He lifted an eyebrow at me. “I do.”

“Well, I want you for you.” I pulled his head down just slightly with my free hand and kissed him.

Right about that time, his cell rang, interrupting our tenderness. I couldn’t see who was calling, but Spike sat up straight and answered, “‘Lo?”

I emulated Spike’s movement and watched his face, searching for a hint of who could be calling him in the middle of the night. Spike, usually the most expressive person I knew, was giving me nothing as he stared straight ahead and listened without making a sound. Then, he glanced at me and said, “She’s here.” He held the phone away from his ear. “Shane wants to talk with you.”

“O-okay.” I accepted the phone from Spike. “Hello?”

Shane’s voice was calm and clear – as calm as he sounded when he told us that he did not feel comfortable being our sperm donor. “I wanted to talk with just you. Do you. . . can you move away from my cousin?” I made a confused face at Spike. Then, Shane said, “I remember what you said about vampire hearing.” He’d been listening.

I made eye contact with Spike, and he stroked my cheek to give me permission. “All right.” I hopped off the stool and took a big swig of my cosmo, making a rather large face right after and turning toward the exit as Spike chuckled. It wasn’t enough to get me drunk, but I was able to focus on the warm sensation of the alcohol sliding down my throat. It felt good. “Give me a minute.”
Ambling toward a row of empty seats outside of the bar, I stepped over a man who was sleeping on the floor with a magazine over his face, passed the bathrooms where a tired-looking mother and daughter were hurrying out, and aimed for the only other open amenity – the coffee shop just beyond a pair of closed souvenir and snack stores.

When I believed that I was far enough away, I paused close to the wall by the mounted box that held the AED machine and said, “Okay. He can’t hear us.”

Shane launched into an opening that he’d probably been thinking about, “Thank you for appeasing me. I realize it’s only been twenty-four hours, but I’ve been doing a lot of thinking during those hours. It seems my daughter also listened in on our whole conversation despite me explicitly telling her to stay in her room.”

“You’re raising a strong young lady,” I said approvingly.

“Let’s hope so. Lord knows I don’t know what I’m doing half the time, and who knows what I’m going to do when she starts her menstrual cycle or wants to date.” Shane’s laugh was soft and low.

I found myself reassuring him. “Just the fact that you can reference a girl having her period in casual conversation with someone you just met means that you’ll be just fine.”

“In any case, Charlie urged me to call you.” I liked the nicknames he had for his daughter: Char, Charlie, and once Lottie. “After you left, we both slept, and the next morning over breakfast, she asked me why I said no to your request. She doesn’t understand all the details of how babies are made, much less the process you described with fertility treatments, and I don’t even think she knew exactly what she was asking.” He took a breath. “But her question gave me pause. She knows me. I tend to have an initial emotional reaction and think through things later.”

I was having trouble following, partly because I was in desperate need of sleep and partly because I probably shouldn’t have had that last big swig of alcohol. I slid along the wall until I was sitting, my knees bent and my free arm tucked against my belly. Better. “Okay. So, did it make you want to talk with me without Spike?”

“I think after I thought about everything you both told me, the one hang up I had with the whole thing was you.” His words were earnest and kind, but still, I was surprised.
“Me?” I frowned, trying to think what he could possibly be talking about and coming up empty. “What about me?”

He was silent for a moment, and I guessed maybe he’d gotten to the end of his organized thoughts. When I was about to check the phone to see if we’d gotten disconnected, he said, “William… Spike, while he’s a vampire, he’s also my family. I mean, you just have to look at us to know. I can hardly believe we’re distant cousins. The resemblance is so uncanny. Even Charlotte saw it straight away.”

“It is pretty striking,” I acknowledged.

“Yes. I actually called my grandmother who still lives overseas, and she verified that we do have a relative from the 1800s named William who disappeared at about my age.”

“What does this have to do with me?” I played with the outer seam of my jeans where it bunched around my knee, bending the denim back and forth.

He was quiet again. Then, “I’m a romantic at heart. Always have been. It’s part of the reason I chose my profession; it’s part of the reason I married my wife. But reality is somewhat different than romance as recent life experiences have taught me, and I, well, I want to know what your intentions are.”

I was a bit gob-smacked. “With Spike?” He made it sound like I was courting Spike and needed his blessing.

“Yes. Beauty and the beast is all fine for fairy tales and other literary stories, but in the real world, those types of relationships do not last, and if I chose to help you, I want to make certain that you both, but particularly you, are committed.”

I almost laughed, but then, I didn’t. Maybe it was related to how tired I was, but I didn’t react with the first thing that came to mind. Putting myself in Shane’s shoes, his concern made sense. He’d heard our unedited story. There were times that I was particularly horrible to Spike. He’d question me, too, even though the badness happened years ago now. The second thing that came to mind, I did blurt out. “Spike isn’t a beast or a monster.” Shane waited for me despite my next pause. “You want to know why I love him… why I’m committed to him?”

Shane’s reply was simple, “Yes. You are a beautiful, young woman. You could choose to go off and marry someone human, someone with the ability to give you children.”
I couldn’t fathom this. “I already tried that. I tried normal. I dated human guys. T-they never really worked out for me.” Did he not remember the part where I talked about the origins of the Slayers? “I am not exactly completely human myself. Spike and I. . . we’ve been through too much together for me to ever consider leaving him.”

“All right.”

Shane’s words were neutral, but I could tell what I said wasn’t what he wanted to hear, so I continued, “You know what? I was a monster, too. I did things when I was brought back from heaven. . . things that didn’t feel like me. But I still did them. I hurt the people I love; I hurt him. He saw through all that. He saw me. He didn’t know how to help me, but he believed in me.” I still remembered how his grip felt on my arm when he stopped me from committing suicide, when he forced me to see that I had to try to live. The memory stirred feelings of hopelessness from long ago, but I easily coaxed them back to sleep. “And I believed in him. He had so much good in him. . . before he was turned, and even at his worst, his goodness. . . it lingered. He went against his very nature to fight a force inside so powerful that. . . I don’t know anyone else that could or would do that. I see him beneath all his defenses, beyond any atrocities that he’s committed. I love him.”

“And if that other guy. . . what was his name? Angel? If he came back around with a soul that wasn’t going anywhere, that was permanent, what would you do?”

Shane’s question was seemingly innocuous, but tears filled my eyes anyway, and my chest ached with a sharp pain that overrode the thigh injury. I could picture the hurt in Spike’s eyes if I ever did that to him, if I chose Angel over him after everything we’d been through. So many memories with Spike flitted through my mind, but the one that surprisingly stood out the most was him smiling in our kitchen in New Orleans as we spent a whole day baking Christmas cookies to send to Dawn and the rest. If I did that to Spike, it would be like breaking me, too. My voice cracked and stumbled, and I not very effectively caught the tears with the fingertips of my left hand. “I could never. . . what you’re suggesting is. . .”

Shane’s tone softened considerably. “I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. . . I just – ”

I took a deep shaky breath. “It’s okay. I understand why you’re asking. We had a rocky start and well, a rocky middle, but we’ve had a long wonderful stretch now. Spike is my. . . he’s my everything.” I felt the sudden urge to be near him. “I-I’m going to bring the phone back now.” My legs were shaky as I braced myself against the wall and stood.

“Okay.”
Shane was then silent as I dazedly hurried across the airport concourse to the bar. Spike was still where I’d left him, and when he heard me coming, he spun on the bar stool. Seeing the expression on my face, he stood and opened his arms. I crashed into him and held him tight.

He stroked my hair and kissed the top of my head. “Hey, love, what’s wrong?” This was becoming a familiar question, but I was too emotional to do more than note it.

I lifted the cell without saying anything and without letting go of him. Spike accepted the phone, and I heard him talking with Shane but didn’t understand any of it. I just focused on the rumbling sound of Spike’s voice in his chest and reminded myself that we were fine. No matter what, we’d be fine.

When Spike finally hung up the phone, I noticed the bartender had come out of the kitchen, so I pulled back from Spike and ran my fingers through my hair in an attempt to appear outwardly presentable.

Spike shoved the phone in his jeans pocket and took both my hands in his larger ones. “Buffy, love, I don’t know what you said to him or what got you so upset, but he agreed.”

I blinked at him. “W-what?”

“He agreed to help us out on one condition.” Spike’s eyes were shining with hope, and in that moment, I realized how much he wanted a family, too.

“What’s that?” I asked, still wary.

“Charlie wants to know her brother or sister in some capacity. The manner of which we can figure out later.”

My mouth dropped open in shock.

He dragged me close to him and kissed me full on the lips until I was grinning like a fool, jumping up and down, and not caring at all what the bartender thought.
This was an actual bar in the Baltimore airport and the drink is on the menu. lol

For some reason, I thought that Shane would be very protective of his doppelganger despite him being a vampire.

This is the last of the chapters in Norfolk area...next up, the IVF process.
“There are so many of them.” I stared at the lineup of bottles on my dresser. I couldn’t fathom how I was possibly supposed to take so many.

“Surely, it’s not so bad that you’re making that face! Let me see,” Willow commanded. We were in one of our now weekly Face Time calls. We started them up after she helped Spike and me out in Denver, and though we hadn’t talked much about the whole infertility thing since that time, I was making more of an effort to include my long ago best friend in my life.

I twisted my mouth to one side and regarded her with doubt. “I dunno. I think it might be a little much.”

“I can handle it, Buffy. Show.” Willow outmatched my twisty mouth with her Resolve face.

“I didn’t realize there were so many. The list didn’t seem this long before I went to GNC, but now that they’re all next to each other. . .”

“Show-sies!” Willow insisted emphatically.

“Okay. You asked for it.” I turned the phone slowly and dramatically toward the dresser.

Willow appropriately gasped. “Whoa!”

“Right?” I said with a small smile that Willow couldn’t see. I was pleased to have my overwhelmed-ness validated.

“Those are all vitamins?” There was a little awe in her voice.

“Uh huh.”
“What are they all for?”

“Well, all of them supposedly help improve egg quality, which they don’t absolutely think I need, but I figured it couldn’t hurt. What I read made it sound like taking them for three months prior to retrieval could make the best difference.” I chewed my bottom lip. “And the one that’s not on the list is acai berry. They’re doing a study on whether it can help egg quality, but I didn’t qualify for the study since I haven’t had a failed IVF cycle. Still, I read about it, and I’m taking it anyway. So not on the list, but I’m adding it.” I picked up one of the bottles to show her.

“Look at you, research gal.” I turned the phone back around to catch Willow’s ironic grin.

My own smile broadened, and I shrugged. “Yeah. If we have one shot, I want to make it count.” Then, I remembered something. “And oh! Did you know that most people are deficient in vitamin D?”

Willow guessed, “Because we spend all day inside? Or in the case of you, outside patrolling cemeteries when there is no sun?”

“Yep. So adding that, too.” I opened my dresser drawer and pulled out another few things I wanted to show Willow. “Want to see what fabulous present Spike got for me?” So, there was a little sarcasm in that question.

Willow wrinkled her nose in confusion. “Sure?”

I held up three large plastic pill containers – the biggest I’d ever seen – with letters for the days of the week on each compartment lid. “I’m like a hundred years old.”

Willow emitted a small snort of amusement. “It’ll keep you organized, right?”

“I guess so. It’ll help me remember what to take when. There’s too many to keep track of.” The list sort of made my head spin: Co-enzyme Q10, Myo-Inositol, L-Arginine, DHA, Vitamin E, Vitamin C, Melatonin, a prenatal, Vitamin D, acai berry, and if I wanted to, DHEA. Had to get my testosterone checked before I took that last one. And was it really smart to be ingesting things that I couldn’t even pronounce the names of and some of them multiple times a day?

Willow was thoughtful, “So, after you take the vitamins for three months, what then?”
“Well, I take them for two months. Then, I take estrogen for a month and an antibiotic in there somewhere along with the vitamins before I start stims.”

“Sounds complicated. What are stems? Like in a plant?”

I shook my head. “Nope. It’s s-t-i-m-s. Like stimulating your ovaries to produce as many follicles at once without ovulating. That’s when the shots start. You know, this whole IVF process is way more complicated than how it’s depicted in the movies.”

“I hear you. And is it depicted in movies?”

I tilted my head to one side to match Willow’s curious expression. She was right; if IVF was depicted, it was in a comedic or brief way. “Guess not.”

“Are you nervous about the shot part? ‘Cause that would wig me out.”

A shot seemed like small potatoes compared to stitching up my own wounds. Giving myself stitches without painkillers and without making a sound to alarm my mom when I was a teen was way harder. At least nowadays, Spike and I took care of each other’s injuries. Handily, said wounds were few and far between. So, the shots wigging me out? “A little?”

“Think Spike will help?”

“Unsure. I haven’t asked yet.” I really wasn’t sure how he’d feel about it.

I tossed the pill boxes next to the row of bottles and flopped on the bed I shared with Spike. He was hanging out at the bar, helping them with some sort of liquor inventory and team-bonding day. (The latter was something I’d been hearing him complain about all week.) Luckily, he’d be inside during the day and was working the night shift, so he wouldn’t burn to a crisp trying to get to his car to come home. “Did you know that there’s a whole vitamin cocktail for guys with sperm problems, too?”

“But Spike doesn’t have to take that because you’re not using his sperm.” Willow made a face. “I can’t believe I just said something in casual conversation about sperm and sperm quality. . . about Spike’s sperm and sperm quality. And lookie there, I said it twice.”
I laughed. “Trust me. I never thought I’d know anything about any of this either.”

“How is Spike feeling about using his cousin’s sperm?” Willow emitted a tired sigh. “Three times.”

“He’s okay with it, I think. Much better than using a donor. At least, he’s not freaking out right now about it. Having a genetic connection makes him feel better. And I can understand why. I think it’s complicated for him, but I think it’ll help him feel connected. Honestly, I’m glad for the connection, too. I love the idea that a potential child would really be Spike’s in a way. Speaking of connecting, Spike has reconnected some with his family. He and Shane have been talking a lot since our trip to Norfolk.”

Willow was quiet for a few seconds. “Guess Spike hasn’t had the best luck with his vampire family.” She fake-coughed. “Angel. Does that bring up stuff for you?”

My history with Angel felt so faded that I hardly thought about him unless someone else brought him up. “Not really. Other than to feel protective of Spike. Not to say that Spike didn’t do his fair share of bad stuff in his relationship with Angel. It’s just. . .”

“You love Spike. It’s different now.”

“Definitely.” I propped my pillow up and my arm behind my head. Then, I changed the subject, “Speaking of guys. How’s Oz?”

Willow blushed. She’d casually dated other women and a couple of men since Tara, but no one was special. Since she came back from that retreat with Oz, they’d been hanging out. . . a lot. “Good. It’s weird being around him so much. It’s like we picked up right back where we left off. . . with the good stuff, not the cheating/weird magic stuff. And it feels right. Is that how you felt when you got back together with Spike?”

Willow and I had never talked about how Spike and I had rekindled our relationship. We’d been in different parts of the world. . . literally. I smiled, remembering. “I dunno. Spike and I took it way slower than you and Oz. I mean, the physical was easy. But the communication was slower. You know me. Slow gal. Spike has the patience of Job.” I still marveled that he’d been so patient with me.

“Seems like taking it slow paid off though. And you had every right to want to go slow after
Sunnydale. . . and him not telling you he was back for so long.”

I’d only found out that Spike was alive after the huge battle in Los Angeles and only because I’d gone to the city to check on the Slayers who’d been hurt in the fray. He’d even tried to hide from me in the large first aid tent. I still remembered the fear of rejection in his eyes when I’d found him and the feel of the solidness of his body in my arms. I loved him then but just couldn’t say it. I was still too broken. Turned out that we’d rather be with each other half-broken than not at all. What had Professor Walsh said all those years ago? You find the person whose brokenness balances out with your own. She had one thing right, I guess, but I preferred to think that now, Spike and I balanced each other in less dark ways, too.

Willow hesitated and then continued, “Oz and I are more with the fast at communicating and slow with the physical.”

I made an assumption, “But you want the physical?”

“I think so. Maybe. I mean, I love waking up with him, but it’s been so long since. . .” Willow trailed off. She meant sex with guys.

“Only way you’re gonna know is if you take the leap.” Pot, kettle, black, Buffy.

“I know. Maybe I should break out the Barry White?”

“No!” I said emphatically, remembering what she told me about senior year.

Willow giggled. “Okay. Barry White and lingerie?”

“That might do the trick,” I agreed, suddenly missing my friend. “Why can’t you live here? I could use a good cup of café au lait and beignets with my bestie.”

“I’ll come visit soon,” Willow promised. “But I need a mocha from your shop. Extra shots.” She waited a beat. “And not the hormonal-medical kind.”

I laughed again. “Deal.”
*hopes no one throws stones at me for putting Willow and Oz back together*

Also, I took so many vitamins. My husband did, too. I felt old. And it was a lot. There were multiple pill boxes. Giant ones. The vitamins were expensive and hard to keep track of, but if nothing else, I learned to stay on top of stuff with the journey. And I was in the acai berry study. Hoping these chapters aren't too tedious, but I wanted them to be realistic.
Spike was treating me to dinner at Jacques-Imo’s on Oak Street. The restaurant was extremely popular – so popular that people waited hours for a table every night, and the hours were only from five to 10:30 in the evening. The first time we went, we’d gone late due to the summer sunlight and knew it was a long shot about getting served. We’d ended up having cocktails/mocktails at the bar and then dusting some vampires who were targeting the wait staff at the end of the night. The restaurant owner, who only wore chef’s whites and brightly-patterned boxers, was extremely grateful, and though we still paid, now we never had to wait and always had a meal. There was something about skipping the line that always made me feel giddy and a little important.

Spike and I had already split the shrimp and alligator sausage cheesecake, which had melted in my mouth per usual, and our entrees had just arrived.

“So, you only take me here for special occasions. What’s the occasion tonight?” I’d wracked my brain to try to figure it out and come up empty. Spike was so thoughtful; he was always remembering little anniversaries and marking them for us.

“You don’t know?” he teased, cutting into the carpet bagger steak – extremely rare with extra cayenne in the hollandaise sauce.

Voices of other meal goers providing a blanket of noisy privacy over our conversation, I nudged his foot with mine under the table and smiled at him over my cocktail as I took a small sip. I’d been nursing the same drink all evening; it was watery and weak like I preferred it. “I don’t.” I made a small face, partly due to the alcohol and partly because I felt a twinge of guilt. “I should though, shouldn’t I?”

Spike took a bite of meat and chewed, watching me squirm. I flaked off a bit of my stuffed catfish. He waited a long time with that glint in his eye, so my bit of affection turned into a kick.

“Hey,” he said with soft amusement after he swallowed. “Can’t a fellow enjoy his steak before anxious Buffy comes out?”

“I’m not anxious.” I huffed. Two could play that game. I slid the bit of catfish between my lips and licked the sauce off the tines of my fork with leisurely slowness. At the same time, I slipped my sandal off and slid my foot up his leg to more sensitive places. He groaned and then reached for my
“Pet.” He was serious. I dropped my foot down but left my leg tucked against his. His finger stroked over the back of my hand.

For some weird reason, my mind went back to my ill-fated date with Principal Wood in Sunnydale. Spike had retrieved me from the date to help Xander. I still recalled how lost and confused Spike had looked, an ill-fitting jacket covering his shoulders but nothing disguising the naked vulnerability in his eyes. So much had changed between then and now.

I gently squeezed his hand. “What is it?” Stupid sneaky note of worry.

“We’ve just been so caught up in the family planning thing for months.” He caught me backpedaling a little and tilted his head with no trace of the past in his bright eyes. He loved me. God, he really did. Why did that sometimes still surprise me? I knew it wasn’t because I didn’t believe he could love. Maybe it was that sometimes I still didn’t think I deserved to be loved like that. “And we needed a break. Well, I did at least.”

Letting out a breath of air, I relaxed and waved my fork in the air. “So, no particular anniversary that I forgot that you remember?”

He smiled. “No.”

“Phew.”

“You remember plenty.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. I could recall no such remembrance of important dates besides Spike’s birthday (human) and our officially designated anniversary (December 31). The designated anniversary was chosen because Spike liked the turn of the old year into the new one. He said it gave him hope, but I secretly thought he picked the date because there were fireworks. He loved watching fireworks, and now he could say the fireworks were for us. “Really?”

“Maybe not the traditional anniversaries. . .”
Releasing Spike’s hand, I ticked my list off on my fingers. “Not traditional like say, oh, the anniversary of our first real date? Or the anniversary of our first official-I’m-with-you-with-you kiss? Or the anniversary of the day we moved in together? Or the day we bought the car? Or –”

Spike chuckled. “Well, those are mine to remember. You remember other things.”

I made a face to display my incredulity. “Like what?”

“You always keep my little stash of peppermints flush in the car.”

“Well, that’s for selfish, fresh-breathy reasons after you smoke,” I insisted.

Spike ignored my counterpoint and cut himself another bite of bright red steak, which he drenched in spicy sauce. After he finished chewing and swallowing, he said, “The refrigerator always has fresh blood from different creatures, so my taste buds aren’t bored.”

“Can’t have you emaciated.” I ate a bite of my fish. The stuffing was rich and delicious tonight.

Taking a sip of his Abita beer, he rolled his eyes. “You buy me that shampoo I always like and let me choose the station on the telly.”

I pointed the fork at him to punctuate my next points. “Only because I love how you smell right out of the shower, and you let me snuggle with you on the sofa while we watch TV.” Sometimes, we even fell asleep together on the comfortable cushions if we were really exhausted. Later, he’d carry me to bed, and I’d wake up the next morning curled up snug as a bug with him under our mountain of blankets, the air conditioning blasting an arctic wind around us.

“C’mon, love! Go with me here.”

I grinned around another bite of fish. “Yeah, well. You know I love you.”

He returned the expression of happiness. “I do at that.” He busied himself with cutting more meat. “I’m kicking the habit.” It took me a few seconds because he was abruptly referring to cigarettes.
“What? You are?” This took me completely by surprise. I couldn’t imagine this. Spike’s cigarettes were part of what made him. . . well, him. “Why?”


“Oh! Well, that makes sense.” I smiled at him. “That reminds me.” I pulled my giant pill box thingie out of my handbag where it was wedged against my stake. I opened the compartment for the evening and dumped a handful of many-sized vitamins into my palm. Spike winked at me; he’d been teasing me about the pills and coming up with various nicknames for me. I held a finger up at him and popped the pills in my mouth. My “don’t even say it,” came out a little garbled. I took a swig of water. “Uch.”

When I turned back to my dinner date, about to say something about his lack of monikers, a small salmon-colored box sat next to my plate. I gave Spike a confused look. “What’s this?”

He just smiled and gave the box a little nudge. “Open it.”

My heart pounding a little, I slid the lid off and pulled out a small soft bag. I opened the flap on the bag and dumped a dainty silver necklace into my palm. The small heart pendant curved gently around a deep red garnet that glinted a little in the low candle light. “It’s beautiful. But why?” Spike never bought jewelry for me in the past, so this was special.

“For a lot of reasons, but the main one is that I want you to know how much I love you no matter what happens next in this journey of ours. I’m not going anywhere, Buffy.” My eyes brimmed, but I blinked away the tears as he touched my cheek. “You may not believe it, but I’ll be with you until you’re old and grey – if you still want me around.”

The corner of my mouth lifted and a tear escaped despite my best efforts. “I’m pretty sure I’ll still want you around.”

He kissed me briefly and brushed the tear away, and then he scooted his chair over in the limited space between our table and the next one to help me put the necklace on. “Your birth stone, right?”

“Yes. I love it. Thank you.” I touched the pendant, the metal smooth and cool under my fingertips. “I’m sorry that I’ve been such an emotional mess these last few – well, several months.”
“Seems to me that I’ve been right there with you on that,” he reassured me. “Besides, much rather you be all emotional with me than – ”

“Than closed off and distant and absolutely awful to you?”

His response was quick. “Oh, pet, that’s long ago, remember?” Then, he changed the subject completely to prove just how in the past it was. “So, want to try a bite of my steak, love?” He waved a bright red piece in my direction.

“Ew. Worlds of no. But I know that means you want to try my catfish.” I carved off a piece for him.

Then, we ate the rest of our meal until I was so stuffed, I didn’t know if I could move. Ah, the food of New Orleans filled me up the way no other food could.

As Spike led the way back into the humid evening, he asked, “What do you want to do now?”

“Park on the shady side of the Quarter and fight some vamps on the way to Café du Monde for dessert beignets and frozen café au laits?” I could use the exercise.

Spike lifted an eyebrow at me. “Which side is that? And won’t you be up all night, love?”

“Exactly to both.”

“You have to open tomorrow morning,” he reminded me.

He was right. I did. “You forget where I work. Caramel macchiatos are my specialty.”

“The vicious cycle of caffeine.”

“Hey. Gotta take advantage of it while I can. Going cold turkey very soon.”
“Weaning might be a better idea.” Spike pulled out his keys and unlocked the Civic.

“Why’s that? Can’t handle cranky-caffeine-less Buffy?” I crossed my arms.

“It’s not that . . .” He opened the car door for me, and I plopped in the passenger seat. He bent to kiss me deep and long, leaving me wanting more, before breaking away to tease in a different way, “Well, maybe it is.”

“Hey!” I protested through my grin.

Chapter End Notes

Sunalso requested food (also thanks for posting about Spike's ugly jacket in the SB)! Jacque-Imo's is fantastic...omg, I'm so hungry now. If you ever go to NOLA, check it out. You do indeed have to get there right when it opens to avoid the wait and to guarantee eating. The cheesecake is delicious (sorry about the alligator, yellowb), and the food is so rich and coma-inducing. I highly recommend. (The owner does dress in a white chef’s top and boxers or at least he did in 2004/2005.)

Also, the IVF process/infertility is so stressful and all-consuming. You need a break to remember who you are as a person and who you are as part of a couple, too. I get tired just thinking about it. There are moments throughout that make you question or validate why you chose your partner and there are moments when you support one another or hurt one another, so these moments of peace...of a break are just gold.

This is the pendant/necklace that Spike gives Buffy:

Thanks for all the support and notes...will reply soon!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Crap. Crappity crap.

Rubbing my tired eyes, I counted again, going meticulously over the list of medications I’d written on a scrap of paper. First, I went over the list from the local pharmacist. Clomid, dexamethasone. Check and check. Empty bottle of doxycycline that I already took at the beginning of the month. Check. Estrace pills were in the bedroom next to my bed. Check. Then, I reviewed the meds from the pharmacy in south Miami. Gonal F, double trigger meds, and half the Ganirelix. Check, check, check, and check.

Finally, the medication from the pharmacy approved by the insurance. We’d easily met the lifetime max allowed for fertility meds and had to order the rest from the Florida pharmacy. The remainder of the needed Ganirelix and the vials of Menopur. Damn. Still missing a package of Menopur. Not that I understood what all the medication was for, but I knew that what I had was one less than what the nurse had ordered.

Crap.

My nurse at the Lone Tree clinic said I needed to order all the medication by a certain day right before stims started, or I’d not have them in time. I also had to balance this with the expiration on some of the medication and keep track of which had to be refrigerated and which didn’t.

Couple this stress with the stress of coordinating with the Fertility Institute of New Orleans, a local reproductive endocrinologist’s office (conveniently located in Metairie) that would communicate lab results to the clinic and the stress of preparing to leave town and finding coverage at work after Roger bailed on me, I was a ball of tension. Tears of frustration filled my eyes.

Grabbing my phone, I blinked away the tears and focused on texting Spike who was just starting his shift at the Spotted Cat. “Hey. Crystal just dropped me off after work. Sorting through the meds. What’d you do with the boxes they came in?” Spike had been home to sign for the medication.

Making sure my phone ringer was on, I poked my head out the back door to see if Spike had set the boxes on the porch. The trio of large boxes was stacked haphazardly atop one another.
Despite the muggy, warm air pressing its weight into my lungs, I scrambled through the cardboard and foam coolers, rifling through the packing materials. After a few minutes of searching, sweat already pouring down my back, I sighed in defeat. There were no extra meds hiding out in the boxes. Frowning, I snagged a few of the now squishy, tepid ice packs to tuck into the freezer. At least, there was one thing useful out here. I could use the pouches to keep the medication cold for travel. They’d fit perfectly in the small cooler I’d bought for the plane.

Retreating into the house, I stowed the packs in the refrigerator, closing my eyes to the blast of coldness. Then, I checked my phone.


Before I could reply, I spied the red sharps container meant for collecting the needles after use. Grabbing for the plastic container, I expertly opened the white top to check to see if the missing medication was inside. Nope.

My fingers ran through the piles of individually packaged needles and alcohol wipes that Spike had sorted by size on the kitchen table. Not there either.

Slumping down in one of the kitchen table chairs, I texted Spike again, my fingers flying over the keyboard, “I’m missing a set of Menopur. Gonna have to call the pharmacy tomorrow.” I sighed, feeling gross and sticky. Stupid humidity.

“Sorry, pet.”

My anxiety was now making me micro-manage-y Buffy, and I responded to his sympathy with a question. “Did you pay the clinic?” The clinic made clients pay for everything upfront and then get reimbursed by insurance later. They must have had people try to skip out on their bills or something. Luckily, the ladies in the business office subtracted the lifetime max that our insurance company paid. Even then, the bill was huge. Giles fronted us the money so that we didn’t have to use all of our savings at once. “And did you check on flights and Shane?”

Instead of texting a reply, Spike called me. “What’s going on, love?” he practically shouted over the noisy bar crowd. I could hear him shoveling ice into glasses and pictured him with his phone wedged against his ear as he multitasked. My shoulders loosened a little just imagining him.
“Nothing. You’re busy.” I hadn’t meant to interrupt his work.

The phone sounds shifted, and Spike spoke to a customer about opening a tab. His work voice was seriously sexy. Then, he asked, “Alex, can you finish these for me?”

“Sure thing,” Alex said, her tone seductive. Just hearing her voice had made me insanely jealous until I met her. She flirted with everyone, including me, and though she sounded like she was in her twenties, she was at least sixty years old and looked much older than her chronological age. Sometimes, if she was in the mood, she’d talk about her life. Her stories were a tad outlandish, kind of like tall tales or the movie Big Fish, but I bet she’d think the same thing if she knew about Slayers and vampires and other assorted things that go bump in the night. Alex also made the only cocktail that I actually enjoyed – the contents of which I could never remember or replicate even if I did remember.

The bar sounds faded, and I heard Spike pushing buttons. He’d moved to the cash register in the slightly quieter area of the bar. “Pet, you there?”

“Uh huh.”

“You’ve got to relax, love. The clinic has their money though I think it’s right unfair of them to ask for it all ahead of time. And let me handle the tickets and the sperm.” He said “sperm” so casually in his British accent that I couldn’t help but giggle. “You don’t need the what’s it medication straight away, do you? And what’s so funny?”

I tittered again and bit my lip. “No.”

“So you’ll call them up tomorrow, and they’ll fix their mistake. Still don’t know what’s so bloody funny.” He was teasing me.

“You said, ‘Sperm.’”

“Well, what do you want me to call it, pet? Cum? Baby batter? Jizz? Seed?” Spike kept going with the longest list of slang words I’d ever heard for sperm. As he continued, I laughed harder, so hard that my ribs began to ache. When he ran out of synonyms, he asked, “Better, love?”
One arm around my mid-section, I coughed a little as I tried to catch my breath. “Why... do you know... so many... words?” I gasped out.

“You don’t want to know,” he said in a tone that said I shouldn’t ask, but that only made me want to ask more.

“Oh, but I do. I really do. Want to know.”

He sighed. “Harmony.”

Spike hadn’t mentioned her in years. “How the heck did that come up?”

“She was trying to learn French,” he said matter-of-factly.

Huh? I tried to piece together the logic that was in Harmony’s brain and failed. “But how—”

“Don’t even ask,” he mock-growled. “Listen. I’ll take off a little early, come home, and help you with that bit of relaxation I’m prescribing.”

I could use any form of Spike relaxation. He’d been helping me with that a lot in the last month. He gave amazing massages – another well-honed skill but not one I wanted to know the origins of. “Let me help you with some French?”

The smirk was audible in his tone. “Of course. A brief lesson. Then, you’re going to get some sleep, and I’m coming to your first appointment tomorrow.”

“You are? But it’s in the morning.”

“So, I’ll sizzle and smoke a little getting in the door. It’ll be fine. Can’t promise I’ll make all the appointments, but for the first one, I’m coming, love. In it together, remember?”

“Love you, too. Gonna get back to work now.”

“Okay. Bye. Thank you.”

“Welcome as ever, pet.”

I set the phone on the table, smiling at it as if Spike can see me even though we disconnected. What to do to set the mood and keep my head out of the list of IVF-related things that had to be done? Candles and a bubble bath ought to do the trick.

Chapter End Notes

There were so many more frustrating bits to the med ordering than discussed here. The insurance pharmacy did forget some meds. I used South Miami Pharmacy for the rest but each time I ordered that I gave a credit card number, the number was stolen shortly after (the reason I suspected it was because the first time it happened, money was spent at a Miami boutique and all purchases were usually for female clothing/cosmetics). I ended up using a different pharmacy because SMP ran out of patches during the FET process and my card wasn’t stolen there. Also SMP forgot to include some of the injection needles when I ordered my progesterone in oil - the IM shot - and I didn’t realize it and was injecting myself with huge needles at first (hey, I’m not a nurse). So many things to advocate about!

I also got a weekly massage leading up to my egg retrieval (before I started stims). The lady who ran the reflexology place was doing IVF, too.

Special thank you to Annieg1rl for her help in this chapter (and to swifthorse for being my cheerleader in this fic as I write it)!
The morning of the first injection

Shivering in the air conditioning the morning after my first appointment with the local reproductive endocrinologist, I chewed my lower lip and hit the play button on my phone again.

Yesterday, we went to the Fertility Institute and got a preliminary sense of what my ovaries were doing after the estrogen priming, which was supposed to help line up my follicles prior to stims. My right ovary hadn’t come to the party like during the ODWU in Colorado. So, my left one was pulling the weight with eight resting follicles. The right had three. My hope was the stims would help the right one wake up a little, but I certainly didn’t know if that’s how it all worked. Now, I was watching videos in preparation for my first shot of Menopur.

Spike was fast asleep in the bed behind me, his solid back firmly against the back of my hips and lower back. He could sleep through most anything, but I had my noise-cancelling headphones on just in case. I wanted him near me but not awake. Oddly enough for a vampire, he was fidgety around needles, and he avoided the piles of needles on the kitchen table like the plague. I tried not to analyze it too much; I had to focus on the task at hand: giving myself the first of many shots.

Oh, man. I’d missed the nurse’s initial instructions again. Running my finger over the video, I rewound to the beginning.

I zoned a little as the nurse explained which medications the mini-lesson was good for, and Menopur was one of them. When her voice slipped over into the list of materials needed, I touched each item I had lined up on the end table, the only spotlighted place in the otherwise dark bedroom. 3cc syringe with one-and-a-half-inch needle. It was for mixing the medication powder. Check. One half-inch needle to administer medication. Check. Water diluent and alcohol swab. Yep and yep. Powder and saline vials. Got them. Red box for needle disposal. That’s a yes.

Okay. Next, I had to uncap the tiny glass powder and saline bottles. Better not drop either or that was what? Four hundred dollars down the drain? Well, maybe not that much but in my head, the cost was close to that and astronomically high. I thumbed off the three plastic caps and made sure not to put in a lot of force because Slayer strength could lead to badness – glass and powder everywhere!

I knew what was next because it was my fourth time watching the video. Potential bottle crushing crisis averted, I wiped an alcohol swab over the tiny metal tops to sterilize them. I put the used damp square on top of the wrapper it came in and gingerly pulled the top off the needle that was already attached to the syringe. I’d learned from experimenting with the needles that jerking too hard led to skin pricking. (The offending needle was already stowed in the trusty red bin and the resulting
bloody finger had found a brief home in my mouth. Somehow, Spike slept through that.)

I glanced at the video again and watched as the nurse held the saline bottle upside down and inserted the needle through the rubbery top to draw out one milliliter of saline. Then, I emptied the syringe full of diluent into the Menopur powder, gently swiveled the bottle between my index finger and thumb (no shaking!), drew out the mixed solution, and inserted it into a second bottle of the medication. Wrinkling my nose in concentration, I swiveled and pulled back again, moving the mix of saline and two vials of powder back into the syringe. So far, so good.

Detaching the larger needle, I tossed it in the sharps box. I mused briefly that no one had cornered the market on large red plastic boxes to store broken, used-up Slayer weapons for later disposal, and said weapons usually had bodily fluids on them. Biting my lip again, I attached the smaller needle until it was just tight. My heart skipped a beat because I was about to give myself an actual shot.

Following instructions, I held up the syringe so that the needle was pointing toward the ceiling and gave the plastic a couple of little flicks to get the air bubbles to the top. Then, I focused my energy on being gentle but also giving the plunger a small push to eliminate the air out of the top.

Now, for the subcutaneous injection video. This was it.

Before I could hit the back button on my phone’s browser, I felt Spike’s hand lazily encircle my hip, and I almost jumped out of my skin. The headphones fell off the back of my head as his lips softly kissed my upper arm.

“Hey, love.” Squinting against the light of the lamp, he propped up on one elbow, his bare chest and part of his torso peeking out of the blankets.

After my initial surprise, I relaxed back against his cooler skin, making sure to hold the precious medication aloft. “Hey. You scared me. I thought you were asleep.”

He yawned and nuzzled my upper arm with his nose. “Not with you watching that bloody video so many times.”

I twisted and glared pointedly at my headphones. “I thought you were noise-cancelling.”

Moving his hand from my hip, Spike lifted the expensive pair of not very attractive ear muffs. “This
bit of technology is not good enough to prevent a vampire from hearing what you’re hearing, love.”

I ran my left hand through his tousled, un-styled curls. “Sorry I woke you. Want me to do this in the bathroom?” I didn’t really want to go. The bed was cozy, and the bathroom had more hard surfaces for disaster to happen upon.

Spike sat up further, giving me a nice vantage point of his abdomen as he propped a pillow up behind his back. He was still beautifully toned, his pale skin revealing the muscles under the surface, but like me, he was no longer overly sleek—well, overly thin. I loved the extra weight to his body, especially on top of mine. He kissed my palm as I dropped my hand and said, “No, no. Stay. I’d like to watch.”

I was sort of surprised, but I stuck to not questioning. “Okay.” I shifted around so that I was sitting cross-legged facing him.
Spike studied my face as I pushed play on my phone. The nurse’s voice sounded tinier in the space of our bedroom, but she was clear. Shot-administering was seemingly easier than med mixing.

Straightening my back, I pulled up my sleeveless pajama top and pinched a fold of skin with my left hand about an inch from my belly button. Holding the needle at what I guessed was an approximate forty-five-degree angle (geometry was a long time ago), I took a deep breath and inserted the needle through my skin. It turned out to be as simple as pushing a needle through skin to stitch up my own wounds, only a lot less painful. I slowly injected the medication into my body, breathing out as I removed the needle.

“Well done, pet,” Spike said as I tossed the first of many syringes where it landed with a clatter in the sharps box.

I grinned at him. “Thanks. Wasn’t so bad. The Gonal F one is similar. But the trigger shot. I might need your help for that one.”

“The Gonal F is for tonight, right?”

“Right. That and the Clomid and the steroid pills. But for now?” I leaned over and pressed my lips to his, slipping into a familiar but brief preview of what I was about to do to him. I felt a small thrill of desire course through my body. “Since I can no longer have coffee or anything remotely caffeinated.” I raised both eyebrows at him.
“Even chocolate?”

I sighed with faux-dejection. “Sadly, yes, even chocolate.”

He caressed my cheek. Then, he drew my head down, kissing my forehead and nose with deliberate slowness. “Poor pet.”

“Yes. Poor me.”

He ran his hand over the goosebumps on my bare arms. “And you’re freezing.” He lifted up the covers and slid down onto the soft mattress.

I followed suit until my body was on top of his, and he tucked the blankets around my shoulders. Resting my chin on the back of my hands, it was my turn to yawn. Ignoring the beginnings of my caffeine headache, I commanded, “Wake me up and warm me up.”

Spike smirked. “Bossy bint, aren’t we?”

I returned the expression. “Of course.”

“You’re wearing too many clothes. Can’t do my assigned task with so much fabric between us.”

“Never stopped you before.”

With a growl, he flipped me on my back so that I shrieked. Then, he divested me of every stitch of clothing before I knew what was happening and proceeded to more than warm me up with his undivided attention.

I sighed happily. We wouldn’t be doing this for a while after my ovaries got bigger – something about a risk of twisting that sounded extremely painful and was pretty dangerous. Screw shots and IVF, I intended to make the most of . . . whatever Spike was doing down there.
Injections were intimidating at first but became old hat, especially the subq ones. I
dreaded the trigger shot because it was IM, and my husband didn't help me with any of
them. Did them all myself.

Thanks for all the kind support!
The fifth night of no sleep

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I laid in bed next to Spike who was sleeping again. I studied his still form and wished beyond all wishes that the Sandman would come by and sprinkle some sleepy time dust in my eyes and take me to dreamland. Of course, the Sandman was probably some vicious demon that ate children’s souls for a midnight snack, but that was beside the point. Heck, I’d take the arrival of this evil Sandman over lying in bed, watching my vampire sleep.

I sighed and flicked my phone screen on again. Rolling onto my back, I pulled up a specific app and tugged the not-quite-noise-cancelling headphones over my ears. The familiar sound of electronic monsters filled my ears. At least the game passed the time. This was my second time through. Last night, I’d curled up in Spike’s recliner and wasted the wee hours playing the game until I defeated it.

Staying in bed with Spike for my second time served more than one purpose. First, the bed was way more comfortable than the recliner. We had the softest pillow top mattress, and my pillow was just the right amount of yielding and firm. Plus, there were blankets galore to keep me and Spike warm. But still, sleep eluded me. Speaking of Spike’s presence, I knew that playing the game in bed would rouse my slumbering partner. After all, I’d recently learned that my headphones totally failed at cancelling noise.

Right on cue, Spike shifted behind me, turning to face me in a half-drowsy motion. He emitted a small groan and gathered me into his arms so that my back was aligned with his mid-section, a place I dearly loved to be. Snuggling my hips close to his, I felt him rouse more, but I continued to poke at the squawking, moaning machine in my hands.

Spike lifted one side of the headphones from my ear. “What’re you doing, love?” His voice was slightly rusty with lack of use.

“Playing,” I said simply, focused on not losing one of my defenses to the creatures attacking them.

“Guess the better question is what the bloody hell are you playing?”

The last monster fell. Yes! Level passed. I held up the tiny screen, so Spike could see, too. “Plants vs. Zombies. It’s fun.”
Spike took my phone and studied the app. “Why are you playing it now when you’re supposed to be sleeping?”

“I dunno. Can’t sleep. Fifth night in a row.” After the second night of little sleep, I’d done a Google search to try to figure it out. “I think it’s the steroid. I wish I didn’t have to take it at night. One of the side effects is insomnia. And I’m so awake.” It was true. My brain didn’t feel remotely drowsy despite my body’s best efforts to convey exhaustion.

“Let me guess. You can’t not take it, so I can get some shut eye?”

“Yeah. Asked my nurse, and she said to keep taking it at night.” I’d been having calls with my nurse, Elaine, two or three times a week for the past few weeks. She always answered my questions or allayed my fears; she was kind of like a nurse, pathway to the doc, and therapist all rolled in one. She’d laughed when I told her so. “Dr. Google says it’s to help egg quality or prevent inflammation of ovaries or various other theories. Who knows? I’m taking it. Hence, awake Buffy and zombie slayage.” I sighed.

“And you’re playing in here because?” He wasn’t irritated and sounded more amused than anything.

I stroked the back of his hand which was still around my waist. “Well, I did play it in the living room last night. Defeated the big bad at the end and everything.”

“And you’re playing it again, why?”

“Hey, can’t take the Slayer out of the girl. Risk of ovarian torsion, so no patrolling.” Or... other ways of relaxing. “So, zombies! And the plants are kinda cute.” I pointed at the phone screen. “The little green guy shoots pods out of his mouth.” I frowned. “Apparently in this game, plants have mouths. I know Venus fly traps sorta do, but I don’t think these are those.”

Spike snorted softly. “Sentient Audreys killing brain-eating zombies, eh?”

“Yep. Well, one of them eats the zombies. In one big gulp.” I turned onto my back, and Spike freed his arm.

Handing my phone back to me, he felt around on the end table next to him and brought up his phone. “What’s it called again?”
“Plants vs. Zombies. Go back to sleep,” I said, half-hoping he’d ignore my command.

So, of course, he did. “You wanted me up. I’m up. Gonna play with you.”

I set aside my phone and turned toward him, cuddling my mid-section against the side of his torso, pushing my leg against his, and laying my head on his chest. “Okay. Download it!”

He turned his pillow sideways, bending the cushion in half to prop us both up a little. “Already downloading. Hold your horses.”

Speaking of horses. “Did you call and remind Leah that we’re going out of town?” He’d taken that task off my list of things to do like pack for our flight to Denver tomorrow... well, tonight.

“I did. Lil bit is disappointed that she can’t spend the night on Friday.” Spike opened the now downloaded app.

Ever since Crystal had her baby, Leah spent the night with Spike and me every Friday night we had off. We’d cook dinner (usually mac and cheese or pancakes or both), watch movies (usually the Silver Stallion – Spike and Leah liked the chase scene especially), play games, and even paint our toenails. Spike always let Leah try to paint his fingernails – black, of course. She wasn’t too good at handling the small nailbrush, but he never complained when paint ended up on the sides of his fingers or bubbled up when she layered it a little too thick. She was still obsessed with horses, too, and she always brought along her toy horses, including Frank. She and Spike would turn the living room into a barn and fields in which the very intelligent horses had adventures.

“You told her we were going on vacation, right?” I didn’t want Leah to know what we were doing. She was too little to understand IVF, and if the process didn’t work, I didn’t want her to be disappointed or upset. She still wanted us to have a baby and periodically continued mentioning the subject.

Spike typed his name in the app. “Told her we were going to Colorado. She asked me to bring back some snow. Don’t think she knows that it doesn’t snow there in the summertime.”

“Thanks for doing that. Maybe we can find her a horse for her collection.” There had to be toy stores in Denver. Maybe one had evening hours.
“Did you find out if you can take the meds on the plane?” Spike asked as he poked around in the game.

“Meds and needles are a go. I have a letter from the clinic, too, if TSA needs to see it.” I’d purchased a little soft-sided cooler to bring on the plane. No way was I putting the very expensive meds in the suitcases we planned to check. Who knew that needles and all kinds of things were allowed on board? I’d also read that security might examine the medication, mostly to ensure the frozen packs were actually frozen, but I wasn’t sure why that was important.

He paused in his game exploration to gently rub my sore abdomen. “How’re you feeling?”

Between the Menopur and Gonal F in the morning and evening respectively, my torso was a patchwork of bruises despite my best efforts to vary the location of the injections. “Bruises from shots are fading. I heal quick, remember?”

“Know that, love, but hate seeing it anyway.”

He’d kissed my belly after my latest round of shots before we went to bed. We couldn’t do much in the physical intimacy department, but he was still tender and affectionate, which I found myself cherishing more than normal because my emotions were all over the place. Sometimes, I felt confident and hopeful, but today, I’d felt more than a little discouraged because I’d had my second ultrasound and bloodwork at the local RE’s office. While the follicles were growing evenly with the medication, my right ovary was still being a reluctant participant, and no new follicles had shown up. Still, the clinic in Colorado gave us the go ahead to fly out tomorrow. We would be taking the earliest dark evening flight, and I’d start daily ultrasounds and bloodwork in Denver until time for the trigger shot followed by egg retrieval. I didn’t think much beyond that because it made me anxious.

His words and my thoughts led me to kiss his chest. I loved him so much for being there with me. “So, you ready to play?”

He turned his attention back to the game and pushed the screen where it said, “Adventure.” “Teach me, love.”

We spent the rest of the night playing Plants vs. Zombies. Spike periodically cursed at the “bloody zombies” and the “fragile-ass bits of chlorophyll,” which made me laugh and him grump at me.
I had to look up what the Little Shop of Horrors plant was called. That movie...*shudders*. Saw it as a kid and still...*shudders*.

One of swifthorse's favorite childhood movies was the Silver Stallion and the chase scene is her favorite scene.

And dex totally kept me up...like a vampire. lol And my doc told me to keep taking it at night. Argh. While we were in Denver, I literally stayed up an entire night. (The other nights I got a couple of hours.) My body was exhausted but my brain was totally wired. And I finished the whole Plants vs. Zombies game. I'd played it before, but it kept me occupied. Thought it was fitting for Buffy to do, too, but I didn't wake up my husband. The steroid is supposed to reduce inflammation by suppressing your immune system or something.
“What are you doing?” I asked bemusedly as I settled onto the sofa in Dawn’s apartment. My lower back was sore and oddly slightly heavy, probably because my ovaries were growing with the stim medication.

Since arriving in Denver, Spike and I had been staying with Dawn in her apartment since her roommate was out of town for the summer. We’d been keeping busy and distracted by letting Dawn play tour guide in the city and the surrounding areas. We’d just gone on an evening hike through the Garden of the Gods, which was usually only open until seven in the evening. However, Dawn had a friend who was a naturalist interpreter, and she enlisted him to lead us on an after-dark nature walk through the park to see the giant beautiful red rock formations.

Now that we were back at the apartment, Spike was trying to sneakily peer out the window, pushing aside the heavy curtain just a crack to squint into the night. “Nothing. Just checking.”

I tried not to snicker. “Checking what?”

“Making sure the Bit is safe,” he said distractedly.

“I’m sure she walks her boyfriend to his car on most evenings without incident.” I kicked off my shoes and swung my legs up to lie down on the couch. Much comfier.

“You see?” Spike emitted a low growl. “That’s the problem, isn’t it? She’s seeing him to his car. The git.” I rolled over on my right side, tucking my arm under my head, and took in my vampire’s rigid shoulders. “I’m sure he walks her to the door and makes sure she’s safe when we’re not here. You know why she’s walking him out tonight, right?”

“If he lays a hand on her . . .” Spike trailed off, opening the curtain wider.

“You’re so going to see kissing. And I’m very sure that Dawn wants him to lay his hands on her,” I noted. “Plus, they probably know you’re watching. Mr. Obvious with the curtain. It’s dark out there and light in here.” Only a lamp was on, but it was still brighter than the dimly lit parking lot.
Spike backed away then, letting the drapes fall back into place. “Right. Still don’t like it, and if she’s not back in ten minutes, I’m going to go –”

I patted the sofa cushion next to me. “No, you’re not.”

Mindful of my soreness, Spike gingerly sat down, the disgruntlement was strong on his face. I rubbed his thigh, and he relaxed under my touch. “You don’t like Thomas, do you?”

He gave me a what-do-you-think look but then asked, “It’s that obvious?”

“Um, yeah. You kept glaring at him while we were supposed to be gazing at the ancient rocks and listening to Mark.” Mark had been a wonderful tour guide, describing the history and discovery of the site while sprinkling in tidbits about geology. With their unusual patterns and shapes and with their sheer size, the rusty red formations were beautiful and somehow elegant even without sunlight shining on them. A lot of them had names based on what other people saw in the various shapes – nature’s Rorschach test. My favorite, by far, was the kissing camels. “They were pretty amazing.”

Spike softened as he gazed at me. “They were. Not much surprises me, pet. Not after having lived so long, but being in the middle of something, seeing what Mother Nature has created? That still gets me.”

“Something about the scope of what it probably took to create them?” The irony of the parallel to our own situation was not lost on me.

“Yeah.” He picked up my left hand and kissed my palm. “How’re you feeling?” This was a question he was asking a lot lately. He could tell when I was hurting. Something about his vampire senses must detect when my gait changed or when my facial expressions shifted slightly. Or maybe it was just Spike being his observant self.

“Good. Sore but good.” The subcutaneous shots were now quick and easy, and I’d even added a third with Ganirelix to prevent me from ovulating all the growing eggs. (That particular shot burned going in.) So far, my daily ultrasounds showed that eleven follicles were growing with some consistency, and my bloodwork was trending in the right direction. Our early morning re-group meeting with Dr. Surrey had been hopeful as well. Because I was fairly young in the infertility world, he expected that my eggs would be decent quality despite my borderline FSH, and he predicted we would likely do well given that Shane’s sperm also came from a younger man. The one thing Dr. Surrey wouldn’t let me do is take the steroid in the morning. Darn it. Though the meeting
had provided temporary reassurance, I was still nervous.

Seeming to pick up on my renewed tension at his query, Spike ran his hand around my hip with a gentle, light touch. “Good. We’re going to rest the next couple of days until retrieval. No more playing tourist.”

Smiling, I moved my hips a little under his hand. “Is that an order?”

He lifted both eyebrows in a don’t-fight-me-on-this fashion that I’d come to associate with Spike meaning business. “Yeah, love. It’s an order.”

“Now who’s the bossy one?” I pouted. I was secretly relieved though. Spending all day curled up in Dawn’s bed under the covers sounded good. Dawn had loaned me and Spike her bed and was sleeping on the pull-out bed in the sofa. Even though I still wasn’t sleeping well with the steroid, I was tiring more easily and was grateful for the extra effort my sister was making to make me comfortable. That was one reason why I didn’t want Spike to give her such a hard time about her boyfriend. “If I’m going to do as ordered, you need to be nicer to Dawn about Thomas.”

“He has a part time minimum wage job, and the layabout doesn’t do anything all day but play video games,” Spike protested.

I pushed my lips to one side. “And you seemed perfectly happy to partake of said video games all day today. What was it that you spent hours playing with him?”

“Super Smash Bros. takes skill,” he said, still with the defensiveness. “And we had to beat the blokes in Kansas.” At my confused expression, he added, “Where Dorothy’s from.” I made a bigger face at him, and he realized what I was asking. “You can play online with people from anywhere, love.”

“Oh.” I paused and then asked, “And did you talk with Thomas while you played?”

“Of bloody course!”

I laughed a little at his sudden burst of passion. “And you concluded that he’s not good enough for Dawn?”
“He lets Dawn take care of him financially. . . at times, and he has no goals for the future.”

“All right, Dad.”

Spike huffed at how casually I was taking this. “He doesn’t appreciate her. Not enough.”

“In case you didn’t remember, neither of us is exactly CEO of a giant company or rolling in dough.”

“That’s totally different,” he scoffed. “CEOs of companies aren’t out helping fight the forces of evil in the world. They aren’t saving the world from bloody apocalypses!”

“Or saving drunk tourists from the fate of staggering onto an isolated street off Bourbon and being eaten by vampires?”

Spike softened. “Exactly. I just want Dawn to be –”

“Cherished and loved the way you love me?”

“Yeah.”

The sound of a throat being cleared from the direction of the front door interrupted the flow of conversation between Spike and me. Dawn smiled at us but mostly gazed at Spike with a kindness that I hadn’t seen in a long time. “Thank you.”

Spike shifted next to me. “For what, Bit?”

“For caring so much about me.” Dawn’s eyes softened with tears that didn’t fall from her eyes.

Spike was clear, “Never stopped.”

Dawn pushed one hand in the pocket of her jeans and shrugged a shoulder. “I know.” She shut and
locked the door with her free hand. “If it helps, I’m not serious about him. He’s not serious about me. It’s just that he fits for right now. I’m busy with school, and –”

“And I’m going to take a shower,” I announced, pulling my legs up and maneuvering around Spike. “You guys should talk.”

Neither of them protested this, which secretly pleased me. As I headed into the bedroom, Dawn called after me, “Clean towels are in my closet. Top shelf on the left when you open the door.”

I didn’t even glance back, afraid to jinx the impending bonding between my lover and my sister. “Got it.”

After my purposefully long but lukewarm shower (exposure to hot water was sadly a no-no during IVF), I changed into my pajamas and wandered back into the living area, feeling refreshed. The lamp was dark, but the kitchen light was bright, and I found the pair of them sitting at the table and chatting away the way they used to... the way I’d caught them laughing and happy in the kitchen with Mom back when Glory was a threat and before Mom had died... before I’d died and come back.

Spike smiled at me as I entered the room, and this time, I felt nothing but love in my heart for him, which was a stark contrast to how the me of long ago felt. I suddenly had the urge to tell him how much I cared about him, to reassure him that he was my only. Instead, I asked, “Watcha doing?”

Dawn held up her mug. “Having hot chocolate like old times. Want some?”

“I’d love some.” I made a face. “Oh, wait. I can’t. Stupid no chocolate, no caffeine rule.”

“Oh, yeah. I have Sleepy Time tea. Tea sans caffeine.”

“Perfect.” I briefly wrapped my arms around the back of Spike’s shoulders and pressed my cheek against his before sliding into the seat next to him. As Dawn rose to fix me a cup, I decided that even if the IVF cycle failed, the renewed camaraderie between my sister and our vampire was worth it and left me more breathless with hope than the giant rocks we’d seen earlier in the evening.

Chapter End Notes
Another one of the reunions I really wanted in the story was that between Spike and Dawn since it was alluded to earlier that they still weren’t quite right.

And my husband and I totally did touristy stuff while we were in Colorado. We went to the Garden of the Gods, Buffalo Bill’s grave, some yummy restaurants, a shopping strip downtown/the mile high point at the capital, and Casa Bonita (my husband made me watch the South Park episode that references the restaurant).

If you want to know more about Garden of the Gods: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVRGo_4qrSQ

I researched park times...and who might give a tour.
The day of the unexpected trigger shot

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

My cell rang, startling me out of my half-doze on Dawn’s sofa. I sat up abruptly, pushing my hair off my forehead and rubbing one eye. Where’d I put my phone? Patting the blankets of my cocoon, I first found the remote. Damn. I flicked off the muted TV, cutting off an infomercial about some product called Shamwow that was neither sham-y nor wow-y. My right hand discovered the phone near my hip. Someone from the clinic was calling. A nurse called every afternoon with the latest on my bloodwork for the day and medication dosing for the evening and next morning.

Clearing my throat, I hurriedly swiped right to answer before I missed the call. “Hello?”

“May I speak with Buffy Summers?” the woman’s voice was direct and revealed little emotion.

“This is she.” I reached over for a pen and stack of post-its on the end table, uncapping the pen with my mouth, so I’d be ready to write down the directions.

Instead of the usual niceties like stating her name or asking about my day, the nurse launched straight into, “Your LH has spiked, and you are in danger of ovulating. So, we need you to do the trigger shot right away, and we need to schedule you for an early morning retrieval.”

“W-what?” My head spun. My LH had been trending nicely in a non-spiky way and wasn’t the Ganiirelix supposed to prevent ovulation? I also just spent a few hundred dollars to have an extra dose or two of Gonal-F, and I’d almost gotten lost on the University of Denver campus because the tiny pharmacy that sold fertility drugs was located on the edge of the school grounds. The retrieval was planned for Wednesday, not Monday. Spike and I had just talked about calling the airport to reschedule our plane ride home because I was stimming for an extra few days.

My mind whirled with all these details, so the nurse brought me back by saying, “Buffy? Do you understand the directions? You need to do the trigger shot now.”

“I-I thought I was supposed to do two triggers.” I had HCG and Lupron triggers, which were supposed to help the follicles and eggs mature for retrieval 36 hours later.

“No. You’re only going to do the HCG,” she said matter-of-factly.
“O-okay.” Spike appeared in the living room from the bedroom where he’d been reading. His blue eyes were full of questions. I ignored him because I couldn’t focus on anything but the current conversation in my current state of overwhelm. “What happened? Is this common?”

“All you need to know is that you have to do the trigger shot now, and then, you’ll go to the clinic tomorrow morning. They’ll do an ultrasound to determine whether you’ve ovulated. If the follicles are still there, you’ll have egg retrieval then.”

“There’s a chance they might all be gone?” Panic was settling into my chest.

“Yes. Do the trigger shot and come in at 6:30 AM.” The nurse sounded annoyed.

I felt dizzy. I had been planning to review the video for the trigger shot a few times before I did it. “Okay.”

The nurse hung up without saying goodbye. I lowered the phone and stared at the screen, unsure what just happened.

“What’s going on, love?” Spike asked from the doorway.

I finally glanced up at him; he was worried. “I have to do the trigger shot now because I’m apparently about to ovulate.”

“What does that mean?” He approached me and sat on top of the blankets next to me. I let him take my hand, and I tried to focus on his familiar touch.

Taking a deep breath, I said, “She said that we have to go in tomorrow morning. They’re going to do an ultrasound to make sure I haven’t ovulated all the eggs, and then, if I haven’t, they’re going to do the egg retrieval early, which doesn’t make sense because doesn’t the trigger shot need 36 hours to work?”

Spike didn’t answer this question because he obviously didn’t know the answer. Instead, he said, “Do the trigger shot, pet. I’ll call Shane.” Shane was in town to provide his sperm sample. We’d considered the option of freezing his sperm and having it shipped, but the doctor said he preferred a
fresh sample along with frozen backups, so Shane and his daughter flew into Denver a few days ago. He already provided his backup sample. Though he wasn’t spending time with us because we still hadn’t decided how to integrate our lives yet, he and his daughter were making a fun vacation out of the trip.

I nodded, feeling a weird mix of numb and anxiety that leaped in my chest, and opened the internet browser on my phone. “I have to watch the video.”

He kissed my temple. “Okay. Which medication is it?”

I went to the clinic website and medication training videos. “The HCG.”

“I’ll get it for you.”

“Thanks. It’s in the plastic bag with the needles.” I’d already organized the medication, putting the trigger shot medication in its own separate bag with the appropriate syringes.

“All right.”

Spike left the room as I tried to pull up the video. The website seemed to be down. What? Now of all times? In frustration, I closed the browser and reopened it. Same broken link. I rebooted my phone. Nothing. I glared at the phone and willed myself to not throw it.

Spike found me with a cross expression. He set the bag of medication next to me. “What’s wrong?”

“The stupid website is down, and I can’t get the video to work. Uggghhhhh!” I dialed the clinic even though I knew I’d only get the after-hours menu. Pushing through the buttons to get to the operator, I explained the situation. The guy I spoke to was much friendlier than the nurse had been. Stupid nurse. He said the nurses were still there making calls, and he’d have someone call me back.

I waited for the call, staring at the screen and willing the phone to ring. I could hear Spike talking to Shane in the other room. My phone sprang to life, and I half-jumped out of my skin. “Hello?”

“Hi there. Is this Buffy Summers?” This nurse already sounded kinder.
“Hi and yes.” I blurted out my predicament without even letting her reply. “I have to do the trigger shot now because I’m about to ovulate, and I can’t get the training video to pull up.”

The nurse didn’t miss a beat. “Are you trying to pull it up on your phone?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Try the computer. Sometimes the videos don’t work on the phone browsers.” She’d obviously heard about this problem before.

I shot to my feet and ambled over to the kitchen table where I’d left my laptop. Flipping the monitor up, I tried to pull up the clinic website. Nothing. Damn it. “It’s not working.”

“Hmm. I’m not sure why. Okay. Try this. Open up YouTube.” The nurse then proceeded to guide me to a working video about how to administer the trigger shot on the Freedom Pharmacy channel.

“Yay! It works,” I said, pausing the video.

“All right,” she said. “Good luck. We’ll see you tomorrow morning. Try to do something to relax this evening, okay?”

“Okay.” My mind was already focused on what I had to do next. “Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome. Bye.”

I hung up the phone, picked up my laptop, retrieved the meds, and headed into Dawn’s bathroom.

“You need me, love?” Spike called after me.

I was a Slayer on a mission. “Nope. Wish me luck.” I peeked back at him. He was still on the phone with Shane.
He cocked his head and smiled encouragingly. “Good luck. You got this.”

“Thanks.” I shut the door, so I could block everything out and focus.

After watching the video once through, I laid out all the supplies: alcohol swabs, HCG vial, water vial, syringe, two needles (one for reconstitution and one for administration), and gauze pads. I pressed play again and slowly followed the steps, pausing the instructions along the way to complete each one. With shaking hands, I drew out the water, added it to the HCG, gently moved the bottle back and forth to mix it (no shaking!), drew out the medication mix, and finally attached the administration needle.

I forced myself to take a few deep breaths, focusing on the air moving in and out of my lungs while I studied myself in the bathroom mirror. You got this, Buffy.

Then, I pulled down my yoga pants slightly, swiped an alcohol pad over the upper quadrant of my buttocks, and let it air dry. Uncapping the needle, I twisted around slightly, spreading my skin the way they did in the video, counted to three while holding the syringe like a pencil, and plunged the needle quickly in. I felt a slight sting but overall it was okay. Then, I awkwardly drew back the plunger to check for blood. No blood. Thank god. Before I could think too much, I slowly eased the medication into my muscle. Once I pulled out the needle, blood welled, and I fumbled for the gauze, pressing it against the tiny wound.

I did it! I grinned at myself in the mirror, feeling a little thrill of exhilaration.

After disposing, of all the supplies and closing up the computer, I reentered Dawn’s bedroom where Spike was watching expectantly. “How’d it go?”

I flopped on the bed, the adrenaline draining away and leaving me exhausted. “It’s done. Hold me please?”

Spike settled down next to me and spooned me, running his hand over my belly and kissing the back of my head. I settled against him with a sigh. “I’m so scared.”

“Aw, pet, I understand.” His voice was calming in my ear. “Shane is ready. He and his daughter were visiting Buffalo Bill’s grave and are going to Casa Bonita for dinner, but he said to tell you that he’ll be there in the morning.”
“Oh good. Can we do something distracting tonight?”

“Like what, love?”

“Coffee shop?”

“Thought you couldn’t have caffeine.”

“I’ll have caffeine-free tea again. Maybe they’ll have some board games there? I can’t think but mindless distraction would be nice.” My usual methods of distraction were off limits, and even if they were allowed, I’d be too anxious even if Spike did his best.

“We’ll bring Dawn along.” He paused and added, “Without bloody Thomas.”

I couldn’t help but giggle. “Okay.” I liked this plan. I needed my family.

Chapter End Notes

This apparently happens only rarely.
Taking a sip of my now lukewarm mint tea, I studied the board and tried hard not to think about whether my lower back still felt sore and my insides slightly heavy because if they didn’t that could mean. . . Spike had two red kings and one more potential king while I had four black king-less pieces trying to dodge Spike’s kings within the confines of what felt like a very small space. Deciding to take one loss in favor of a small victory, I slid one of my pieces into his territory. “King me!” I said with forced triumph.

Spike ignored my tone in keeping with Mission Distraction. “Fine.” He took one of his earned black pieces and balanced it gingerly atop mine. “You’re still doomed, love.”

“Well, now I have hope! Now, it’s not just you chasing me all around the board in the most frustrating hunt ever,” I noted.

He lifted an eyebrow at me. “Chasing your bits around this board is hardly the most infuriating way you’ve evaded me.”

I knew he was referring to the past but in a playful way this time. Reaching over, I ran my fingertips lightly over the back of his hand. I nodded toward the black piece that was his for the taking. “As far as I’m concerned, you can have all my bits, including that one there.”

He smirked at me before hopping my sacrificial piece and removing it from the board.

Sitting in one of the comfier chairs nearby, Dawn looked up from the thick book she was reading and shook her head at us. “Only you guys would make playing checkers have a double. . . no, a triple meaning.”

I smiled at my sister. “Remember, you promised to play the winner.”

Dawn made a less-than-thrilled face. “Oh, shoot. I have too much studying to do.”

Spike peered over his shoulder at her. “Not too much studying to play a game with Big Sis. I need a
“He has played like a million games,” I added.

Spike rubbed his temples with his fingertips. He picked up his thermos of vampire nourishment and poured more into his empty Starbucks cup, replacing the lid to hide that what he was drinking was far from coffee. “It bloody well feels like it.”

“Hey, you’ve won most of them!” I pointed out.

Twisting a strand of hair around one finger, Dawn yawned. “You haven’t made it to a million yet. I’ve been counting.”

Standing, I tentatively stretched, trying again not to focus on how my insides felt. Denial Buffy came in handy sometimes. “I’m going to get more tea, and then, I’m going to come back and kick your ass,” I informed Spike, leaning over to softly kiss him on the lips.

“Like to see you try,” Spike drawled.

I imitated his seductive tone. “Oh, you just wait!”

“That’s it!” Dawn said in a mock irritated tone, clapping her book shut. “I’ll play next.”

“Yay!” I said, grabbing my phone and empty cup.

“Thank god.” Spike groaned. His evident relief made me smile. He scooted his chair back and tugged a cigarette free from the pack on the table. “Be right back.” The two or three cigarettes he’d smoked since the earlier phone call from the clinic were the only evidence that he was as nervous as me.

The good humor lasted about twenty seconds as I stood in line for more water and a new tea bag. Anxiety’s persistent fingers wrapped around my stomach and heart and squeezed as I watched the guy in front of me hem and haw about how many shots he wanted in his latte so late at night and whether he should have an extra pump of vanilla. My phone vibrated in my hand just in the nick of
time. A quick glance at the screen told me that Xander was calling me.

Without thinking, I answered. “Hey! What’s up?” Still with the false levity.

Despite the dwindling communication between us over the years, Xander picked up on the note of deception in my voice. “What’s wrong, Buff?”

“Nothing. At Starbucks in Denver. How are you? How’s the Norfolk vampire population?” Several months had passed since the problem was identified, and Spike and I had spoken with Giles about our discovery. Giles had handled the situation with Xander and the Slayer coordination beyond what was done the night we’d met Shane.

“Much more under control. They have their own Slayer now. Giles sent Carrie over from England.”

I hadn’t heard of Carrie but was sure I’d met her at some point. “Is she adjusting okay?”

“Yes. She’s older. Was about your age when the whole thing in Sunnydale went down. Has a background in Tae Kwon Do. She’s been teaching the younger girls a thing or two about fighting technique, and they’ve been helping her with the cultural stuff. We have weekly Skype calls.” The dreamy edge in Xander’s tone was a familiar one and told me that he was more than a little smitten with her. I decided not to call him on it, partly because I didn’t want him to call me on my bullshit.

“That’s good. Still not sure why you’re calling me.” Nice deflection, Buffy.

“Can’t an old friend call up another old friend without being tied up and interrogated?” Xander joked.

The Starbucks cashier gave me a tired glance, and I held up my empty cup, mouthing “water” at her and then showing her my teabag wrapper to indicate I wanted another of the caffeine free variety. “Well, it has been a long time since you called. Texting, yes. Calling, no. A girl’s gonna be suspicious.”

“Suspicious of me?”
“Uh huh,” I said a little too brightly.

Xander took a deep breath. “Well, a little birdy told me that you were doing something in Colorado besides visiting the Dawnster.”

SLiding my credit card to the barista, I held the phone by tilting my head and hiking up my shoulder. “Is that little birdy named Willow?”

“That’s the one!”

Pocketing my credit card and picking up my steaming cup of hot water and the tea packet, I readjusted the phone and left the line behind, sneaking a glance at Spike through the glass window. He was sitting with his legs splayed in one of the chairs outside, staring into the night, not smoking like he said he was going to. I felt a pull in my chest and suddenly wanted to check on him. “Easy guess.”

Xander plunged onward, sounding a little awkward. “She said, well, that you are having surgery. That you have to be put under.”

“People go under anesthesia every day,” I reassured him. No need to fill him in on that there might not even be an egg retrieval. “And it’s not for very long. Twenty, thirty minutes tops.”

“Still. It’s a surgery. I won’t pretend to understand all the ins and outs of what you’re doing, but you going under. . . I just wanted to say good luck. And I love you.” The layers of what Xander wasn’t saying were not lost on me. I knew he wanted me to be happy and that if being with Spike made me happy, Xander supported me. He’d said as much when Spike and I officially became a couple, but there would always be an edge that Xander couldn’t quite work around in his mind. I wondered what he really thought about me and Spike starting a family.

“Love you, too.”

Dawn looked up from her new position at the checkers board and mouthed, “Who?” while pointing at the phone.

“Text me or call me or send a carrier pigeon and let me know that you’re okay?” Xander asked.
“Will do. Here, talk with Dawn a minute.” I passed the phone to my sister who regarded me with wide, what-the-hell eyes. “It’s Xander,” I said to her.

Her mouth made a little “o,” and she accepted the phone. “Hey, Xander!”

Leaving the water and tea bag on the table, I wandered out the front door and perched on Spike’s vacant knee. Though he continued to stare out into the dark, his arm slipped around my waist, and while he’d usually pull me closer, he was gentle now just in case. “Penny for your thoughts?” I asked softly, the irony of the question not lost on me.

“The mountains are beautiful,” he murmured.

With the faint glow of the city lights, I could still make out the ridges and giant angles of the mountain range in the distance. “So much different than home where we live in a swamp.”

He chuckled. “True that, pet.”

“That’s not the thought I was going for though.” I turned without twisting and studied his face, which was a little inscrutable.

He sighed. “Feels like we’re at a crossroads of a sort.”

“How so?”

“It’ll go one way or the other tomorrow, I suppose.” He meant we’d either have eggs or we wouldn’t. “And I’m trying to figure out how I’ll feel one way or the other.” Lifting his arm from my waist, he stroked the back of my hair. “Suppose it’ll be okay either way.”

He was keeping his face purposefully neutral, so I caressed his cheek. “It’s sorta like we’re holding our breath tonight.”

“Right.”
“If I forget to tell you, thank you.” I kissed his forehead. The whole journey so far forced me to face things I never thought I’d have to face, and each time, I chose Spike again and again.

His eyes slipped into question marks, which was better than unreadable. “For what, love?”

“For being in it with me. Even when it’s hard.”

“You don’t have to thank me for that.” Being there for me was what he’d always done even when he didn’t realize he was doing it. He deserved to have it marked.

“But I do. So thank you.” I stood and took his hand in mine. “C’mon. Watch me kick my sister’s butt at checkers.” This time my smile was genuine.

Chapter End Notes

When this happened to me, my husband took me to the coffee shop, and I did indeed have tea and we played a million rounds of checkers in the coffee shop and late into the night in our hotel room. Of course, he wasn't nearly as funny about it as Spike and Dawn were. And we didn't talk about it other than to say we were scared. This was a hard time because it was our last shot.

And also, there's a little surprise for Carrie Ann in here.
The morning of what felt like impending doom

Similar to the day of our initial evaluation, Amy was the nurse who greeted us in the underground parking lot. She held the door open for us, letting us inside. “Good morning. Come on in. You’re the first ones here again. Making it a habit?”

I smiled ruefully. “Hopefully not.”

Amy returned my smile and gently touched my arm. I still couldn’t believe she was a witch; her gentle nature reminded me a bit of Tara. “Come on this way. Let’s get your ultrasound done, okay?”

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I nodded. “Okay.” I glanced back at Spike, and though he still looked uncomfortable to be in the clinic, he scooped up my hand in his, and I shivered, afraid to say anything because I wasn’t sure the words could come out clearly past the emotion.

Together, Spike and I hurried after Amy who strode swiftly down a hall or two and into the main area of the clinic. She made sure we were behind her and motioned to us even as she continued to walk. “This way.”

When we arrived at the door to one of the exam rooms, I hesitated. Crossing that threshold meant that there was no turning back. Like Schrodinger’s cat, if I stayed outside, my eggs were equally likely to be there and not there. Spike squeezed my hand.

Amy caught my wavering. “He can come in with you.”

The compassion in her eyes made the air push past my fear. “I’m scared.”

She touched my arm, which grounded me for a moment. “It’s understandable. The sooner we look though, the sooner we’ll know what to do next.” At least, she wasn’t lying to me.

“C’mon, love.” Spike nudged me forward. “I’m coming with you.”
I entered the room and began trembling all over. Trying hard to hide it, I stood still and held my arms around my ribcage.

Amy turned on the ultrasound machine and swept the privacy curtain across, effectively dividing the room. “You can keep your dress on. Just take off your underwear, cover with the sheet, and I’ll be back in a minute.”

I didn’t reply but kicked off my sandals and shed my panties, which I mutely handed to Spike. So many ultrasounds. I was no longer intimidated by the giant sensor they pushed up into my vagina for ovary checks, and I’d learned that wearing a flowy dress meant that I didn’t have to fully strip down. It made me feel less naked.

Spike sat in the chair in the corner. I could tell he was doing his best not to fidget or pace. He was staying calm for me. He folded my panties and set them on the arm of his seat.

Amy returned in good time as promised, and I leaned back and spread my legs, my knees angling up and the paper crinkling underneath my body. She squirted some gel on the end of the sensor. “It’s going to be a little bit cold and may hurt a bit.” Nothing I hadn’t heard before. She rubbed my forearm, her touch warm. “Breathe, honey.”

I inhaled deeply at her command and forced myself to focus on the in and out of the air in my lungs as the wand entered me. Too afraid to look at the TV that hung on the wall above, I studied Spike who was watching the screen intently as the unclear ultrasound images appeared.

He felt my stare and gave me an understanding smile. Then, he inclined his face up, encouraging me to watch.

Amy expertly maneuvered the sensor inside me, and I felt the familiar pull as she searched for my first ovary. I couldn’t help it then and my gaze found the screen. As soon as I saw the large yellowish circles with dark outlines, hope zinged through my heart. “They’re still there,” I said, half in awe and half in relief.

“They are. Let me count them.” Amy sounded as relieved as I felt. She then counted eight follicles on my left ovary and three on my right. “Does that sound about right?”

“So, I didn’t ovulate?”
Amy smiled. “You didn’t ovulate.” She removed the wand, and I sat up with care. “Get ready. We have to get you up to the surgery center right away.”

“Oh my god!” I grinned at Spike who leapt to his feet and kissed me gently on the mouth while stuffing my panties in my hand. I giggled a little at that, giddy with excitement.

We hurried across the foyer and just past the reception desk. Amy left us to assist other clients who had to be there early for other reasons. Spike pressed the up button for the elevator. Once inside the car on the way up to the second floor where surgery was located, I wrapped my arms around my vampire’s waist and laid my head on his chest, relishing the embrace and the moment of privacy.

“I love you, pet.” His voice was hoarse with emotion.

I ran my fingertips in small circles at the small of his back and looked up at him. “I’m going to be fine.”

“Don’t rightly know what I’ll do if I lose you again.” His corneas were damp with unshed tears. As the elevator doors parted, he closed his eyes.

I tugged him forward a little. “Hey. Look at me.” He reluctantly opened his eyes but gazed to the side, his eyes brimming. “I’m going to be just fine. Promise. Just going under for thirty minutes at most. I’m not leaving you.”

“You can’t promise that.”

I maneuvered my position so that he had to meet my eyes. “Oh, but I am. And you better be right there when I wake up.”

A throat cleared behind us, and Spike and I parted, but I snaked my hand down his arm to find his hand. Now was my turn to reassure him.

A young man was holding open the elevator doors with one hand and offering a clipboard with the other. “Sorry to interrupt, but before you go into surgery, there are a few more legal documents for you to sign.”
“The bloody hell? Now?” Spike sniffed and growled with a little too much annoyance. We’d already signed so many papers that I forgot what most of them said. I know some of them had to do with what we’d do with any embryos should we separate or one of us died; some were consents and health warnings about treatments, no guarantees, and side effects; and some involved Shane.

The young man paled and adjusted his glasses in a way that made me think of Giles. The elevator doors started to slide closed again, but he quickly whacked his hand back into place. “I’m sorry. It’s just that we’ve never had a vampire who is part of the IVF process here, and our legal team had to draft a few extra documents to cover – ”

I clasped Spike’s hand, and his next question was decidedly softer. “To cover your ass?”

“Let’s just fill it out,” I redirected, stepping out of the elevator and taking the clipboard from the man’s shaky hand.

“T-thanks, ma’am.”

I filled out the forms while Spike read them over my shoulder and borrowed the pen to initial or sign as needed. He occasionally snorted and shook his head at the lawyers’ attempts to account for his undead, immortal status. Still, at least he was signing. As we neared the end of the stack, a nurse wearing scrubs and a cap popped out of the over-sized door nearby.

“Buffy Summers?” she asked.

I sat up a little straighter. “That’s me.”

“I hear we’re in a hurry, so let’s get you started.” She glanced at Spike. “You can come with her for a minute. Then, you’ll need to step out. You’re using a sperm donor, who is here. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” I said.

She addressed Spike. “Then, you’ll need to go make sure he’s checked in and settled.” I briefly wondered if she was trying to keep Spike occupied while I was in surgery.
Spike nodded solemnly. “Got it.”

The young man with the glasses was still hovering nearby, and I passed off the papers. “I think we got all of them.”

“Perfect,” he said with a little bow. “Good luck.”

“Thank you.”

Once past the big door, things happened so quickly that I barely had a chance to understand what was happening. I had to change into a hospital gown but could wear socks to keep my feet warm. They then hooked up an IV and gave me a Valium. The nurse stayed right with me, making sure I was comfortable. An anesthesiologist came by and shook my hand, introducing himself and checking some things. Then, the doctor stopped briefly in to say hello. I think they checked my blood pressure somewhere in there. The reproductive endocrinologists traded off, and Dr. Surrey’s day to do egg retrievals was not Monday. The young female doctor smiled, told me her name was Dr. Kondapalli, and said she’d be ferreting out my eggs. Spike barely had time to kiss me on the forehead before I was being wheeled down the hall and into the surgery room. I was awake long enough to have a brief conversation with the nurses before I remembered nothing else.

When I woke up, I opened my eyes and realized that I was in a different place with curtains drawn almost all around me. There was warm air blowing from a tube under the blanket covering my body. The nurse from earlier appeared seemingly out of nowhere through the opening in the drapes, and she smiled.

“How are you doing?” She checked some monitors. “Are you warm enough?”

“I’m okay,” I said, focusing on the temperature. “Cozy.”

“You did good,” the nurse assured.

“Did... was she able to get any eggs?” I was too groggy to feel nervous.

“Yes. Dr. Kondapalli retrieved twelve eggs.”
“Twelve. W-wow.”

The nurse patted my leg. “Want something to drink? Sprite, water, ginger ale? And we have a variety of crackers and cookies.”

I didn’t want anything really. My brain still felt groggy. “Ginger ale, please.”

“Be right back.” She returned shortly and set up a little snack station near my head. “I’m going to get your husband. Be right back.”

“He’s not – ” I was too tired to find the words to explain, and she was gone again. Then, it hit me. They got twelve eggs. We went from maybe having none to having twelve. One more than expected. I suddenly wanted... no, needed to see Spike. Unidentifiable emotions swept over me, and before I knew what was happening, I was sobbing, and I couldn’t stop.

Spike was behind the nurse, but he pushed past her when he heard me. I propped up slightly to see his face, the blue flash of his eyes, the curve of his cheekbones. His cooler thumbs swept away my tears, and I leaned into his touch.

“She wasn’t like that when I left her,” the nurse explained. “Let me get you some tissues.” She hurried away.

“Oh, Spike. We got twelve eggs.” I slumped back down onto the pillow, and he swept the hair off my forehead.

He sat lightly on the edge of the bed and smiled. “And the little swimmers are a go.”

“Thank Shane for me.”

“Already did. You did good, love.”

I tucked my hand under his where it rested on the blanket. “We did good.”
A lot of what happened in this chapter happened with us. We were the first people at the clinic; Amy greeted us and let us in. I didn't say much other than I was scared. Things were a blur of speed from the ultrasound to the operation. They were really rushing me in. When I woke up, it was just like this. I even sobbed when she went to get my husband, and I remember very clearly that the nurse said exactly those words on her return. We did get one more egg than expected, and Dr. K. did my retrieval.

I included the parts about the additional legal paperwork for a vampire because well, they needed to draft some stuff! lol There were so many papers to sign...so many. I'm trying to include as many parts of the process as possible so you can get a feel for what it's like. We didn't have any additional papers the day of retrieval, but we did have a young, glasses-less lab guy come find us (before our regroup with Dr. Surrey) to sign some extra papers about the experimental procedure we did (calcium ionophore); we also did PICS and IMSI instead of the usual ICSI (where they choose a sperm under a microscope based on how it looks for fertilization).
Waiting had never been my strongest suit, and the wait between the phone call with our fertilization report and day six felt like forever. Out of the twelve eggs, nine had been mature or capable of being fertilized using Shane’s sperm and a technique called ICSI, and of the nine, six fertilized in the correct way and were left alone to grow in the lab culture, some mix of chemicals that I couldn’t begin to understand. The goal was to grow them to the blastocyst stage and then biopsy the part of the embryo that would become the placenta to check to make sure all the chromosome pairs were present and accounted for. Though the clinic didn’t require someone of my age to do genetic testing, Spike and I agreed to do it because he didn’t want me to go through a miscarriage or for us to have to make a difficult decision that we didn’t want to make.

“Buffy! Focus!”

I startled so hard that I almost knocked an empty coffee mug onto the coffee shop floor. “Don’t have to shout,” I muttered, hooking a few fingers through the almost slayed cup’s handle and his equally dirty cousin at the same table.

“You’ve been all off this morning,” Roger complained. Roger always complained about everything. “Don’t know why you bothered to come into work.”

Because I needed the distraction, you asshole. I wasn’t usually so irritated with him, but today was an exception. “Mary said I could pick up a couple of shifts even though I’m still on vacation.”

The only one available the morning I really needed it was with the most annoying of co-workers: Roger. Roger who forgot to buy milk, who delegated all his work to whatever poor sap happened to be stuck on a shift with him, who couldn’t ever break even on the register, who chatted up the female customers to “keep the business happy” instead of making drinks even when the line was almost out the door. That Roger.

“Well, I need you to focus because we gotta keep the busin – ”

Picking up the napkins and empty sugar packets and tossing them in the trash, I completed the sentence for him, “Gotta keep the business happy. I know.” I knew plenty of customers who avoided the shop when he was around. They told Crystal and me and more than once. Mary knew he was a problem, but there wasn’t much she could do unless he really messed up.
“Buffy, you got the floor? I’m going to go unbox the supplies.” He meant that he was going in the back to watch You Tube videos on his phone and troll Plentyoffish for unsuspecting victims. Typical Roger. Once he invited me to be part of a threesome. I didn’t tell Spike about that one; it wouldn’t have ended well for Roger.

Roger disappeared before I could even reply because five customers walked through the door with that burning need for caffeine in their eyes. It was hot and sticky outside, so I’m sure they’d all want something cold.

“Good morning.” I greeted them before I rounded the counter, dumped the dirty cups in the sink, and washed my hands. “How can I help you?”

After a brief assessment, I decided they were tourists who had hangovers, and that was why the hunt for caffeine was so desperate. They’d obviously never been to CC’s before because they all stared at the menu over my head with almost slack-jawed expressions. I couldn’t help but be a little amused and made a suggestion to the first young man. “Caffeine’s usually not the best strategy for a hangover.”

The young man ran a hand through his curly light brown hair and then rubbed his unshaven jaw. “Oh. Well, I, hmm.” He glanced at me and then back at the menu and then back at me. “What do you suggest?”

“Well, I’d suggest drink a glass of water, a simple cup of coffee, then a glass of water. Hang out here and have a banana or some fruit or go for a walk and then come back and repeat the first thing.”

His face betrayed his confusion. “Water, coffee, water. Walk. Then, water, coffee, water?”

I laughed. “Something like that. Maybe some food that’s not typical New Orleans fare in there.”

The other male in the group who was hovering at the end of the line said, “She’s right, Mac. We’ll all do that.”

“Hey!” one girl protested, flicking one of her long braids over her shoulder. She didn’t look as disheveled as the rest of the group; she’d even bothered to comb her hair. “I was the D.D., so I can have whatever I want, and I need some caffeine.”
Another young woman teased, “Um, how were you the designated driver when we didn’t drive anywhere? We’ve been in the Quarter the whole night.”

The girl with braids blushed. “Oh, yeah.”

My phone took that opportunity to ring. Retrieving it from the pocket of my apron, I saw that the area code was 303. That was Denver. I smiled at the group. “S’cuse me. I’m really sorry.” Then, I called loudly, “Roger! I need to go on break. Female emergency!” This was sure to bring Roger running. He was horrified at any female bodily function. I couldn’t even tell him I needed to go pee without him freaking out.

The young women in the group snickered, and I headed for the women’s restroom, answering the phone as I ran. “Hello?”

“Buffy Summers?” The woman on the other end of the line sounded youthful and kind.

Despite her kindness, my heart was thundering in my chest and ears. “This is she.”

“This is Rachel from the lab in Colorado.” She totally skipped the other pleasantries, which I appreciated. “We checked your embryos today, and they’re all growing nicely. All six have made it to the blastocyst stage.”

Holy crap! From what I had been reading online, that was pretty rare. Spike and I had been expecting maybe three blasts. “Really?”

“Do you know what that means?”

Feeling like I could barely breathe, I replied, “I think so.” I knew exactly what she meant, but I wanted her to elaborate. What if she told me something I didn’t know?

“It means that all six made it to the stage where we can biopsy them for CCS testing.” Her tone was lilting and happy.
“Oh my god.” I sank onto the toilet seat, which was very clean. (I kept the bathrooms spotless; Roger always pawned that task off on me.)

“That’s good news.” She didn’t say congratulations. Like with Amy, I appreciated her tempered approach. There were no promises. “Do you want to know the days and grades?”

“I’d love to know.” I bit my lip. “Mind if I put you on speaker so I can take notes in my phone?”

“Sure. Just tell me when you’re ready,” she said, amusement creeping into her tone.

I pushed all the appropriate buttons. “Ready.”

I typed as she spoke. “You and William have two that became blastocysts on day five. The grades were a 5AA and a 2/3, and the other four were biopsied on day six. The grades are 5AA, 5BB, 5BB, and a 2/3. Do you know what the grades mean?”

As my fingers caught up, I said, “Sort of.”

She continued with the ease of someone who has explained this many times, “The fives at the beginning mean that the blastocyst is hatching out of the zona or shell, and the first letter is the grade of the inner cell mass or what will become the fetus. The second letter is the grade of what will become the placenta. An A means that each of those parts are well formed and distinct with many cells. A B means that there are fewer cells and those cells are loosely grouped. The 2/3’s are blasts but not developed enough to be given a grade; however, they are still capable of being biopsied.”

“Oh.” My happiness deflated a little.

“Keep in mind that grades don’t always correspond to whether they pass CCS testing.”

I knew this also from reading online, but it was another thing altogether to hear it being said by a professional. “Got it.”

“We’ll be calling you in a few weeks with the results of the genetic testing. Do you have any other questions?”
“No. Thank you so much. I can’t believe it!”

“It’s so nice to deliver good news.” I wondered how many times she’d had to deliver bad news like I suspected Dr. Surrey had. “I hope you have a wonderful day.”

“You, too.” I was hit by a wave of elation, and trembling, I stood and dialed Spike.

He answered the phone. To my surprise, he didn’t sound the least bit sleepy. “Hey, pet.”

“Hey! The clinic called.”

“And?”

“All six of our embryos made it to blast!” I grinned even though he couldn’t see me.

“That’s –”

“Crazy unbelievable, right?”

“Well, we always seem to beat the odds, eh, love?”

“We do!” I realized that I heard something – maybe something outdoorsy – in the background. “Hey, where are you? I thought you’d be in bed. Asleep. ‘Cause you know, vampire and during the day?”

The coffee shop bell rang as the door opened, and I realized that I heard the same bell in my ear. “You’re here? In the middle of the morning? Are you crazy?”

“Crazy unbelievable news deserves a crazy unbelievable entrance.”
I threw open the door and ran around the wall dividing the bathroom from the entry way. Spike threw off a heavy blanket, and I barreled into him, inhaling his familiar scent mingled with the faintest tinge of burned flesh, which always made me a little anxious. “You’re here!”

He buried his face in my hair. “Where else would I be, love? It wouldn’t be very good of me if I let you be by yourself when you got the news, now would it?”

I lightly smacked his arm. “Dummy, you could have burned up.”

“Well, I didn’t.” He looped his arm over my shoulders. “Now. Where’s the hot chocolate and my favorite dessert?”

“Get to work, Buffy!” Roger shouted in annoyance.

The group I’d been helping before the call tittered again. The peanut gallery was now settling around tables: the girls with napkins and plastic utensils and the guys passing back and forth sections of the Times-Picayune.

I shrugged out of Spike’s hold and ran my fingertips down his arm to his hand, rolling my eyes about Roger. “Coming!”

Spike grinned wolfishly at me.

As I tied on my apron and passed by Roger, who was juggling drinks and waters, he hissed, “Don’t think I won’t be telling Mary about this.”

Roger’s threat didn’t bother me in the least because Mary had heard it all from him, and she knew Spike and I were doing fertility treatments. Instead, I let my happiness at the small victory sing through my soul and set to work making Spike and I some celebratory hot chocolate. Had to enjoy that caffeine while I could.

Chapter End Notes

Good news! My friend that I mentioned earlier...she had testing done and she’s carrying a healthy baby! So thank you for the prayers, positive vibes, and support you sent her
way! She just found out after more testing...
“Things are going well, huh?” I whispered at Willow as I curled up in Spike’s recliner with a big mug of coffee. Spike was sleeping in the next room. (We both had a Saturday off, which was a luxury.)

Willow emitted a happy sigh and had the goofiest look on her face – a look I always associated with Willow-in-love. Last time I saw it was with Tara and before that with Oz. My friend was beyond due in the love department. “So well.”

“I’m happy for you! How is the . . . you know?” I widened my eyes for emphasis. Willow had pulled the trigger sans Barry White a few weeks ago, but I hadn’t asked her about it in a while.

Her response was immediate. “It’s good.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Just good?”

Willow seemed suddenly shy but admitted, “More than good. I thought that . . . well, I thought I couldn’t go back . . . to boys, but well, it’s Oz. And well, I think maybe only with Oz.”

I grinned. “I get that.”

“I’m also really loving Falls Church.”

“I’m assuming it’s a city and not a church.” Willow had never been particularly religious. “Where Oz lives? In Virginia?” I didn’t know too much about Virginia, having only been to Norfolk. “And you’re close to Xander.”

Willow was glowing as she gushed. “Yeah. It’s close enough to Richmond that I can go into the city for some sisterly bonding. They have a thriving Wiccan community and some really powerful witches. I went the other weekend; they were welcoming and super excited to learn about the English coven and what I learned there. Plus, Richmond itself has so much history. So much supernatural history. And Falls Church is close enough to the open country that Oz can run wild if he
feels the wolfie urge.” Oz could still control himself during the full moon if he wanted. “And seeing Xander is just like a little bonus. I didn’t realize how much I missed him, and he’s totally crushing on Carrie. He needs to make a move already.”

A wave of nostalgia, homesickness, and jealousy rolled over me. “Wow. Sounds pretty perfect.”

I couldn’t help but smile at my friend as she leaned dreamily into her palm. “Yeah.”

Oz’s face suddenly appeared over Willow’s shoulder from where she sat at the kitchen bar. His face was seemingly timeless with only an extra wrinkle or two around the eyes, presumably from smiling a lot. Today, his hair was black and spiky with electric blue tips. “Hey, Buffy.”

“Hey.” I waved at him. “What’s up?”

“ Heard my name. You guys talking about me?”

I shrugged. “Well, yeah.”

“In a good, cool vibe kinda way?”

Willow kissed his cheek and then gave his face a little playful shove. “Of course! Now, go away. It’s girl time.”

Oz moved right back into place and nuzzled her temple. “I’m headed to the grocery store. Need anything?”

She smiled over at him. “Some hummus and those almond crackers.”

“Got it.” He gave her a very Oz smile, which she returned with a schmoopy one of her own.

As he walked away, Willow perked up and turned toward him. “Oh! And ice cream!”
I could barely see Oz in the distance, but he said, “Text me the flavor.”

“Thanks! I will.” Willow’s mouth pushed to one side, and I could tell she was contemplating flavor choices. “Mint chocolate chip. Edy’s.”

“Mint chocolate chip. Edy’s,” he turned back and repeated. “Love you.”

Willow’s neck turned red, and she covered the blotchiness with her free hand. “Love you, too,” she called with confidence despite all signs pointing to embarrassment.

Now both my eyebrows were up. “Ohhhh. The L-word.”

My friend rolled her eyes at me as Oz exited the room. “Okay, okay. Let’s change the subject back to you. You got the genetic results back yesterday.”

“Yes.” The results had come in at nine days rather than the 21 that Rachel had quoted me. I’d used my phone calls with Willow as a nice distraction but hadn’t really explained to anyone how excruciating each of those nine days was. Some moments I felt okay, but other moments, I felt like my heart was swelling inside my chest, and my stomach would drop in panic. Then, when I did get the phone call from the doctor, I’d called Spike in on the phone, so he could hear, too. “We have two embryos with all the little chromosomes in place.”

“Only two of the six?”

“Yes.” I sighed. Both were the higher-grade embryos: the day five and six 5AA’s despite the prediction that they might not be.

The line of concern appeared between Willow’s green eyes. “And that’s good, right?”

“I was hoping for more. It’s not that I want more than one kiddo necessarily. I just wanted more chances in case something went wrong.” Saying this out loud made my breath catch in my throat for a moment.

“What did the doctor say?”
“He was hopeful. He has a lot of hope for us. He’s all with the hope.” I had been, too, on the phone with the doctor, but now, I was anxious again.

“His hope didn’t exactly bring you hope.”

“Right, and he’d predicted we’d have more normal embryos given my age and Shane’s age.”

Willow’s eyes were full of sympathy, and I suddenly wished that they weren’t. “Did the doctor say why you didn’t get more?”

“Not really.”

“Think it has to do with. . .” Willow trailed off and then, asked, “Think it has anything to do with the resurrection? I mean, after what Tara found with the cell stuff?”

I shook my head. I didn’t need Willow feeling guilty for something that probably wasn’t a factor. She’d already beat herself up too much about what happened so long ago, and these days, I was grateful to be alive. “No,” I said firmly. “Honestly, Wil, I think IVF’s a lot about luck of the draw. I feel good knowing that we went to a really good place, and we have two little frost babies.”

Willow hesitated, but she went a different direction than self-punishment. “How does Spike feel about it?”

“He’s more excited than me, I think.”

“Really?” Willow took a sip of her own coffee, which reminded me to take one as well.

The hazelnut-flavored liquid was still hot on my tongue. “Yeah. I’m not sure why. I mean, I should be ecstatic, right?”

“Right?”
Running my finger over the rim of my mug to wipe off a drop of coffee, I put my thoughts together. “I think I’m just exhausted.”

Willow was quiet for a moment as she studied my face across the airwaves. “It has been quite a journey for you.”

I nodded. “For me and Spike.”

“For you and Spike. It makes sense that you’re exhausted.” Willow drank from her cup again. “You should give yourself a break.”

“This whole thing has been a roller coaster, and we did take a break. Spike took me to dinner, and we went slaying. There were beignets.” The memory of the mountains of sugar made me nostalgic. What made me even more nostalgic was holding Spike’s hand as we walked through the Quarter after a good slay. He’d even indulged my wish to have fortune told by one of the group of soothsayers and psychics that camped around the Cathedral at night. They lured in tourists for readings and for the first time, me. The lady who ran her rough fingers over my palm and squinted at the lines in my hand wasn’t very good; she just told me that my life would be dramatically changing. Could she have vaged it up anymore?

“And when was that? Months ago?” The image of Willow jerked and blurred as she got up from her seat and headed into her kitchen.

“I guess you’re right.” I leaned back a little in the recliner, propping the warm mug on my stomach.

Willow rummaged around in the pantry as she talked. I heard a Tupperware lid unseal. “What about Slayer self-care? Isn’t that in the handbook somewhere?”

“Which one? The old one or the one we wrote with Giles?” There was no Slayer handbook. It’d all been a big running joke until Giles and the rest of us who were in Sunnydale (Xander, Willow, Dawn, Faith, Robin, and I) wrote one after the collapse of Sunnydale. There were whole sections on how to identify the individual, personalized thing that kept each Slayer going. (For me, it was anger and passion; for Kendra, it was her Zen.) There were chapters on using proper slaying technique, researching, and accessing the Slayer senses by Giles with a few additions by me. There was a section on forging relationships as a protective factor with warnings about the forces of evil being insidious and prone to interfering with group dynamics. Faith may have snuck in and mostly written the initial draft on self-care. Willow later modified the chapter and added more on actual self-care beyond just “blowing off steam” after a good slay through partying and sex.
“The one that actually exists.” Willow put a large chocolate chip cookie between her lips, clicked the lid back in place, and shut the cabinet with a clunk.

“You mostly wrote that chapter.” I stuck my bottom lip out at her. “Did you make those? I want one!”

“Wish I could give you one.” She poked the cookie at the screen. “And I did, and it’s a very important chapter!”

“If only I had a copy, I’d read the whole thing,” I joked, turning on my side on the chair’s gentle, cushiony incline and setting my coffee on the lampstand.

“I can email you one.” The screen shifted again as she found her way to her sofa and settled down, all while juggling her phone, cookie, and coffee.

I frowned. “I wasn’t serious.”

Willow’s resolve face was a force to be reckoned with all on its own. “I was. I am.”

“Fine.” I chewed the inside of my cheek. “Spike and I have plenty of vacation time saved, and we do have a week before we have to start prepping for the transfer.”

Willow wasn’t caving; her jaw was still set. “Good. Transfer?”

“That’s what they call putting the embryo back into my,” I circled my finger at my abdomen even though Willow couldn’t see it, “uterus. It’s called a frozen embryo transfer. F.E.T. Little embryo reunited with me. Then, he or she just has to snuggle in.”

She took a bite of cookie, chewed and swallowed, and then said, “He or she will definitely want to snuggle in. You and Spike will make good parents.” Her unequivocal acceptance of Spike still felt new despite the years that had passed.
I smiled, letting myself feel a little bit of happiness. It was hard to. “I hope so.”

“Now, back to vacations.” Willow sure was persistent.

I sighed. “A weekend away does sound nice, but we don’t have the money with all the travelling we’ve already been doing and the medical bills.”

“Don’t worry about that. Remember, I work from home, making an excellent salary for an IT company. I don’t spend my money on anything really. Name the place, and it’s done.”

Chapter End Notes

Just a couple of notes:
Swifthorse’s favorite ice cream (brand and flavor) is the one Willow requests here. They do not have it in Texas...I don't think.
She also gave me the place where Willow and Oz are settling...hope I did it justice in the story so far.
Most clinics do FET’s now. They noticed that success rates were higher in doing a frozen transfer vs. a fresh one because the woman's body has a chance to recover from surgery and all the hormones. Some women do better with fresh transfer though. Also, it is true that grade of the embryo does not mean it will be normal or abnormal in terms of chromosomal testing. Lots of women have lower grade embryos that have all their chromosomes and make viable babies. And there is also some debate about the accuracy of genetic testing even on day five embryos...unsure about how accurate that is or what the future of the field will bring. Even if an embryo is CCS tested as normal, the pregnancy does not always take...for so many reasons.
A night at the resort in Cancun

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Every muscle in my body was relaxed. I felt like I’d never been so relaxed. The sunset massage on the beach had almost put me to sleep, and I’d hovered in that cozy place between wake and sleep as strong hands pushed and pulled and worked the tension out of muscles I didn’t even know were tense. The sound of the waves seemed to cradle my brain and wash away any nervous or worried thoughts that hovered at the edges of my mind. The sky had been a painter’s palette of pinks, scarlets, oranges, yellows, and purples when I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, the sky was dark, and the stars and full moon shone above, lighting my way through the sand and back to the resort. I barely remembered thanking my masseuse and giving her a generous tip before I padded my way through nature’s fine-grained, feather soft floor to the concrete path back to the now empty pools and outdoor bars.

Spike and I had arrived at the all-inclusive resort in Cancun the previous night, had a late dinner at the steak restaurant, and slept curled up together on the large king-sized bed in our luxurious open room. I couldn’t remember the last time we’d both slept so well. Spike had stayed in bed while I explored the resort and found breakfast. The crepes with Nutella and berries melted in my mouth, and the cappuccino provided much-needed caffeine. After sunbathing and sipping on cold drinks, I’d gone back to the room to find Spike awake. We’d made love slow and gentle, called in for a room service lunch, and napped before I headed out for my sunset massage. Spike had gone into the city to locate the butcher’s shop that he knew was friendly to vampires and offered a variety of types of animal blood.

The distant sound of a live band drew me closer to the main resort building where I hoped Maria waited with the supplies I’d requested earlier that afternoon before I went out to sunbathe by the ocean. My sandals dangling from one hand and my beach towel slung over my arm, I made my way past lingering couples on the tree-canopied, stone path; through an open-air restaurant filled with hungry but unhurried patrons – the scent of seafood tempting my taste buds; and around the water fountain that sprayed elegant arcs of blue-lit water from the beaks of three long-necked marble swans.

The band was playing lively Michael Jackson cover songs in the courtyard outside the main building where the resort workers had set up round tables and folding chairs, and couples were dancing, laughing, chatting, and drinking colorful cocktails that they procured from serving trays that suit-clad waiters were balancing with ease. I smiled. Maybe I could talk Spike into dancing later tonight or tomorrow evening. The beat of the music was coaxing my muscles back to life, and I smiled to myself, doing a little shimmy and twirl or two as I aimed the staircase. A young man smiled at me as I danced onto the stairs, and I smiled back before lightly jogging up the steps and into the open lobby.

Maria was on the phone at one of the side desks like she promised, and she gave me a little wave as I
approached. She smiled conspiratorially at me as she hung up the phone. “Hello, Buffy. I have all the things that you requested.”

“Wow. Thank you!” I beamed.

Maria held up a finger. “Give me a moment.” Then, she disappeared through the ornately-carved door behind her, reappearing quickly as promised, pushing a small wooden cart around the desk. She pointed to each item as she listed them off and then asked, “Is that everything you wanted?”

“It’s perfect. Gracias.” I felt a little shiver of excitement.

“Be careful with the candles?” Her words came out half like a warning and half like a question.

I was serious. “I will be.”

“Would you like help?” she asked, gesturing at the cart.

I shook my head. “No, but thank you.” What if Spike was already back at the room?

The wheels rolled noisily over the stones on the way back to the suite. The supplies all stayed neatly packed together. Sliding the key card in the slot, I swung open the door. No Spike tinglies. Perfect. Holding the door open with my backside, I pulled the cart inside. Then, I set to work.

An hour later, I flipped off the lights in our suite and surveyed my handiwork. I smiled. Slipping into a clean swimsuit, I climbed the twisting staircase to our rooftop patio, being mindful of Maria’s warning not to knock over any of the candles or slip on the strewn scarlet-colored rose petals. So, I wasn’t always this romantic, but Spike deserved more than a gesture.

My phone was on the marble table where I’d left it in my decorating frenzy, and I saw that he’d texted thirty minutes ago to say he was on his way back.

The moon was full and bright above, and the citronella candles for outside were keeping the pesky mosquitos away. As I climbed the wooden steps to our small private swimming pool, I tugged my hair into a loose bun before sinking into the warm inviting water, letting the liquid envelop my
I slid to the edge of the pool and peered out over the resort before turning away from the people partying below and closing my eyes.

I wasn’t sure how much time passed before I felt Spike’s presence. He was silent on the stairs, but when he appeared, I opened my eyes. He wasn’t smiling but gazing at me with that mix of hunger and love that made me simultaneously long for his touch but want to stare at him forever. With few movements, he freed himself from clothing and joined me in the water, gliding toward me like a pale crocodile through the water. He pushed me back against the tiles of the side of the pool but then didn’t touch me except to kiss me long and tender in a recapitulation of our afternoon. When he broke away finally, I moaned in protest.

“Hello, love.”

I reluctantly opened my eyes to view the dark blue of his irises in the moon- and candlelight. “Do you like?”

He brought a wet hand out of the water and undid my hair so that the strands fell in thick locks around my shoulders, the ends dipping into the water. “Love,” he said in such a way that I didn’t know what the love referred to. He traced damp fingertips over my cheek and ran his thumb over my bottom lip.

I nipped at him and then nudged his hand away. “Guess you’re not the only one with a romantic side.”

“Never had anyone do this sort of thing for me before,” he admitted, bobbing into my space again and nuzzling my shoulder. “Not rose petals and candles, not in our own pool with all the oblivious humans down below.”

I wrapped my arms around his midsection and pulled him flush against me, so I could feel how much he. . . “Never?”

He shook his head and trailed kisses up my neck. I shivered in his arms and squirmed, letting out a breath of desire. Then, without warning, he turned me in his arms and brought us gently up against the edge of the pool, away from the side with the partygoers and toward the vast ocean. The waves rolled in with a gentle rhythm, and the sand glowed, borrowing light from the moon and stars above.

Spike peered over my shoulder and whispered, “I love being here with you. Just you and me. Feels
like the world is ours. Only ours.”

I snuggled back against him, feeling the strength of his limbs in the water as he buoyed me up so that I didn’t have to kick or hold onto the side. “I love you.”

Then, we made love again with nature as our only witness, the water sloshing steadily around us – an echo to the ocean below – as we got lost in one other.

When we were both sated, Spike positioned himself in one of the tiled seats that were fashioned in the side of the pool, and I curled up in his lap with my head on his shoulder. He stroked my back as we relaxed in the heated water.

He spoke first. “I know we said we wouldn’t talk about the baby situation, but it has been on my mind even in paradise, pet.”

“Me, too,” I admitted. “There are moments that I don’t think about it at all and moments that I feel that nervous feeling from right before retrieval all over again.”

“What are you nervous about?” His voice was low and rumbly in my ear.

I held him tighter. “It not working.” I paused for a moment and then said with some irony, “It working.”

He chuckled. “I’m nervous about whether I’ll know what to do with an infant. Leah, I get. She’s old enough to talk, to tell me what she wants and when. Understands English.”

“Infants have their own way of letting you know what they need,” I said. “At least, I think they do. . . . I hope they do.”

“I don’t buy all that rubbish about different cries meaning different things,” he scoffed. I’d caught him watching some ancient video about baby cries on YouTube from some long-ago episode of Oprah – the women bouncing babies on their laps and nodding sagely about various baby cries, but I decided not to tease him about it now.
Instead, I lifted my head and made a face at him. “If anyone would be able to tell a difference, it’d be you.”

He looked uncertain. “Dunno ‘bout that, pet.”

“Change in heart rate and breathing patterns, body chemistry, minute detection of bodily fluids. You’re going to be better at this than me. Vampire senses for the win!”

He jutted his chin out, half-proudly, the candlelight casting shadows and highlighting his cheekbones. “Guess you’re probably right at that.”

“I have a feeling there’s no instruction manual though. No matter how many parenting books have been published.” I floated my palm on the top of the water.

“Right.”

“I’m worried about juggling everything. You know: work, slayage, baby, us.” I punctuated each by pushing a floating finger under the liquid surface. I lifted my eyebrows. “Not in that order, of course.”

Spike played with my fingers. “You’ll do fine with prioritizing. No doubts here.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, for one, you delegate now. Case in point: you texted Xander in Norfolk. Asked for the bitty Slayers to come help out, so we could focus on Shane.”

I hadn’t thought of that but was pleased that he’d noticed. “Good point.”

I twined my fingers with his and repositioned my head on his shoulder. We were silent for a few minutes before Spike spoke again.

“’M worried about certain people finding out.” He paused and added, “If you get pregnant.”
“What do you mean?” I was asking about the first part and not the second. My mind couldn’t go there right now, but I could appreciate Spike’s caution. There were moments I couldn’t even let myself think it might work and moments when I had more hope. It was like walking on a tightrope and not knowing which way the wind might blow.

“I mean, all the baddies and ne’er-do-wells who might come after the child of the Slayer and a vampire. Whether it’s to get to you or to me.” He was as serious as Leah was about her horses. He’d known about Nikki’s son, so he knew other nefarious types would know about our child. If we had one.

“The vampire,” I corrected, trying to shift him away from his solemnity.

He didn’t smile. “I’m not joking, pet.”

“Are you thinking about what happened to Connor?” I didn’t know much about Angel’s son except that Connor had been raised in a hell dimension.

Spike sighed and shifted beneath me. “Yeah. Connor.”

“Connor was a different situation,” I started but stopped, not wanting to highlight Spike’s tenuous biological tie to any hypothetical child we might have. “But I get your point. It just means we’ll have to take precautions. It’s a good reason to have people nearby who can help.”

“People who don’t get confused and sodding screw up.” Spike was referring to Wesley. “Might be good to consult with Angel. Much as I bloody well hate to say it.” I could sense Spike’s discomfort already rising from the way his body almost started closing in on itself despite the way the time in L.A. somewhat healed their relationship. Angel was included in the group we’d had little contact with in our semi-retirement. It seemed that having a child together meant reuniting with many people I hadn’t expected to reunite with.

I turned in Spike’s lap then and straddled him. Cupping his face in both my hands, I said, “Enough about Angel. Enough about baby stuff. We have candlelight and stars and comfy, heated water in our private pool. Let’s focus on you.” I kissed him on one cheek. “And.” I pressed my lips to his other cheek. “Me.”

Spike grinned. “Twisting my arm, love.”
I didn’t bother to reply with words. Then, he submitted to my ministrations.

Chapter End Notes

So, this was a meshing together of various all-inclusive resorts that my husband and I’ve stayed at in Mexico. We only went to one with a rooftop pool...the inside of the suite sounded like we were in a fish tank. But it was so gorgeous.

Also, someone mentioned Connor in a review on an earlier chapter. This was the later chapter I was referring to. It is a little different as Connor was born of two vampires...and if Spike and Buffy have a baby, he or she will be born of two humans (if you count Buffy as human).
The night of the reduced Lupron and the reluctant consumption of beignets

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

“What in the world are you doing?”

“Nnnya!” I made a face at Spike who was watching me from the end of our bed. I was flopped back, sucking in my stomach. “What does it look like I’m doing?” I grumped. “Trying to put on my jeans!”

He came around the side of the bed and perched near my head, his hands in his lap and a very big smirk on his face – a smirk I wanted to wipe right off. “Poor pet. You never had this trouble before. Aren’t they the jeans you wore a few days ago?”

I glared. “Don’t ‘poor pet’ me! And yes, they’re the same jeans!” I pulled in my stomach again and tugged at the zipper but hopefully not enough to rip it. Damned Slayer strength.

Spike reached over and patted my still tanned but swollen stomach. “Did you dry them?” He frowned and looked thoughtful. “Did I dry them?” He’d done the laundry last. Sometimes he’d forget and would over dry loads to get out the wrinkles.

“No!” I pushed his hand away. “And this was the only pair that still fit. Boyfriend jeans are baggy. They should fit!” I wrinkled my nose and tried again in vain to make the denim close around my hips and stomach. I gave a mighty huff and sat up into a cross-legged position, tugging my shirt over the stupid non-zipping jeans. “I think it’s the Lupron shots. I just eat salad, and I gain five pounds.”

“Is that the drug that – ”

“Makes your body not ovulate and makes you gain weight by looking at food. None of my pants fit. I can’t wait to stop it.” Twelve days of sub-q Lupron shots were kicking my butt. So much for the relaxation I felt during and after our trip to Mexico. All non-stress-y-ness was long gone.

Spike put his arm around my shoulders and gave me a side hug. “At least you went down to a smaller dose tonight, eh, love?”

“Right, and now I start jamming estrogen pills up my vagina twice a day.” This also made me
grumpy. I was dreading the blue discharge I’d read about online and the start of endless days of panty liners. I was also going to start Minivelle patches (generic Vivelle that the insurance would cover) and aspirin.

He kissed the top of my head. “You got this, Buffy.”

“Easy for you to say. You don’t have your hormones all out of whack.” Despite my disgruntlement, I leaned into him, borrowing his strength.

He stroked my hair with patience. “You’re right. I don’t. And you’re beautiful even though your pants don’t fit. Red will be here soon. Didn’t you say something about promising her beignets?”

Willow had flown in to distract me prior to the trip to Denver for transfer. “Yeah.”

“So, put on a dress of some sort. I’ll head to work early and drop you off at the Quarter. Have your beignets.” He pulled back and started to massage my shoulders, his fingers deft as always. “Don’t worry so much about your clothes. You can always buy new ones. Don’t you birds like to go shopping?”

Groaning, I closed my eyes as he worked a particularly tough knot out around the base of my neck. “I love you.”

The doorbell rang, and my eyes flew open. Willow was here!

Spike stood before I could. He raised his eyebrows, his blue eyes wide and stern. “Relax. Get ready. I can entertain the witch for a few.”

I smiled at him in gratitude. “Thank you.”

“Welcome.” He strode out of the room, softly shutting one door to open another.

Hurrying, I sloughed off the jeans and my blouse and opened the closet. Rifling through my dresses, I mused that in New Orleans in November, I could wear a sundress, but I’d be packing sweaters and a coat for our trip to Denver on the 8th. There was a chance of snow. Choosing the light blue swing
dress, I slipped the fabric over my head, appreciating the freedom that rejecting the jeans gave me as I donned my sandals. Then, I hurried into the bathroom where I ran a brush through my hair and finished my makeup with a light lip gloss.

Willow jumped up from the sofa when I practically ran into the living room, and we were hugging before we even said hello. She smelled of strawberries and a scent that was distinctly my friend. I felt young again just being around her, and feelings associated with the excitement, terror, and exhaustion of tackling a new big bad at the Hellmouth flooded my mind. Goosebumps flew over my arms, and for a fleeting moment, I asked myself why Spike and I had chosen semi-retirement and the time for just us. I missed my friends; I missed my Willow. If I was honest, I missed the rush of being at the forefront of the battle between good and evil.

As I drew back, I beamed at her. “You look exactly the same.”

She fluffed her scarlet hair with the palm of one hand. “Waves and long. A little different?”

Willow hadn’t worn her hair at that length since high school. The layers made the cut more sophisticated. “A little.”

Then, I noticed Oz leaning against the wall near the door. As he raised his hand in casual greeting, I bounced on the balls of my feet and embraced him with similar enthusiasm. He was warm and friendly as always. Hugging myself as I drew away, I studied him. “Same chill guy. Different hair.”

Oz’s hair was red with bleached blonde spiky tips, and he dressed much the same way he always did in jeans, a band tee, and jacket. There was the subtlest shift in his face, and one corner of his mouth barely went up. That was all the indication that I had that he was confused by my comment.

“Last time it was blue,” I explained.

His eyes widened just slightly. “Oh. Yeah. Hope it’s okay that I tagged along. Never been to the Big Easy. Heard they have quite the music scene. Plus, any town that’s called the Big Easy sounds like my kind of place.”

“Totally fine.” I was hoping for some girl time, but I hadn’t seen Oz in person since Sunnydale – since he broke Willow’s heart and then she broke his.
Spike spoke from his recliner. “If it’s all good with you, pet, the wolf is coming with me to Spotted Cat. Thought he’d appreciate Alex’s prowess with the liquor bottle and the chance to head to Blue Nile to take a gander at the Ruffins bloke.”

I seriously loved Spike sometimes... make that all the time. “After dropping us off at Café du Monde?”

His eyes twinkled at me, and he stuck a thumb in his jeans pocket. “After.”

Twenty minutes later, Willow and I were situated at a little table in the famous beignet café, and the first question my best friend asked was, “Who’s Alex?” The worried line between her wide eyes was clear as day.

I waved a dismissive hand at her. “Oh, she’s way old, but she makes a mean drink. Well, one I can actually stomach.” I rolled my eyes. “Speaking of stomachs. My pants don’t fit anymore.”

The worried line was replaced by an expression of mirth. “What? Isn’t that supposed to happen after you get pregnant?”

“Your’d think! The hormones are doing a number on my body. Hence, the sundress.” I gestured at my dress.

“Amazing how all the little systems in our body work together.” Willow picked up the napkin box to read the café menu. “Cute dress though.”

I smiled. “Thanks. I really took the bodily systems working together for granted before.” I pointed at the menu. “Not much to choose from, but get three and not six. It’s a lot.”

“But I’m starved!” Willow protested.

“Trust me. We’re getting dinner soon. You want the three.”

“All with the trust-age here. Three beignets. Got it.”
“And a large frozen café au lait,” I insisted. The cold ones were the best for providing a little oasis in the heat.

“That’s like a lot of caffeine, right?”

What was the deal with the caffeine police? First the clinic, then Spike, and now Willow. “All the better to stay up all night with you. We have to have energy to power through dinner at the Gumbo Shop later and the walk up and down Bourbon. Then, we’ll head to Frenchman to find our guys.”

“Got it.” Willow nodded and gave a little salute like she understood the mission.

After the waitress came and took our order, I asked, “How are things in Virginia?”

“Oz and I decided to move in together,” my friend burst out, grinning in excitement.

I couldn’t help but match her joy with my own grin. “You’ve been wanting to say that this whole time, huh?”

Willow nodded. “Uh huh. I feel all grown up. Living together. Paying our own way.” She meant not mooching off me like in Sunnydale. “And to be honest, I’m not that sad to leave behind Cleveland. There’s just so much more for me where Oz is.”

“Does it feel serendipitous that it’s all just – ”

“Falling into place?” She folded her forearms together and leaned on the table, sighing with happiness. “Totally.”

A little jealousy rolled through my belly. The feeling was irrational because Willow hadn’t had it easy, but the easiness she was feeling now made me question what Spike and I were doing. What were we doing trying to have a child in such a convoluted way?

Willow gave me side-eye. “Where’d you go in your head?”
When I opened my mouth, the words tumbled out with a clarity that I didn’t realize I had to my thoughts, “Sometimes I wonder if Spike and I should be doing this.”

“I thought you really wanted it.”

I sighed. “Most of the time I do, but sometimes. . . sometimes I don’t know at all why I even brought it up with him in the first place. I mean, what was I thinking? A vampire and a Slayer having a kid?” I whispered the last question.

Willow was quiet for a long moment. Then, she put her hand on top of mine. “I think it’s totally normal to feel that way. There’s anxiety about doing something new, especially when there are unknowns.”

My eyes widened in agreement. “Lots of unknowns.”

“And said unknowns could lean toward badness.” Willow’s fingers went to her bottom lip.

My anxiety ratcheted up from twenty to a hundred, and I pushed my chair back without realizing it, metal legs scraping against the concrete, sugar-covered floor.

Willow blinked as if she was lost in her own personal fears, and she quickly amended, “Or goodness.”

“It’s just that a lot has been good, so I’m sorta expecting the badness.” I started pulling flimsy napkins out of the holder and putting them in neat piles. Beignets were covered in powdered sugar which was sticky when wet. Napkins-at-the-ready were of the good.

Willow emulated me only with the other side of the napkin dispenser. “We’re sorta used to badness when we have something good, huh?”

“Uh huh. Just when things fall into place. . . .”
“Bam!” My gloom-and-doom was contagious because now Willow looked all wilt-y.

At that moment, the waitress delivered the beignets, hot and sweet, and our focus shifted completely to the pastries and coffee. Willow let out a moan of ecstasy as she bit into the beignet at the top of her stack. White powder sprinkled all around her hand and onto the table. Spillage was inevitable, but it didn’t mean that there wasn’t still a lot of good. I eagerly dug into my own pastries, the sugar exploding with overwhelming sweetness over my tongue and the dough melting in my mouth as it only did when the fried dough was piping hot.

Willow took a sip of her café au lait. “Oh, sugar overload. How I’ve missed you.” She took another sip and turned back to her beignet. “Sometimes the ‘bam’ is just what you need.”

My friend was right. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

Smiling around the cheek full of food, Willow covered her mouth. “Me, too.”

“Girl time is so much better in person. Thank you for coming.”

“It’s a big thing you’re going through.” Willow’s shoulder lifted. “Besides, I needed it, too.”

Chapter End Notes

Lupron sucks. That is all. Patches, vaginal inserts all good...Lupron not so much.
The morning before embryo transfer

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

I silently counted to three and slowly pushed the progesterone in oil into “the upper outer quadrant of my buttocks” where the nurse who’d checked my uterine lining at the clinic in Metairie had drawn me a little “x” to mark the spot. Contrary to my expectations, the big IM shot was getting easier. I’d only drawn back once to find blood and had to start over. The resulting squirting blood had sent Spike running to check on me. Sensitive nose on that one.

Sliding out the needle, I pressed a cotton swab to the resulting pinprick wound and nudged the needle into its cap. A few seconds later, I patted a ready Band-Aid in place. Then, I inserted the morning dose of Endometrin and estrogen into my vagina, swapping out the panty liner for a clean one. I checked the Minivelle patches lined up around my belly button. I’d gone from one that I changed every other day to four, and they were all still in place. Then, I swiftly cleaned up the mess in Dawn’s bathroom, which she luckily didn’t share with her roommate, who was home this time around.

Spike was sleeping in Dawn’s bed, and I joined him under the covers, careful to keep the current hormone-filled side of my butt up. Spike turned to face me and drew me close, nuzzling my hair and finding and very gently massaging the muscle. I winced and then relaxed as his touch eased the pain just a bit.

“That was a record, pet,” he whispered.

I drew his arm around my midsection to cradle against my chest. “Right? Think self-administering shots all twisted and backward is like a new super power?”

He chuckled and drew his legs up against the back of mine. “Maybe.”

“Maybe I could use it on vampires? Inject some holy water during a fight?”

“Not sure how that’d go over. Lack of circulation and all.”

I frowned at the new conundrum. “But vampires have other working bodily functions.”
He pushed his hips against me to show me that I was indeed correct. “Magic, pet. It’s magic.”

“Hmm. Maybe I’ll inject it in the heart? That ought to do the trick.” Kralik had ingested the holy water that killed him. A shot through the heart of the stuff would probably have the same effect.

Spike snorted. “Wood’s a helluva lot more efficient.”

“True. Wonder why we never soaked the stakes in holy water.”

“Too much work. Unnecessary.” He slid his fingers between mine.

My brain continued to whirl with ideas despite our 3 AM arrival into Denver. “Maybe Andrew could make a ring that injects holy water into the heart somehow? A little dart of the stuff?” Andrew was constantly piloting gadgets with different Slayer groups across the globe. Giles made the remaining nerd spread his inventions around because Giles was afraid something “untoward” would happen if he allowed Andrew to focus his efforts in one location.

“Maybe so, pet.”

I pouted. “You’re not playing along.”

“And you’re distracting me from sleep. Again.” He didn’t sound too annoyed.

I huffed a little. “You usually like distraction.”

“I do, but you’re –”

“Distracting myself from thinking about how we’re one day away from our transfer?”

He kissed the back of my head. “Yeah. I’m nervous, too, you know.”
I grasped his hand tighter. “I know.”

“Tell me about how it’ll go.” He sounded sleepy.

I spoke softly, “So, we leave early in our rented hamster mobile, so I can do the acupuncture before the transfer. Remember to remind me to not wear deodorant. Apparently, the embryos are sensitive to smells. Like you.”

“What kind of malarkey is that?” His tone matched my own. “And I don’t wear deodorant. And haven’t smoked in a week.”

“I’m very proud of you, honey.” I held up his hand and kissed his knuckles before nestling our hands back in place on my chest. He’d tapered quite easily, much more easily than I expected, and he’d hid his grumpiness from me though I’d heard from Alex that he was more jittery than normal at work. She’d even sent me a little video of him, which made me giggle. I hadn’t shown it to Spike. “And apparently, it’s a thing. No scented anything. Use the Dove Unscented when you shower.”

“Got it. Continue.” His voice was quieter. He was falling asleep on me.

I listed off the next steps, feeling pulled by dreams myself. (Thank god there was no steroid this time.) “Then, I do the acupuncture, and then, you come in and so do the doc and the person from the lab, and they do the transfer. The little embryo will have a nice thick lining to nestle into.”

Apparently, the most ideal uterine lining for embryo implantation had a tri-laminar appearance developed through the use of the estrogen. I had looked up the name of the lining more than once. The docs and nurses really didn’t explain much along the way. Luckily, the last ultrasound showed that I had the right kind of lining. “Then, more acupuncture while I lay down for an hour.”

I felt him stir behind me. “And the Asian needle technique does what exactly?”

“It’s supposed to help you relax, and some research shows that it improves implantation rates.”

“Ah. Doesn’t sound relaxing.” I remembered Spike’s needle avoidance and still wondered what that was about, and I almost asked, but then, he said, “Will be taking a picture of that.” He grunted when I elbowed him.

“No, you will not. But you will take a photo of our little embryo. I think they show us a picture on
“Will do.” Spike was proficient with technology and always had his phone like every other human being on the planet. He took photos of demon-hunting kills and different Slayer-related scenes to share with the local Slayer when we worked on cases together. There were pictures of beautiful little moments that he noticed throughout his day like a white crane perched on the back of a bench on Frenchman or one of the many street performers, joyfully making music for passersby. He had several photos of me and a few of little Leah. One was a cute video of the two of them making goofy faces at the camera and laughing. He didn’t know I’d seen it because Leah had shown it to me when he wasn’t in the room, but it was adorable.

I continued with my description of the process, “I also have to drink a bunch of water before they do the transfer, so they can see what they’re doing, but hoo boy, that hour of lying there afterward is going to be challenging. Apparently, I can use the bed pan.”

“Modern chamber pots aren’t so bad. Better than going to the privy in the middle of the night.”

I smiled that he remembered a time with no flushing toilets. He was so going to help our kid with history class someday. If we had a kid to be in school. “If you say so. Just weird to pee in front of you.”

“Not like I don’t hear it at home.”

“Oh. Yeah. Others then.”

He perked up a little at that. “You’ve been poked and prodded by all manner of high tech gadgets, and you’re worried about peeing in front of other people at the clinic?”

“Good point. Not worth worrying about.”

Spike settled back down into the pillow behind my head. “And then?”

I snuggled closer still. “And then, we come back here, and I have to be on bedrest. The amount of time for that is a little unclear.”
“As is the research as to whether it’s beneficial or not.” I kept forgetting that Spike’s eyes were as wide open as mine regarding the process.

“I’ll follow their instructions,” I insisted. I didn’t often do things exactly by the book, but I was learning to toe the line in this process, at least a little. I vaguely wondered what happened to the women who didn’t follow the steps. The clinics really did rely on women to do what was needed.

“And I’ll see that you do,” Spike assured me.

A question that I’d been avoiding saying aloud popped into my head, and I found that drowsiness allowed me to ask it, “Do you care if we have a boy or a girl?”

Spike was quiet for several seconds, and I wondered if he’d fallen asleep. It was hard to tell sometimes even after all our time together. Then, he said, “I don’t really care either way.”

“What do you mean? You don’t have a preference?” I’d never thought to ask this, but now, I was curious. The clinic didn’t tell us gender until a heartbeat was found at the six-and-a-half-week ultrasound. We had two embryos, but they transferred the best grade because it had a higher chance of success. Spike and I had decided against transferring both because of the physical, financial, and emotional stress and risks that came with having twins.

“I really don’t. I didn’t expect to have a child at all. Boy or girl. I’ll love him or her all the same.”

Good answer. I sighed against him. “I don’t care either.” I remembered a time when I had my life planned out. When I thought my life would be normal and mundane. Before I became the Slayer. “I used to want three kids, maybe four, back before I knew what raising kids entailed.” Financially and emotionally. “And sometimes, when Dawn was being really annoying, I wished that I had a little brother instead.”

Spike disentangled his hand from mine and ran his fingers up my shirt, settling his palm over my sticker-infested belly. “Seems we both had different dreams before our lives changed unexpectedly.”

“Seems like.” I paused and added, “Thank god.”

Spike yawned. “Yes. Thank whoever’s out there looking over things.” He nuzzled his nose into my hair as he often did when we slept together.
Then, we fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Next up...embryo transfer!
The morning of embryo transfer

My entire body tensed, and I felt Spike go rigid next to me. Seriously? The day of our transfer? I knew Dr. Surrey had said the clinic helped demons who were trying to conceive, but we hadn’t run into one the entire time we’d been coming to the clinic.

Sighing, I gripped the edge of the counter where we were waiting for a nurse to check us in and closed my eyes. Then, I pivoted to search for the owner of the voice that sounded like he swallowed knives.

Spike groaned softly next to me. “Bloody hell. A Grappler.”

“A what?” I side-whispered, taking in the only other couple with us in the dark reception area. A tall, grey-skinned demon with horns jutting out of his chin glared our direction, and his human companion held his arm, trying to hold him back. Her face was a mask of desperation. Oh crap.

Spike looked a little panicked as he edged in front of me. “They’re ruthless in a fight. But not the brightest of the bunch.”

I hadn’t brought any weapons. They weren’t exactly high on the list for today. Of all the days to be unprepared Slayer. “Great.”

“And a vampire,” the demon growled, puffing up and clenching his fists. He addressed Spike, “And you’re one to talk about intelligence.”

“Lonnie. Seriously. This is not the time,” the woman pleaded. “You promised that this weekend would be relaxing. I need to relax.”

I smiled at the young woman. “Seriously. Transfer day?”
The corner of her mouth went up, and she nodded. Gesturing at me, she spoke to Lonnie, “See. She’s here for the same thing we are.”

“With a vampire?” Lonnie asked incredulously. “It’s unnatural. And impossible.” His shoulders dropped a fraction, which wasn’t saying much because he was tall and looming. Not that that stopped me before but still.

The Grappler’s partner must have to deal with this all the time because she ran her hand gently down his arm to calm him. “How is it for us to judge? We’re here in the same place for the same thing.”

“Still.” Lonnie took a step forward, shaking off the woman’s hand. “This means something that they’re here. Now.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Spike retorted, and it was my turn to try and soothe my partner. I touched his elbow, and he reached back for my hand and squeezed when he found my fingers.

Someone cleared her throat behind me, and all four of us stared at Amy. Her smile did not conceal the sternness in her eyes. “Amanda’s right, Lonnie. You are here for the same reasons and not for a fight. Both of these ladies need to be relaxing.”

Another nurse appeared at Amy’s elbow, the younger nurse’s face a little less serene and in control than Amy’s. “Mr. and Mrs. Brown?”

Amanda perked up considerably. “That’s us.” She raised her eyebrows at her mate. “Let’s go. We’ll go through a drive-through on the way back to the hotel.”

Lonnie sighed. “All right. Wendy’s?”

Amanda’s relief was evident. “That’s fine.”

The Grappler demon glared at us as he went by.

Amy sighed. “Sorry about that.”
“No worries,” I said. “Believe me when I say we’ve dealt with way worse.”

“You’re a Slayer, huh?” Amy didn’t seem confused, so I guessed she’d heard of Slayers, which made sense. Most supernaturally-inclined individuals had. Her eyes flicked to Spike and back to me.

I shrugged. “One of many.” After ten years, saying this was old hat. A nice old hat.

“Good for you both.” She smiled, obviously getting it on a level that even I hadn’t anticipated. “Are you ready for the transfer?”

Spike slid his fingers between mine. The muscles in his forearm were still tense, which made his next words unsurprising. “I’m coming with her.”

“Even for the acupuncture?” Amy asked.

“Yeah. Even for.”

I glanced at Spike; his jaw was tight, but he’d brave the needles to ensure I was safe during the procedure. A rush of love flowed through my heart.

“All right,” Amy said with another smile. Then, she led us upstairs. Amanda and Lonnie were nowhere in sight.

The room was small and narrow with a monitor near the door, a narrow examination-type bed against one wall, and a chair for Spike near the head of the bed. As I settled on the bed, Amy went over the directions for after the transfer. We were staying with Dawn again. Bedrest was for forty-eight hours, but it wasn’t completely strict. I had to lay on my back but could prop up at a slight angle if I wanted. She even said we could go out to dinner as long as I didn’t overexert myself. I couldn’t shower for the first day. I wasn’t allowed to lift anything over ten pounds, but she said this might not apply to me since I had Slayer strength. Shots, patches, and vaginal medication all stayed the same. She said my nurse would send orders for the local bloodwork, including a beta check on the ninth day following transfer. The guidelines really weren’t as restrictive as I thought they’d be. The only rule that kind of sucked was that I had to sleep on my back, something I was not used to doing. Amy suggested propping pillows around me.
The final rules were no exercise and no sex at least until check for heartbeat at six and a half weeks.

When I glanced at Spike, his jaw was set. We’d already talked about this. He was holding firm. I pushed my bottom lip out at him, and he shook his head. “No.”

Amy sided with him. “Now that I know you’re a Slayer. Definitely no to anything remotely related to killing demons and vampires. The time will go by before you know it.”

I nodded, knowing that Spike might protest me doing anything remotely related to slaying at each pregnancy milestone. “Okay.”

Smirking triumphantly, Spike tucked the instruction list that Amy gave us into the tote bag I’d brought with me. Then, she gave me a Valium and instructed me to get undressed and ready for the transfer. Lucky for me, I’d remembered the sundress trick though I had a heavy coat with me this time. It was cold outside.

After Amy left the room, the acupuncture lady came into the room. She was probably in her thirties and had long blonde hair pulled back in a low ponytail. Her demeanor was gentle and warm, and I immediately relaxed in her presence, the drama of the Grappler demon and Amanda forgotten.

Within minutes, I was lying on the table, Zen music that reminded me of Oz and Willow’s meditations playing softly in the background. Needles were scattered over me, the metal bits standing tall from where they were wedged into the surface of my skin. The acupuncturist only used a few, very small gauge needles in my head and legs and hands. As she twisted the needles, I zoned out and almost fell asleep. I only vaguely heard Spike shifting in the chair in the background.

The next thing I knew, the needles were gone, and Dr. Surrey and another older man entered the room. The older man introduced himself as John, the head of the lab, and he said that Spike and my embryo had thawed without a problem and looked “just beautiful.” They showed us a photo of the embryo on the screen, and true to his word, Spike snapped a picture. I wasn’t too aware of what the doctor and lab guy did to set up the procedure. Maybe it was the Valium? However, I was aware of the doctor poking around on my cervix and inserting the catheter.

Before I knew it, the catheter was being withdrawn, and the procedure done, and just like that, our hard-won embryo was home. Tears filled my eyes as I tried to sit up, and the doctor immediately told me to lower back down. I’d forgotten the instructions to lie there for an hour. Spike kissed my forehead, and the nurse came in to help me pee. Then, the acupuncturist reentered the room.
“You feel any different?” she asked, her blue eyes sparkling.

The corner of my mouth lifted. “Not really.” I frowned. “Did I pay you?”

She laughed, the corners of her eyes wrinkling in mirth. “You did.”

I peered at Spike. I had no memory of this. “I did?”

He ran a thumb over my cheek. “You did. I was there.”

“Oh.” The Valium was more powerful than I realized.

The acupuncturist smiled. “Don’t worry about anything. Just relax, okay?”

I gave her a small salute, settled back, and closed my eyes as she began placing the needles, pricking my skin with the short little taps from earlier. The same music floated around me, and I dozed.

Thirty minutes later, Spike was gingerly helping me into our rented Kia Soul in the dark, underground parking lot. The Grappler and his partner were long gone, and we saw only human couples. I decided not to worry about the demon; hopefully, he was looking after his newly PUPO partner.

Instead, from my inclined position, I watched Spike as he put the car in gear. He caught me studying him, and without a word, he took my hand in his. Still goggly from the Valium, I closed my eyes and smiled. I was looking forward to hiding away with Spike for a few days in Dawn’s apartment. As the entrance to the parking lot opened, white snowflakes peeked in at us, and we drove into the gently falling snow.

Chapter End Notes

Valium makes you loopy. I really didn't remember if I paid the lady. And I did try to sit up and the doc freaked out a little. Oops. I made my husband take a photo of our little embryo who was hatching out of his shell.

Also, it snowed while we were there. It was so pretty and when I was let off bedrest, we
made a snowman. It's sort of a sad little snowman because I wasn't supposed to exert too much.

And Spuffy again rented a Kia Soul like my husband and I did... and pfeifferpack said I could share this pic she made, which makes me laugh so hard.
Spike decides to get a soul.
The second night after transfer

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I woke to the sounds of soft but urgent murmurings coming from Dawn’s living room. Spike’s half of the bed was empty, the sheets and blanket a rumpled mess.

Shifting positions slightly to get more comfortable as my consciousness came online, my hand went to my stomach where I’d felt the faintest of twinges throughout the day, twinges that were probably my imagination and not the embryo burrowing into the lining of my uterus.

“Buffy?” Dawn entered the darkened room, whispering my name. She sat on the edge of the bed, her back straight in the dim light. I couldn’t see her face, but I felt and heard the note of tension in her voice. “Spike heard you wake up.”

Of course, he did. I touched my sister’s hand; she was trembling. “What’s wrong, Dawnie? Who’s Spike talking to?”

“So some blue god that looks like someone named Fred?” Dawn sounded confused. “She makes me nervous.”

“Illyria. She’s a god shoved in Fred’s body.” Spike had talked about Illyria only a handful of times since we’d been together again. I only knew that the god’s presence had led to Fred’s death. Fred was someone who’d meant a lot to Spike. He said she’d tirelessly worked to help him become corporeal again. Willow had once told me that she thought Fred was pretty, which made me a tiny bit jealous though I’d never actually met Illyria.

Dawn glanced at the door to the bedroom with fear on her face. “Kinda like how Glory and Ben shared a body?”

“Kinda. Only Fred is gone.”

“Gone?”

I chose a better word, “Destroyed, I think.”
She drew closer to me. Her horrified reaction was almost inaudible. “Oh.”

I stroked Dawn’s arm, suddenly realizing what the fear was about. “I don’t think Illyria is interested in your key-ness.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” I wasn’t one hundred percent sure, but I wasn’t about to tell my sister that. There was a reason Spike sent my sister in here with me. Spike had said the god has lost her ability to bend time and open portals to other dimensions, but I wasn’t sure if she’d lost her interest in re-attaining either of those abilities.

“And that’s super convincing.” At least, there was sarcasm there.

“Hey. Spike and I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.” I sat up a little and moved to slide off the bed. My time on bedrest was mostly up anyway, and the nurse had said it wasn’t a hard and fast rule.

“Where are you going?” Dawn protested. “You’re supposed to be resting.”

I pulled on a pair of fuzzy socks to keep my feet warm. There was an old wives’ tales that said something about warm feet being important for baby stuff working out. “I’m going to find out what’s going on.” I gave Dawn a dose of my best big sister insistence, “Stay here.”

“Trust me. Not going in there again. . . unless you need me.” I heard the sheets rustle as she slid to the ground and rooted around under the bed.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.
“Getting out the weapons.” There was a scraping sound and the creak of a hinge. “Sword?”

Moving gingerly, my hand found the wooden door frame. “Not yet.” I didn’t think any of the weapons Dawn had would do much to Illyria anyway.

“K.”

Squinting into the brighter lamplight of the living room, I smiled at Spike who lounged back on the sofa, seemingly relaxed but with that certain tension in his shoulders that let me know that he was far from nonchalant. He offered me a casual smile.

“Pet, you’re up. This here is Illyria.” He gestured in an almost lackadaisical manner at the lithe figure sitting ramrod straight on the nearby loveseat. “Illyria, this is –”

The god was awkward in her stance as she cocked her head at me. Her long dark hair was streaked with a vibrant blue, and her wide unblinking eyes and pale skin practically glowed in matching alien blueness like the mermaids that Leah sometimes colored in garish colors. Power emanated off the god, power that I hadn’t felt since . . . well, since ever. The energy swirled through the room and pressed into my chest like fingers digging into my ribcage and threatening to break my ribs. All of which was encased in a slender young woman’s form. (Huh. That part was somewhat familiar.) This creature was dangerous, perhaps the most dangerous being I’d ever encountered.

“She is your pet? As you are mine?”

I almost giggled nervously at this unexpected set of phrases coming from her mouth. Spike hadn’t told me that the god king considered him her pet. Instead, I said, “Little different type of pet. I hope.”

“Hardly think I’m your pet anymore, Blue. It’s been a while since we’ve been sparring.” Somehow, there was affection in Spike’s tone. I knew they fought together in the battle in L.A. but nothing about them sparring.

The corner of Illyria’s mouth went down a fraction. Uh oh. “Your timeframe is irrelevant.”

“How so?”
Her intonation unchanging, Illyria said, “The passage of eight human years is meaningless to me.”

Spike regarded her thoughtfully. “I get that.”

“You cannot fathom it, vampire.” She sounded certain.

Spike ignored her jab and addressed me, still with the same underlying tightness to his shoulders. “Illyria came by to check up on us.”

My heart almost skipped a beat. “Why?” And when can she go away?

Illyria fixed her blue gaze on me, her eyes roving over me from head to toe. “The one you call Angel. He sent me to see if it was true.”

Okay. Now, I was pissed. I didn’t care if she was a powerful god from the beginning of time. I crossed my arms and frowned pointedly at her. “See if what was true?”

Illyria sighed, the first human-type thing she’d done. “He is ‘concerned.’”

I hadn’t heard from Angel in years, and he sent a messenger to inquire on Spike and my status like we owe him something? This time, my voice was louder and firmer. “Well, you can tell him that what Spike and I do is of no concern to him.”

Spike didn’t rouse like me, and his manner helped me contain the heat rising in me. “Your ex heard a rumor that we were trying to start a family of our own.” Loved how Spike was lumping Angel with me as if Spike hadn’t spent a century doing things-I-didn’t-want-to-think-too-hard-about all over Europe and other parts of the world with “my ex.”

I focused on Illyria. “Why is he concerned about that anyway? Doesn’t he have his own life to live by now?”

“He is not alive,” Illyria stated. “Yet.” She was reminding me of the robot me with her literalness.
“She’s asking why he wants to know,” Spike clarified.

Illyria was silent for almost too many seconds before she said with surprising insightfulness, “He still cares for your pet. He does not want what happened to his offspring to happen to hers.”

“How does he even know what we’re doing?” I demanded. “He heard rumblings,” Spike said.

“Rumblings from where?” As soon as I asked, I knew the answer.

Spike confirmed my suspicion. “It appears that our little Grappler demon friend has a big mouth.” He propped his arm on the back of the sofa, trying to appear more comfortable.

I didn’t keep the irony out of my tone. It’d only been two days? “That was hell-a fast.”

“Hell-a fast?” Illyria asked, moving one hand from the edge of the seat cushion to her lap.

Oh god. How did Angel stand it? How had Spike stood it? A wave of protectiveness for the little bundle of cells in my belly made me push back more. “Can you tell him something for me?”

“Yes.” This one was simple and to the point.

“Tell him that if he is so ‘concerned’ about Spike and me starting a family, he can pick up the phone and tell us himself. We’re not him, and what happened to his son isn’t inevitably going to happen to any potential child we might have.” I wasn’t sure if the last statement was meant for Angel, Spike, or myself.

Illyria nodded. “I will tell him. I cannot promise he will listen. He does not often cooperate. It is. . .” she trailed off, stared into space for a bit longer than was comfortable, and then finished with, “frustrating.” At least, the god king knew who she was dealing with. Then, she stood without fanfare and nodded once to Spike. “Goodbye, my pet. It was. . . nice to see you again.” Then, she strode out the front door to Dawn’s apartment with eerily silent determination.

Spike followed her, swinging the door shut behind her to shut out the cold and sliding the locks
home. As he did so, I settled back onto the sofa, resuming my bedrest position.

When Spike turned to face me, I asked, “What does this mean? Her showing up at Dawn’s?”

“Dunno, pet. It just means that a good portion of the demon community knows we’re trying to conceive.”

“Great.”

His face softened as he sat sideways next to me. He kissed my temple and took my hand. “You okay?”

I shrugged, feeling suddenly tired and twinge-y again. “I’m fine.”

“Your job is to rest,” he said with a mix of firm and tender.

“For now.”

“For a while,” he insisted, moving his thumb over mine.

I sighed. “I guess we should at least tell Giles about the Grappler and Angel.”

“I will take care of it.”

“Thank you.” I extricated my hand and hugged my arms across my chest. “This is just the start, isn’t it?”

Spike’s eyes were serious. “Afraid so, pet.”

Dawn’s head poked tentatively out from her bedroom, sword raised at the ready. “Is it okay to come out now? Is she gone?”
I addressed my lover and sister, “We should talk about what to do. And did you notice that she wasn’t even wearing a coat? It’s freezing out there!”

Chapter End Notes

Another layer is about to be added to the lives of Spuffy...hope you enjoy this extra plot line to the story. I tried to hint at it along the way. Let me know if anything is confusing.
The morning of the beta test

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Tears filled my eyes when the nurse called my name. Spike put his arm around my shoulders and gave me a gentle hug. We were about to do a beta test, a blood test to see if the frozen embryo transfer worked. The test was nine days after the day of the transfer, and I was terrified.

Yesterday, some bright red blood made an appearance on the toilet paper when I went to the bathroom, and it wasn’t from straining though I was so with the constipated (progesterone sucked). My nurse had reassured me and said she had a “really good feeling” about us, but a little nagging bit in the back of my head screamed that bright red blood meant the worst. If baby was growing in my womb, baby was too little for Spike to smell or sense anything different, so he couldn’t really reassure me. All he could smell now were the hormones.

Spike ran the back of his fingers over my upper arm. “Love, it’s going to be okay. It’s just one more step. Remember? One step at a time?”

Blinking so the tears drew back inside, I stared into his earnest blue eyes as he reassured me, and I felt my heart tug with love for him. “One step at a time.” Then, I stood and addressed the nurse who’d summoned us, “Here. I’m Buffy.”

The nurse from the New Orleans clinic led Spike and me down a long hallway and then took a right down a shorter hall to a small waiting area. Other women and couples were crowded together under the fluorescent lights. Anxiety and tension were rolling off everyone. At least, the walls were a soft beige, the leather chairs were comfortable, and the art on the walls made the space less sterile than a typical doctor’s office. The outdated magazines – tabloids for the women and sports magazines for the men – and the adjoining blood draw room were the only things that gave the clinic’s identity away. I vaguely wondered if Spike’s senses were going all haywire smelling all the blood radiating from that direction.

“Wait here, and they’ll draw your blood soon, okay?” the nurse said, already halfway walking away. They were busy today.

“Thank you,” Spike said simply, not giving any indication that he was bothered, and we sat.

We sat and sat and sat some more. Sitting made me more aware of just how sore my bottom was from the IM shots. Plus, this hurry-up-and-wait thing was for the birds, so heedless of the other
people waiting, I started a conversation with Spike, collecting his hand in mine and squeezing.

“Are you sure you’re okay with Dawn staying with us?” I whispered.

Dawn was coming to join us as soon as the semester was over. The appearance of Illyria had more than scared my sister – and to be honest, Spike, and we’d discussed her taking one semester of school to be with us. The hiatus was meant to be temporary, just until we understood what was going on. Dawn had already discussed the matter with her academic advisor and thesis chairperson, and both had allowed for the time away. Dawn would be doing some work online from afar.

“Is that even a question?” Spike asked. “She’s your sister.”

I lifted my eyebrows at him. “A sister who hasn’t exactly been nice to you for oh, the last several years.”

“We made up, and she had reason to be.” Spike flinched a little at what happened between us in the bathroom on Revello Drive, even years later.

This time, it was my turn to reassure him. “You know that’s long ago, right? Lots of things have happened between us since then.” Compassion for him spread warmth through my chest. “So many wonderful things.” If not for the group of complete strangers all around us and the awful way I felt with a bloated stomach, sore bottom, and vagina filled with medication (and did I mention constipation?), I’d show him how much I loved him.

He ducked his head. “Yeah. I know. In any case, I’m good with your sis coming. The truth of it is – it’ll be better when she’s here.”

“I agree.” To the casual outside observer who knew about supernatural stuff, Illyria showing up on my sister’s doorstep wouldn’t seem like that big of a deal, but to Spike and me, knowing what we knew about Angel and Illyria, the situation was not to be taken lightly. Maybe asking Dawn to stay with us was extreme, but I’d learned over the years not to dismiss my gut.

Though Spike had offered to call Giles to let him know about Illyria’s appearance, I’d insisted we have the conversation together when we got back to New Orleans. Giles, of course, had been less than reassuring, telling me to rest while at the same time catastrophizing about what could possibly have happened since we hadn’t told him right away. I’d almost retorted that we sorta had other things on our mind like how to get a wheelchair at the airport (Spike had insisted) and how to get through
airport security without having to go through the X-ray scanner (just in case), on the off-chance I was actually pregnant or on the way to being pregnant. Luckily, Spike had reminded my Watcher that all we were asking was for someone to do a bit of research to find out if there was anything to what Angel was concerned about. Giles had apologized for his over-the-top reaction and agreed to hit the books and send out feelers into the world even if it felt like searching for a needle in a haystack. He’d also wished us luck with our ventures into possible parenthood, which was nice given he’d rarely sent well wishes Spike’s direction – even after all this time.

I fidgeted and changed the subject. “Do you think I should have tested?”

“No. Remember what you told me about not letting you, pet?” I made him swear on a stack of bibles that he wouldn’t let me take a home pregnancy test.

“Those tests are going to all go to waste.” I’d impulsively bought a package of three tests – the digital kind that said “pregnant” and how far along you were. Not usually one to hang back unless something was important to him, Spike encouraged me to hold off on testing and to wait for the blood test.

He leaned over and nuzzled my ear. “You’ll pee on the little whatnot after today. They won’t go to waste. You’ll confirm the results.”

I nudged him away. “I don’t know how you can be so confident,” I whispered.

He shrugged. “You need me to be.”

With those words, I knew how scared he was, too. Screw listening ears. “I love you.”

He lifted our hands and kissed the back of mine. “Love you.”

“Buffy Summers?” an older woman called from the doorway to the blood draw area.

My stomach dropped. Here we go. The moment of reckoning. I stood but didn’t move. “Here.”

“Come this way.” The woman was gentle and kind, her accent not one I could place, her long grey
hair pulled up on the sides, making her seem younger than she was.

I glanced back at Spike, and he lifted an eyebrow at me and smiled gently. Shoring up my Slayer strength, I followed the woman into the small room. Perching on the edge of the black, faux leather seat, I tried not to tremble. Instead, I focused on the woman’s movements as she first studied the orders sheet that said what tests to run (the beta test and tests for progesterone and estrogen) and then efficiently prepared the supplies she needed to draw the blood. The fears that had effectively been dammed with Spike’s presence and the distractions of work and the Angel situation suddenly flooded over me, and tears filled my eyes again, this time spilling hot and fast over my cheeks.

The phlebotomist noticed immediately and set a gentle hand on my right hand which was clutching the stress ball used to help my vein pop out. “What’s wrong, dear?”

I wiped the tears away and sniffled. “I’m just so scared.”

She handed me a tissue, and I noticed that her nametag said, “Siobhan.” “What are you scared of?”

My hand went to my belly, which was only really protruding from the hormones. “I-I had cramps in the middle of the night last night. I-it felt like my period was starting, and I know the hormones won’t let me have my period, but I had some bleeding yesterday, too.”

“A lot of blood?” Siobhan asked, watching me intently.

I shook my head and swallowed. “N-no. Just after I peed.” Talking about bodily functions with complete strangers and not caring at all were all part of the IVF package.

She patted my upper arm. “That, my dear, is very common in fertility treatments. Did your nurse tell you?”

“Yeah,” I admitted.

She gazed at me over the tops of her glasses. “Let’s get your blood drawn.”

I borrowed her strength and straightened my arm up. “Okay.”
She traced her fingers over the crook in my arm, the arm that had gone through so many blood draws that I looked like I was a heroin addict. “You have good veins, hun.”

I sniffed again and smiled. “Thanks.”

Siobhan was efficient and drew my blood with little pain and little mess. Vampires could take some lessons. As I held a cotton ball over the tiny wound, she wrapped my arm to prevent blood from going everywhere. When I stood to leave, I felt a wave of dizziness from the emotion of everything, and Siobhan pulled me into a brief hug.

“We’ll send the results right over. Do something distracting,” she advised. I appreciated that she didn’t reassure me that I was probably pregnant or tell me to relax.

“Thank you again.”

Her blue-grey eyes shining, she smiled at me, and I wondered if I’d see her again. “You’re welcome.”

Then, I reunited with Spike who gazed at me tenderly, laced his fingers with mine and led me toward the exit without saying a word.

Chapter End Notes

The phlebotomist's name was indeed Siobhan, which I thought was ironic given the Ringer connection, so I kept in the story.

Next up...beta test results...

Thanks everyone for reading!
My phone was set on vibrate for any texts or calls, and every single time it vibrated, I jumped ten feet in the air. Well, not literally ten feet, but enough to make some of the customers give me side eye. At least, I was working with Crystal today and not Roger. I didn’t know what I’d do if he was working with me. Probably punch him, which would be very bad. Well, very bad for Roger.

After my latest twitchy moment, Crystal finished rinsing her milk steamer and nudged me with her shoulder. “You okay, Buff?”

“Yes.” I pulled my phone out of my apron pocket. The message on the screen was from a group text with Willow and Xander. They were wishing me luck. Part of me wished they didn’t know about the beta today, and part of me was grateful that they did. “Just lots of texts.”

“No phone call yet?” She asked picking up a crumb-filled plate that someone had brought to the counter.

I shook my head and did a little antsy foot shuffle that I tried to hide by straightening the stack of New Orleans nightlife magazines nearby. “No.” And it was making me really want to go out and kill something. A dusty vampire or two would do the trick. Only problem was it was daytime, and Spike had laid down a strict no-slaying rule. Damn it.

Crystal looked me up and down with an evaluative expression on her face as she flipped on the sink faucet to wash the dish. “You look like you’re about to come out of your skin.”

I made a desperate face. “I think I might.”

“Why don’t you take off a few minutes early and go for a walk around the Quarter? Grab some dinner. You haven’t taken a lunch break today.”

She was right. I’d had a snack at the beginning of my shift, but now, my nervous stomach was growling angrily at me, demanding nourishment. “You sure?”
“Very sure.” She pulled me into a brief hug, and I felt my body relax a fraction at her touch.

I grinned and started untying my apron, making sure to palm my phone. “Thanks.”

Only when I was out on the street did I realize that she hadn’t asked me to let her know what happened like everyone else seemed to be doing. That one small gesture made me feel more cared for than she knew.

The evening air was getting cooler as the sun was starting to set, and there were several people bustling around. Locals were headed home from work, and tourists were dressed up and setting foot outside their hotel rooms, eager for a night out on the town. Musicians were warming up for an evening gig on the street corner, and I let the sound of the joyful saxophone wash over me. The humidity even felt decently tolerable, and I already felt a little freer and lighter. Not giving much thought to where I was headed, my feet made the decision for me, leading me toward Frenchman Street. On the way, I picked up a po-boy at a local hole in the wall restaurant that served a mean roast beef with debris. As I resumed my journey, I slung the warm plastic bag along as I walked.

Several minutes later, I found myself standing in front of the Spotted Cat with my hands in my jacket pockets, the food attached to my wrist. Spike wasn’t here yet; his shift was later, but I could see Alex at the bar, so I wandered inside, scanning the room for smokers. No one yet, so I could stay for a bit. I slid onto the bar seat and waited for Alex to notice me.

Even though her back was turned, she knew someone was there, probably out of some bartender instinct, and she slid a glass of water in front of me. Then, she propped her elbows on the bar and tilted her head into her hands. The corners of her eyes crinkled as she smiled at me. “Hey, there, Miss Green Eyes. You’re here early. That man of yours doesn’t start for another hour or so.” Spike’s shift started once the sky was dark.


She blinked at me as if trying to figure something out. “Go right ahead. Want me to fix your drink?” She’d labelled my drink the “Buffy special.”

If the beta was negative, I’d take her up on it. “No. But thanks.” Ignoring the anxious roll in my stomach, I used the plastic fork and forced myself to take a bite of the roast beef goodness. The French bread was saturated with gravy that exploded in a burst of flavor on my tongue.
Alex turned her back to me and began sorting bottles of alcohol, grouping like with like. “Everything good between you two?”

Her question startled me, and I swallowed. “More than. Why?” Had she noticed something I hadn’t given how consumed we’d been with baby making?

Alex counted, muttering herself, and then said, “He just seems distracted the last couple of weeks, and more than I’d expect given that you went on vacation last week. Where’d y’all go? Denver?”

“How huh.” I took another drink. Spike hadn’t said anything, but I knew he wasn’t sharing everything with me because he was trying to take care of me. He’d all but said so himself earlier today. “Has he said anything?”

Alex glanced over her shoulder to give me an it’s-so-obvious look. “Sweetheart, he doesn’t have to. He doesn’t exactly hide his feelings very well.” This was true. Which meant that Spike doing so with me required a lot of effort.

I opened my mouth, unsure of how I was going to respond to her observation when my phone vibrated in my pocket. There was the waited-for-dreaded 303 area code. Heart suddenly thundering in my ears, I swiped right and brought the phone to my ear. “Hello?”

“Buffy?” I could hardly hear her I was so anxious, but I recognized Elaine’s voice right away.

“This is she.”

“This is Elaine calling from Lone Tree.”

“I-I know.”

“Take a deep breath.” She took a deep breath of her own to encourage me. “Your beta came back at 256. We like to see betas of at least 50, so you’re officially one month pregnant.”

“Oh my god. Really?” Tears filled my eyes, and I grinned like a fool. Alex probably thought I was crazy as I jumped off the bar stool and paced a little.
“Really.” She was firm in her certainty.

“Oh my god. I can’t believe it. I’m so excited!”

“I had a feeling you would be. . . pregnant and excited. You should be! Okay. Here’s what you’ll do next.” Elaine proceeded to tell me the levels of estrogen and progesterone from my blood work and to give me directions for the PIO shots, the patches, and the vaginal estrace and endometrin. “And then, you’ll go back to your local doctor in two days for more blood work. It’ll be for a second beta and a repeat of the estrogen and progesterone levels.”

I couldn’t think of any of the questions I’d thought about earlier, so I asked, “You like to see the beta double, right?”

“Sort of. We look for at least a 50 percent increase.”

I nodded though she couldn’t see me. “Okay.”

“But for now, try not to worry about that, and enjoy your good news!” She sounded so thrilled.

“I can’t wait to tell Spike!” And I couldn’t.

Elaine laughed. “I bet! Anymore questions?”

“Not for now. I’m sure I’ll be calling you though if I do.”

“I’ll be here,” she assured me. “I’m sending over the orders for the next round of bloodwork, so check the portal. If you don’t get it, send me a message. Talk with you soon!”

“Sounds good. Thank you!” I hung up and looked up to find Alex watching me with a bemused expression on her face.
“You have some happy news. Something special.” Her words were statements, not questions.

I nodded. “Yeah, but I have to – ”

Alex picked up a towel and started shining a glass that didn’t need polishing. “No, don’t say anything because you have to tell him first.”

Grinning, I was grateful that she understood. “I do.”

“Well, you can tell him in just a sec.” She lifted her chin just slightly toward the door to the bar.

I glanced out the window to see that the world outside was dark and that Spike was striding to the door, looking lost in his own thoughts. As soon as he pushed open the door, he saw me. His brow furrowed, worry immediately filling his features. “Pet? What’re you – ”

He let out a big oof as I slammed into him, my arms going around his waist. I buried my face in his chest, snuggling my cheek against the soft cotton of his t-shirt and inhaling his familiar scent. “Guess what!”

Gently taking me by the shoulders, he pushed me back. “What?” His blue eyes – those precious windows to his soul even when he was soulless – swirled with fear, hope, and love.

I couldn’t be too exuberant, not when he looked at me like that, so I ran my fingertips over his cheek. “You’re going to be a Daddy.”

He blinked at me as if he wasn’t sure what I was saying was real. “I am?” I softly kissed his lips, which were hanging open, and he briefly kissed me back before pulling away again. “I am?”

This time, I beamed. “You are.”

He drew me up into a tight embrace, tucking his face in my neck, and I felt his tears against my skin. When I emitted a little squeak at just how close he was holding me, he let go and stepped back, his hands on my elbows. “Sorry.”
I laughed. “It’s okay.” Then, the anxiety came back. “Of course, we have to get past the second beta test, and then, the six-and-a-half-week ultrasound, and the first trimester.” This was given that nothing untoward and nothing supernatural happened.

“Then, we’ll be in the clear?”

“I think so, yes. For the most part.”

He studied my face. “How are you feeling?”

I sighed. “Fine. And if you keep asking me that too much, it’s going to get old really fast.”

He ignored me. “Should you even be in here with all the smoke?”

I gestured at the empty bar. “No one is here, so no one is smoking.”

“What about third-hand smoke? The walls are saturated with the stuff.”

“To a vampire.”

He caught my lifted eyebrows, and his shoulders slumped a fraction. “I’m being overprotective.”

“Just a little bit,” I teased, taking his hand in mine and tugging him forward. “C’mon. Sit with me while I finish my po’boy.”

“Okay, love. Then, you’re going home to rest,” he said sternly.

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Sing me a new tune.”

“And you’re taking the car.”
“How will you get home?”

“I’ll catch a cab.” I so could not picture Spike in a cab though he did live in New York City for a long while, so maybe there was cab-taking? Then, he grinned as if he’d won the lottery, interrupting my musings about his days as an evil vampire in the Big Apple. “We’re having a baby.” Then, he shouted, “Hey, Alex, we’re having a baby!”

Chapter End Notes

And there you go... :o)

Btw, if you ever go to NOLA, check out Mother's and get the roast beef po'boy with debris. Mmmm... Mother's is not a hole in the wall on the way from Royal to Frenchman. It's actually near the casino on the opposite side of Canal. So, Buffy is visiting a different, made up hole in the wall for her po'boy.

Now, I need to get to writing.
The night of the forbidden patrol

I had too many extra hormones inserted in too many places, and the heartbeat ultrasound felt like forever away. During the wait, I was not allowed to do anything physical whatsoever, the extra shifts at work were not distracting or stimulating enough, and I had no idea why the blue god had shown up at Dawn’s apartment. All I knew was that Ilyria’s message had been vague, and she was scary.

All this made for an extremely restless and grumpy Slayer.

My muscles were aching with the need to release pent up energy, and my nurse and Dr. Google said that what I really wanted to do was off limits.

Spike, my usual source of comfort, was driving me batty because he was being so hover-y. He wouldn’t even let me pick up items around the house. How could cleaning the pots and putting them away possibly constitute exertion of any sort? I didn’t want to even think about his cleanout of the cabinets and fridge. All that money down the drain. He’d thrown out so many of my favorites, including all the soda (but none of his beer) and any sort of cleaning supplies that had chemicals in them (aka all of them).

He’d also packed up all the shoes with any sort of heels in a giant box that he’d then locked in the shed in our backyard. As if a little lock could keep me out. Still, I’d humored him. But what was I supposed to do without my pair of favorite chunky-heeled boots? The extra height was part of my vampire-intimidation repertoire. There really was something to the power heel.

Honestly, if Spike did one more crazy, over-the-top thing, I was going to kill him. So far, I’d managed to bite my tongue, mostly because I knew he was doing it out of love, and he frequently overran my protests with his decadent foot rubs.

I had to admit that his male protectiveness reminded me a tad bit of Riley, which was not an association I ever thought I’d make with Spike and was so not an association I planned on sharing with Spike.

So, sue me, I was taking a short, late night, after-work stroll through St. Louis Cemetery #1, one of two Catholic cemeteries near the Quarter. The cemetery was one of the oldest in New Orleans. It was also a huge tourist attraction because Marie Loveau, the voodoo queen, and other historical figures were buried there. Newly turned vamps tended to gravitate to the old burial grounds for some
reason that even Spike hadn’t figured out. There was no inherent magical pull to the cemetery, yet
vampires and other demons often sought it out.

If I happened to run into a baby vamp, it couldn’t hurt to do an easy kill. I only had one bit of
hesitation about even doing this, and it wasn’t about it being too dangerous. What if slaying
something only made me crave it more?

I innocently meandered along the paths, lingering in the areas with older tombs, pretending to be
very interested in their carvings and architecture while keeping my senses heightened. The air was
cooler and a bit dryer than normal, an indication of the coming winter. The sky was clear and the full
moon bright above. Didn’t a lone girl standing in the middle of a creepy, historical cemetery look
enticing? I pulled my hair up into a high bun and tried my best to make my face look innocent and
my neck appear longer and appetizing.

After thirty minutes with nothing to show for my efforts, I heaved a disappointed sigh and reluctantly
started toward the gate and in the general direction of where I’d parked the car.

Rolling my eyes heavenward in annoyance, I spoke aloud to no one, “You didn’t even have the
decency to show up and try to eat me.”

Right at that moment, I felt familiar tingles on the back of my neck along with something else
unidentifiable. Score! Deftly pulling a stake from where it was tucked in the side of my (flat-heeled)
boot, I spun in the direction I’d sensed the vampire and found myself face to face with three
bloodsuckers. They didn’t exactly look like the typical fledglings either. Discerning new vampires
from the rest wasn’t about cleanliness, not in New Orleans with the above ground burials. I could tell
they weren’t newbies because of the power that emanated from them. Damn.

“Slayer!” the tallest male hissed. “You’ll make a tasty treat.”

“Ron, be careful. This one’s a powerful one.” The slighter male figure sidled up beside the big
redhead, running a hand through his longer dark hair.

“Really, Harold,” the trailing female said with derision, her form in shadow. “You’re much too
tentative. Where’s your courage? There’re three of us and one of her.”

“Shut up, Miney,” Harold said, shoving her shoulder. With a low roar, he shifted into game face and
sniffed the air. “She smells funny. You two need to pay attention to things like that. It could mean – ”
Ron lunged at me before Harold could finish. The big vampire took a swing at my head. He was quicker than I thought, and he grazed my shoulder as I dodged. Still, he stumbled with the force of his unrealized attack.

I dropped into a ready stance and grinned. “What do you mean I ‘smell funny’? Shouldn’t I be saying that to you, you being dead and all? Being a rotting corpse is kind of odiferous.” Spike, on the other hand, smelled like home.

Ron growled and charged again. “I’m not rotting.” He tested the air around me. “And you’re right, Harry. She smells... off.” A strange smile spread broadly across his face.

To wipe the disconcerting expression off his face, I swung a punch that connected hard and gloriously with his jaw. Before I knew it, their banter had ceased, and I found myself in the middle of an all-out brawl with three vampires, who turned out to be much more adept at fighting than a group of baby vamps. They also seemed to be almost toying with me instead of desperately going for the kill.

As I narrowly ducked a roundhouse from the female vampire, I grabbed her by the hair and jerked back. She howled in pain. There was a gush of something warm and wet between my legs, and panic set in. A gasp escaped my throat, and one of the male vamps shoved me hard from behind. Whirling, I protected myself from the onslaught of arms and legs, punches and kicks. Somehow, none of them hit my stomach, but the barrage was so intense and my anxiety so high that I found myself backed against one of the tombs.

The searching for an accidental slay was turning out to be at the top of the very-bad-ideas list.

Suddenly, a burst of dust flew around me, and I blinked through Ron’s leftovers, which were floating toward the ground. Spike was in front of me, his ridges and fangs firmly in place as he growled and jerked Harold away from me. The dark-haired vampire tripped over his own feet and fell in a heap in the grass. As he scrambled to push himself back upright, I squatted and snagged his ankle, pulling him down again. Spike drove his stake home.

My eyes scanned the shadows and found the female vampire watching with eerie quietness, her shoulders hunched and her eyes glowing golden. Before Spike or I could make a move, she ran. I tossed my stake after her, but she swerved left and the wooden weapon bounced off a tomb column and clattered to the pavement.
Instead of chasing after her, Spike addressed me. “What the fuck are you doing?”

My cheeks flooded with heat. “You’re driving me crazy!”

“You’re not following the doctor’s orders!” Spike growled.

“And you’re acting like I can’t handle anything!” My hands balled into fists. “In case you haven’t noticed in all the years you’ve known me, I really need a way to let off steam!” God, I sounded like Faith.

“And you can wait until you’re cleared!” Spike stalked toward the tomb and scooped up my errant stake.

I felt like I was at the end of my rope. “All I do is follow guidelines!”

“And you’re the one who wanted this!”

Fury filled my chest. “Does that mean I can’t complain? Or, or be miserable with the situation? Am I just supposed to happily go along with it like a robot?” I was tempted to snatch my stake from him, but I held back as I remembered something else. Instead, my hand went to my abdomen. I still didn’t know what was now saturating my panty liner. Fear tugged at my heart. I needed to check the fluid for blood. Tears filled my eyes, and I blinked my eyes rapidly to prevent more liquid overflow. “And I thought you wanted this, too.”

Spike softened. “Oh, pet. You know I do.” He noticed the movement of my hand. “What’s wrong?” His words of concern came out in a lisp with his fangs in place.

“Something gushed.” The car, home, and bathroom seemed lightyears away. “I mean, it has before, but this time, it was in the middle of –”

“So, check.” He nodded at my hand.

“In the cemetery?” That wasn’t a half-bad idea.
He lifted an eyebrow at me as he placed a gentle hand on top of mine. “Thought you said there were too many rules. No one’s around. And I seem to recall that we’ve done much more intimate things in public.”

I laughed. He was right. I’d seen much worse in the Quarter, too, which was a much more public place than Sunnydale ever thought about being. I’d seen men dressed in business suits passed out on side streets, men and women headed to orgy houses, people of all ages doing drug deals in broad daylight, and a woman who pulled down her pants in front of me and took a dump on the sidewalk. Still... 

“Will you be my lookout?” I traced my fingers over the ridges in his forehead. I knew every dip and curve of them by heart.

He kissed my temple and turned away, true to his word. “Of course. If it helps, I don’t smell any blood.”

“Oh, good.” I fumbled with the button on my dust-covered jeans and tugged them down. The moonlight revealed nothing but creamy white-blue discharge, the aftereffects of shoving estrogen and progesterone up my vagina. My heart thundered in my ears. “It’s okay.” I hastily pulled up my pants and buttoned them.

When Spike faced me again, I saw that his ridges were gone and that my relief was mirrored in his blue eyes. “Thank god.” He took me by the hand. “If something happened, I’d never forgive myself.”

I sighed and pulled him in for a hug. “Me, either.”

He broke away first and tucked my hand in his elbow. As we headed toward the exit, he said, “So, did I hear one of the Three Musketeers was named ‘Ron’?”

I kicked a pebble with the toe of my boot. “Yeah. The redhead. And the dark-haired one was Harold. Not sure the female’s name. Miney or Whiney or something. Why?”

“They named themselves after the witches in Harry Potter?”
I gave him an incredulous look. “You read Harry Potter?”

He drew his shoulders back and put his nose in the air. “Sure, I have. Everyone has. It’s literature, isn’t it?”

I smirked. “Dawn?”

He sighed and admitted, “Dawn. After the retrieval. She sent them to me to read on that app on my phone. What’s it called?”

“But the Kindle app?”

“Yeah.”

I frowned as we stepped over the threshold to the cemetery. “Think they were witches, too? I felt something... different about them.”

Spike’s eyebrows drew together. “Vampire witches? Rare but not unheard of. I was too busy rescuing you to notice anything of that sort.”

Every little thing made me think of Illyria’s visit. “Think it could be tied to – ”


I hugged his arm tighter. “We should tell Emily and her Watcher, just in case.”

“And Rupert and Red.”

I nodded. “Yep.”

“In the meantime, let’s get you home, so you can rest.”
“A fantastic plan.” My whole body was sending out flares, letting me know how emotionally and physically drained I was. “Can you at least let me have my shoes back?”

Now, it was Spike’s turn to smirk. “Went a little overboard, didn’t I?”

“Um, yes.” Understatement of the year.

“All right then.”

“I promise I’ll be more careful. No more patrols for Buffy.” I’d learned my lesson.

“At least until exercise restriction is lifted,” Spike amended. “I believe, however, that I have some ways that we can get around said restriction and have you... let off some steam without you know...”

I glanced up at him. “Oh, really?”

“Yeah. I’ve had more than enough time to think about it.” My poor vampire. He was as eager for action as me. How could I forget about that?

I removed my arm and maneuvered in front of him, standing on tiptoes for a generous kiss. My whole body felt like it was coming alive as he returned my affection. When I finally needed oxygen, I pulled back and tilted my head at him. “Show me?”

“Can’t wait, eh, love?”

I simply beamed at him.

Chapter End Notes

So, the cemetery is actually named St. Louis Cemetery #1. All the little observations
from the Quarter, I've witnessed...except the last lady. She only squatted to pee.
And Kathleen (and I think OffYourBird), you called it! Buffy is so restless.
Also, I can’t tell you how many times I worried about blood.
My phone vibrated again in my palm. I jogged the screen to life. Another text... no multiple texts in my group chat. I opened the messages app, my leg jiggling.

Giles wrote, “We really should discuss this matter on the phone and not over text messaging. Someone could hack into the system and read our texts.”

Willow replied, “And the government might be watching, Giles, we’re all in different time zones, and you’re constantly traveling. My head hurts from trying to figure out a time to make it work.”

“I’m not traveling now. I’ve been at home for nearly two weeks.” I smiled. I could almost picture Giles’s disgruntled expression.

“Phone tapping has been around since at least the 1890s, but I highly doubt that anyone is going to be reading these texts and thinking much of it,” George, Emily’s Watcher, texted.

“See, Giles,” Willow said.

“Nevertheless, we should talk in code,” Giles insisted.

Emily joined the conversation. “Y’all are texting too early in the morning for me. Some of us patrol almost all night, you know? To get this over with so I can go back to sleep: we didn’t find anything out about the HPV’s from the usual sources (i.e., books, online forums). But I do have an idea about who to shake up a bit to find out more.”

“Code! Use a code for patrol! HPV’s?” Giles typed. “Human papillomavirus?”

Emily replied, “I have no idea how to code ‘patrol.’ Walking through cemeteries with a big wooden stick? That seems much more obvious.”
“You tried,” George noted. He was much younger than Giles and very tech savvy. “That’s the main thing.”

“Not the virus. And I thought patrol was code-friendly,” Willow said.

“Thanks, George and Willow. So encouraging,” Emily wrote.

“It doesn’t do much good if the code is one that no one understands but the person texting,” Giles grumped.

I imagined Emily rolling her eyes with her next text; well, I rolled my eyes. “Harry Potter vampires, Giles.”

I decided to join the group. “Spike can go with you, Em.”

“Thanks. I could use the help.”

Giles wrote, “Thanks for the clarification. I’ll look through the texts here. Er, the actual books, not text messages. Good Lord, this texting thing is much more tedious than an actual conversation. There is some bit of prophecy that I read about a month or so back that talks about vampires who are witches. It was tied to vague portents about an apocalypse involving multiple hellmouths.”

“I’ll speak with the coven here, too,” Willow said. She didn’t bother pointing out that Giles was not being very sneaky in his texts. No doubt, he gave up. “And hey, Buffy, good luck this morning.”

My cheeks turned pink though no one could see that but the local fertility clinic receptionist, another couple sitting kinda far away, and Spike. “Thanks.”

“Good luck about what?” Emily asked. Oops. She didn’t know about me being pregnant.

At that moment, Spike reached over and squeezed my knee. “You okay, love?”

I switched off my phone and smiled at him before laying my head on his shoulder. “Yeah.
Volunteered you for something.”

“What’s that now?” He took my hand in his.

“To go with Emily to help her,” I glanced at the other people in the waiting room to make sure no one was listening, “knock some information out of someone.”

He chuckled. “Can do, pet.”

“You should have all the texts.” Spike was in the group, too.

He played with my thumb. “Not really worried about that right now. It’ll keep.”

“I can’t believe we’re here,” I said softly, studying our hands together.

“Me either.” Spike had been trying his best to hear the heartbeat by pressing his ear to my belly. His efforts had been to no avail though. When my worry spun off into the world of catastrophizing, he assured me that my heartbeat was simply too loud for him to hear anything else.

“Buffy Summers?” a nurse called from the doorway.

I stood hastily. “Here!”

“Good morning. Come on back.” The dark-haired, youthful nurse looked familiar and peered at my chart as we cleared the doorway. “Date of birth?”


She smiled with patience. “I’m good, love working here, and am so not ready for Thanksgiving. Y’all?”
“We’re nervous,” Spike offered.

“Understandable.” She gestured us into what was now one in a series of familiar exam rooms. “Put on the gown and sit on the table. You can leave your dress on but remove your underwear. I’ll be with you in a minute.”

I shucked off my sandals and tugged off my panties, slapping them against Spike’s open palm. “You know? This whole me-getting-half-naked thing in front of strangers is really for the birds.”

Spike opened his mouth, and by that twinkle in his eye, I knew he was planning on saying something sarcastic, but he shifted at the last second. “You know I’d do anything for you if I could, including trade places with you.”

“That was not what you were going to say!” I protested.

“Keeping my trap shut.” I knew exactly what he was doing, and I was letting him do it. Distraction thy name is Spike.

“Come on!” I pouted.

“Technically, there is witchcraft that could be done, and it’d take some finagling, but it could happen. Didn’t Red plan on changing that bloke, AJ or whatever his name was, into a girl?”

“RJ,” I corrected. I pretended to thoughtfully stare at the ceiling. “And I believe she was.”

He pointed at me in confirmation. “That’s the name. And she was. Harris and I stopped her little chant.”

“Thank you, by the way, for stopping me from killing Robin.” I’d never thanked him. “I haven’t thought about that in years!”

He arched an eyebrow at me. “If I remember right, you were going to do more than ‘kill’ him. You
were going to blow him up with that missile launcher you used to kill Big Blue. Had to wrestle it away from you.”

“Oh yeah.” I perched on the paper-covered examination table and fussed with the flimsy cover that was supposed to go over my legs. I changed the subject away from the embarrassing part about how I’d chased Spike down trying to get back said missile launcher. “So, you’d let Willow turn you into a girl, so you could carry a child for us? Would you want to?”

Spike slouched back into the chair across from me, only the slight tension in his jaw giving away how nervous he was, too. “Never said that I’d relish the idea, love. While I’m right fond of all your girlie bits, I have no desire to have any of my own.”

I laughed just as the nurse knocked on the door. Spike and I both sat up straighter as she entered the room and dimmed the lights.

“Y’all ready?” She pulled on some gloves and made casual conversation. “My name is Lindsey. Forgot to introduce myself earlier. I know this is the hardest part, so we’ll get going fast as we can. Go ahead and lay back and scoot down to the end.” As I followed her familiar instructions, she sat on the rolling stool and wheeled up to me. The ultrasound machine was already on and ready. “You know this will be a transvaginal ultrasound, right?”

I peered down at her. I’d read online that this type was used when babies were too small to be detected by the ultrasounds done on the outside of the belly. “Yeah. Used to those.”

She didn’t laugh even though I was halfway joking. “I imagine that you are. Just a warning. Expect some bleeding later. It’s normal.”

“Got it.” My other nurse, Elaine, had already counselled me about the same thing.

Lindsey motioned to Spike. “C’mon over. You’ll want to be close.”

Spike didn’t need more permission and stood at my side, reclaiming my hand.

Then, she adjusted the paper modesty cover, which I continued to think really wasn’t all that modest, and prepared the wand with clear gel. Clutching Spike’s hand in a firm grip that would have broken any other guy’s hand, I held my breath and stared at the screen as she inserted the device and slowly
began searching my womb. Shapes came and went into view, and then, she found it: a roundish shape with a little stick within it.

As she moved the wand inside me, she explained what we were seeing, “So, there’s the yolk sac and that’s the fetal pole.”

“So, that’s?” Spike’s voice was full of more awe than I’d ever heard.

“That is your baby.” Lindsey sounded happy. “Congrats.”

“Our baby?” I couldn’t look away from the screen. He or she looked like a little grain of rice.

“Your baby,” she assured. Her free hand moved to some buttons on the ultrasound control board. “Let me just take a quick measurement here, and then, I’ll let you hear the heartbeat.”

“Oh my god.” A grin slowly spread across my face.

Lindsey worked to finish whatever calculation she was making. I felt Spike’s arm go around my shoulders as he leaned down to be close to me. I touched my head against his as the nurse pushed some more buttons.

Then, the sound of the baby’s heartbeat filled the room, a fast, strong little sound.

“A hundred and twenty-six beats per minute,” Lindsey announced.

“So fast! Is that normal?” I asked worriedly.

“It’s perfect,” she assured. “I’ll be sending these results over to your nurse at the other clinic. You should hear from them today with further instructions regarding bloodwork and medication.”

“Thanks.” I glanced at Spike who was staring at our baby with tears in his beautiful blue eyes. I kind of hoped the baby would have his eyes, and then, I realized that having a baby with him might actually be a reality. Before with the rising beta numbers, I knew intellectually that I was pregnant,
but now, with the heartbeat in my ears, my heart came up to speed with that truth. The heartbeat made it real.

“We’re going to have a baby,” I whispered so that he turned his eyes to meet mine.

He smiled through his tears. “We are.” He turned back to the image of our son or daughter. “She’s got a good strong heart like her Mum.”

“Oh, Daddy has a strong heart, too.” Even if Spike’s heart didn’t physically beat anymore, it was certainly one of the strongest and most loving I’d ever known.

Chapter End Notes

I had way too much fun with the texts...

Everything about IVF is so scientific and...like you're following a formula that hearing the heartbeat make is more real than anything else. I am blown away that women get pregnant so easily...so many things go into making a child happen. And it's even more amazing that scientists can help couples who struggle. And more and more, they are starting to realize that the men contribute, too.
The night Aunt Dawn moved in

There was a loud crash from the living room, and my little sister said a string of curse words that I’d never heard come out of her mouth. Ever. Then, there was a scraping sound as if something was being dragged across the hardwood floor.

This got me out of bed post haste because not much good was associated with those sounds. I hurried across the cold bathroom tiles to peer around the doorframe at my sister who was red-faced and half-dragging, half-kicking a particularly heavy box of her belongings. Her long hair was askew and her jacket – a jacket much too warm for a New Orleans December – was half-hanging off her shoulder. She had to be sweating buckets.

“You okay there?” I asked, not bothering to hide my humor now that I saw that nothing was bodily wrong with her.

She righted herself and glared at me while trying and failing to blow a strand of her long, dark hair out of her field of vision. “Does it look like it? And you’re supposed to be in bed!”

“How do you know that?”

Giving up on puffed air doing anything for her, she raked her hand through the strands and crossed her arms. “What’d you think? Spike and I wouldn’t talk on the way from the airport?”

I almost laughed but didn’t. “Well, no.”

Dawn made a face at me. “No, we wouldn’t talk? Or no, you didn’t think we would?”

This time, I laughed, but the sound faded on my lips as Spike appeared in the doorway, both eyebrows raised at me. He shifted two of Dawn’s boxes to one arm and pointed back toward the bedroom. “Bed. Now.”

Chastened and more than a little annoyed, I hurried back to the bed, leaned back against the headboard, and propped my feet back atop the pillow Spike had tucked under me earlier. Taking a sip of tepid water out of the large, half-empty cup we’d pilfered from the movie theater, I held my breath and waited for the inevitable appearance of my vampire.
Spike’s eyes were flashing as he rounded the corner, his teeth gritted. “Are you still bleeding?”

“No!” I’d been spotting for the last few days and called Spike from work in a panic the first time it happened. He’d left a message for Elaine, my nurse, who’d given him instructions to pick me up. Luckily, Mary was understanding and told me to take all the time I needed. Spike had kept me under house arrest since then, and I was absolutely going crazier than before. On the third day, Crystal had texted and offered to bring over some chicken gumbo and watch some Netflix, but I’d turned her down because Dawn was moving in.

“Your nurse said feet up, rest, and water!”

“And I’ve been doing it!” I held up the water to him. “See. All with the drinking!”

He peered over the edge of the glass. “It’s only halfway gone.”

“This is the second glass this evening! And I haven’t been bleeding in six hours! And Elaine said dark brown blood was okay. Might even be the applicator. And you’re so doing it again!”

“Doing what again?” Dawn appeared in the doorway behind Spike, question marks in her eyes.

“Being Mr. Overprotective and not letting me do anything!” I informed my sister.

“But I thought you were bleeding?” my sister asked tentatively.

“See!” Spike gestured behind him without glancing at Dawn. “Even your sister agrees!”

Dawn’s eyes widened in an “uh oh” expression at me. “Agrees with what? I don’t even know what I’m agreeing about. With. Whatever.”

I sat up a little straighter, my knees angling up. I fixed Spike with challenging stare. “Do you smell any fresh blood?”
Spike growled at me, and mindful of my sister in the room, he delicately sniffed between my knees. “No.”

“So, did you and Dawn get all of her stuff in?” I was so ready for him to go to work.

“Hold on,” Dawn said, dashing off to check the living room. “All accounted for!”

Determined to hold onto my strong stance, I set my mouth at Spike. The problem was the corner of his mouth was lifted in a half-smirk of relief and humor. Damn it. The guy wouldn’t let me stay angry with him, and this forced bed rest-y thing was making me angry all on its own. I reached my hand out for him, and when he acquiesced, I tugged him along until his lips were near mine. Kissing him gently, I said, “I’m relieved, too. Go to work. Dawn and I will be fine. We had George set the wards. Nothing is going to get us.” The magical wards were connected to an app in all our phones; they got tripped, and we’d have all kinds of help coming to the rescue.

“Fine. I love you,” he ran his hand over my belly, “and this little one, too.” I reminded myself that we weren’t even to week ten yet, and he still wasn’t able to hear baby’s heartbeat. Hence, the anxiety.

“I love you, too.”

Dawn appeared back in the room as Spike grabbed the car keys and phone. Back to serious mode, he instructed her, “Don’t let her do too much, and call me if you need anything.”

Giving him a little salute, she grinned. “Got it. Thanks for the pick up at the airport.” Then, she gave him a big hug. “And for letting me stay with you guys.”

Spike looked extremely pleased by her sign of affection. “Anytime, Bit.” He ran his fingers over the wool of her coat sleeve. “You won’t need that here.”

As if she suddenly realized how hot she was, Dawn shrugged off her coat. “You’re telling me!” She heaved a sigh. “You know, I thought I knew New Orleans was muggy and humid because you told me so. But phew. Experiencing it is a whole other animal!”

Spike glanced back at me and hesitated. I reiterated my position, “Go. We’ll be fine.”
He nodded. “I’m coming home early. Alex and John offered to close up.”

“Okay.”

As soon as the front door was shut and locked, Dawn bounced on Spike’s side of the bed, snagging the TV remote off his pillow and leaning against the headboard. “So, any news?”

I emulated my little sister. “Any news about what?”

“I dunno.” She started listing things. “Illyria, Angel, those HPV’s, the prophecy Giles mentioned, Willow, baby?” She paused and pressed her lips together. “Spike?”

I laughed. “Where do you want me to start?”

Dawn pushed her lips to one side as if considering the choices. “Spike.”

I decided to get through her list with as much expediency as possible, so we could relax. “He’s a wreck because of the bleeding. Because no one’s been able to get in touch with Angel or Illyria, because even when Spike’s been out with Emily to find Hermione, they’ve come up empty-handed.”

“Wouldn’t Faith know where Angel is?” Faith was the person in our circle who’d most recently known Angel’s whereabouts.

I shook my head. “No. I called her. She and Robin are in Cleveland still, dealing with some demon circle there, and a couple of Slayers in that region who’ve disappeared off the grid.”

“Oh, crap. Slayers have disappeared?”

“Yeah. One from Canada named Natalie, and the other’s from Minnesota. They didn’t show for the Quarterly conference Face Time meeting that Andrew organizes. Giles has Faith’s girlfriend on it. She’s the Chicago Slayer.”
“Joy?” Dawn guessed.

“Yeah. I think that’s her name. How do you know about her?”

“Faith’s been using that new app, Snapchat, a lot. They post a lot of videos.” At my horrified expression, Dawn explained, “Nothing Slayer-y or sexual. Well, maybe a little of the second. They go out a lot. Dancing.”

I lifted a hand. “More than I wanted to know. Do you have this Snapchat?” God, I sounded old. God, I sounded like Mom! “And do you and Thomas. . .”

“I do, and we don’t. Did I tell you I broke things off with him?”

“Oh, really? Spike will be pleased.”

“I know. But it wasn’t because of Spike’s dislike of him. I just got bored.” She grinned. “I’ll show you the app later. It’s fun.”

“Okay.” I was cool with my little sister keeping me in the know.

“How’s the baby? Bleeding’s not good, right?”

“Well, no, but it’s not been a lot. Just spotting. It’s apparently really common in IVF pregnancies for some reason, and it’s also really common with repeated use of the applicator for one of the meds. If you bump up against your cervix, it can cause some bleeding. The nurse said to rest and as long as it’s mostly dried blood – dark brown – it’s okay.” I was so paranoid that every time I wiped after using the bathroom, I held my breath. Seeing the dark tinge to the discharge was taking some getting used to.

“Gotcha. Still. That’s kinda scary.”

“Tell me about it. I’m so glad you’re here.” Dawn would provide some nice distraction from being in
my head. “So, your program is good with you taking a short time off?”

She nodded. “They are. I explained your situation, and as long as I work on my thesis here, they’re good with me shifting some course work to another semester. I just have to have weekly phone meetings with my advisor and turn work in throughout. It’s all good, and I’m really glad to be here. A god king who lost her ability to travel to different dimensions and who’s used to want-take-have with the whole world scares the crap out of me. I’d much rather be around family.” She drew her knees up to her chest and shuddered.

I gently touched her arm. “It’s the best idea. Until we have some idea of what’s going on.”

She laid her cheek against her left kneecap and smiled at me through her fear, her long hair fanning over her shoulders. “Thanks for getting it.”

“Plus, we don’t get much sister time anymore.” I missed my sister more than she knew.

“We don’t. Spike isn’t gonna know what to do with the two of us.” She grinned.

I ran my hand over her hair. “He’s very excited that you’re here. He went grocery shopping just for you.”

“Did he get the –”

Before Dawn’s arrival, Spike had been so proud of his purchases and had deposited all the bags on the bed before stowing the items away in the kitchen. “Everything he knows you like to eat and drink.”

Her eye lit up. “Anchovies?”

I wrinkled my nose in disgust. “Yes. Even the anchovies.”

She pumped her arm without moving her head up. “Yes!”
“Just don’t grill them,” I said sternly.

“Huh? Why not?”

“Grilled meat makes me want to hurl.”

Her blue eyes brightened with this tidbit. “Like really? Do you have morning sickness? Or cravings?”

“No morning sickness. No weird cravings. Well, actually, that’s a lie. I’m putting really spicy sauce on everything.” My breasts were majorly sore, but I hadn’t had any nausea or vomiting. Spike was also excited that I could tolerate the heat like he could. “But grilled meat smells horrendous.”

She sighed as if completely put out. “Fine. I won’t grill any anchovies. Not that I was planning on it.”

“Good. I can eat fried whatever though.”

Dawn shrugged. “That’s the good stuff anyway.” She frowned as if just remembering something. “Any news from Giles or Willow?”

“No much from Willow yet; she’s still gathering info from the witches she knows in Virginia. And Giles’s prophecy is majorly vague as most prophecies are. He’s taking a page from Wesley’s mistakes and not rushing into things, but he is digging further and keeping us in the loop. So far, all he has is that there is a prophecy about witches and possibly vampire witches casting a spell at multiple hellmouths simultaneously to gain some sort of power. Somehow, it’s also tied to the either the blood of powerful women or... cows.”

Dawn made a face. “Cows?”

I shrugged. “Don’t ask me. That’s all I know.”

“Speaking of cows. I’m assuming Spike stocked the freezer with frozen nuggets?”
Now, I made a face. “Yes, but explain this logic of yours, please?”

She grinned. “Well, I’m hungry, and since you can’t eat grilled meat, I’m assuming burgers are off the list, so then, I thought of the Chick-fil-A cow, who is always saying to eat more chicken. So, then, I thought of chicken nuggets. Most nuggets are fried. And,” she gestured at me, “you just said you can eat fried meat.”

I laughed again. “I do not want to know what goes on in that head of yours, do I?”

She bounced off the bed and practically skipped toward the kitchen. “Nope! Chicken nuggets coming right up!”

“With the spicy sauce!” I called after her.
The morning before the big meeting at Christmas-time

My butt hurt. My butt hurt a lot. I recapped the syringe, tossed it into the overflowing red sharps container, frowned, and rubbed at the giant knot on my left side.

“What’s wrong, love?” Spike’s arms came around me from behind, embracing me lightly.

I leaned back against him and closed my eyes at his touch. “Nothing. Nothing at all because you’re here.”

“Then, why were you rubbing here?” He brought his fingers gingerly to the injection site and the giant painful knot, and I winced. “It’s hard.”

“And it’s my own fault.”

“How so, love?”

“I thought that with my Slayer healing powers, I could inject myself in the same area every day and it not make a difference. But apparently, I was wrong. So, now, I need to switch to giving the injection in the opposite muscle.” The nurse had recommended it, I’d read about switching in the forums, and I’d studiously ignored the advice. “It’s just more awkward with my left hand. But never mind that. We have more important things to worry about.”

“Like wrapping the Bit’s Christmas presents while she’s hanging out with Em?” Spike asked, pushing aside the strap of my tank top and kissing my shoulder so that a ripple of desire coursed through me. The shirt braced by my arm, he ran a finger over the top of my breast before cupping it gently. “Little blue veins.”

I shrugged and nuzzled the concave of his cheek. “Uh huh. Freaked me out, too. Google told me that it’s the increased blood and hormones.”

He squeezed. “And they’re bigger.”
I laughed. “You, of course, would notice that.”

“I notice changes in the woman I love,” he said, slightly affronted, “and more than just what you’re insinuating.”

I pulled his other arm tighter around my mid-section. “Hey. I know you do. I’m looking forward to less time with injections and insertions and patches and more time with you.” I felt so bad about the shift in our sex life.

He turned me in his arms then and cupped my cheek. “I am not worried about what we do between the sheets or outside of the sheets, as it were.” He smiled and then softened. “Do I miss the way it was? Not gonna lie. I do. But I love you for far more than that. Thought you knew.”

I nodded but still avoided his eyes. The guilt wasn’t going away that easily. “I know that.”

“Look. You’re so tired that you can barely stand on your feet half the time. You’re creating a bloody life inside you. I wouldn’t be a proper gentleman to my lady if all I cared about was putting it to you.” He ran his hand over my stomach, the stomach that was still bloated from the medicine but didn’t have a proper bump yet.

I rolled my eyes at him. “Okay. There’s more to us than that.”

“Now see, that’s what I’m saying,” he teased, tucking my hair behind my ear.

“I guess you’re right.” My shoulders sagged. “Half the time lately, I feel like I’m walking through mud. And we might need a new sofa because the one we have now? It totally has some sort of glue on it. Makes it hard to get up.” It was true. I fell on the sofa after work and couldn’t work up the energy to make it to the bedroom, let alone change in my pajamas. For the past few weeks, Spike had been carrying me to bed, helping me change, and cuddling under the blankets with me.

“Has the Bit said anything about the sofa being adhesive?” Dawn camped out on the sofa at night, her boxes half-unpacked with most of her belongings neatly stowed behind the Christmas tree.

I pretended to think about it. “Hmm. Nope.”
“Think it’s the hormones, love.”

“You’re right, you’re right.” I thought back to what Willow said about bodily systems working together. Now I was building another system in addition to my own. I never knew such exhaustion. . . not even when I was depressed all those years ago in Sunnydale. “Should we wrap presents now that Dawn is out for a bit?”

Dawn had taken to hanging out at Emily’s place a few days over the past couple of weeks to study and give us some privacy. She and Spike had spent yesterday evening babysitting Leah and decorating the Christmas tree together. Leah, of course, didn’t know about the baby yet. We didn’t want to confuse her if something should go wrong. If Spike had his way, he wouldn’t tell anyone about the baby until he or she was eighteen. It was a funny thing seeing him be so careful. He was impulsive, rash, and impatient, a front to how much he really cared for those he loved and to how tender his heart was. I shouldn’t be surprised in the least that he was cautious with the pregnancy.

“You know me and wrapping presents,” he joked. He wasn’t the best at finagling the paper and the tape, but he did his best.

“Well, come supervise at least? Hand me the tape?”

“Of course.”

Thirty minutes later, Spike and I were sitting on the hardwood floor in the living room. We were neck deep in wrapping paper, tissue paper, bags, and wrapped and unwrapped presents. Somehow, we’d managed to wrap all of Dawn’s gifts. Spike tried to cut the paper, but maybe because he was left-handed, his lines were often crooked, resulting in a large heap of unusable wrapping paper.

“Let me cut the paper this time!” I insisted, pulling my long hair into a low bun and reaching for the scissors in his hand.

“I got it!” he maintained, holding the scissors away from me. “You just focus on the tape and folding parts.”

“But have you seen our discard pile?” I gestured with both hands at the crumpled scraps of paper.
He put his nose in the air. “All part of the art!”

I patted his knee. “My creative vampire.” He’d written me some beautiful poems over the years. His words never failed to bring tears to my eyes, partly because he cared so much and partly because I’d missed it for so many years.

“That’s right.”

He began trimming off another swath of paper for Leah’s present: a grey-blue-colored Breyer horse named “Wild Blue” and a book called, “The Girl Who Loved Wild Horses.” Spike said the book reminded him of “The Silver Stallion” movie that Leah loved. He was very proud of how he’d picked out her gift. (Luckily, Crystal said she hadn’t bought either item for her yet.) He’d even somehow found Christmas paper with tiny horses wearing sprigs of greenery and red holly berries in their manes and tails.

Gift giving made me think about my family. I hardly ever talked with my biological father anymore, and my real family – the family I’d made – was all going to be in town for the holiday. Spike and I had one more ultrasound before Christmas to confirm the heartbeat and measurements, and then, I could start weaning off medication. We planned to tell at least the major players in our lives as a kind of Christmas/Hanukkah gift. When I thought too much about it, I felt a zing of anxiety through my stomach. I was most nervous about telling Giles, and I had no idea why.

Spike set the horse box in the middle of the paper he’d successfully detached from the roll and folded the paper over one side. “Are you ready for tonight?”

“I think he’ll be happy for us,” I said, drawing out a long length of velvety red ribbon for Leah’s package.

His eyebrows drew together in minute confusion, but then, he refocused on his task, holding the two sides of the wrapping paper in place with one hand and fumbling for the tape with the other. I was falling down on the job. “Who, love?”

“Giles. I’m not sure how he’ll react.” I fingered the ribbon, focusing on the soft material.

“I’m sure he’ll be right over the top like always.” Spike glared at the ends of the package (his least favorite part of wrapping). “And I’ll be right there with him until we suss out what’s going on and put a stop to it if needed.”
Wait. How was telling Giles about the baby going to put Spike over the top? “Are you talking about what I’m talking about? We’re talking about the baby, right?”

Spike chewed his cheek and mashed one end of the paper together, somehow making neatly folded corners that looked halfway decent. “We’re talking about the vampire witches, disappearing Slayers, and the possible Hellmouth situation, which could be tied to our baby. Yes.”

“Oh.”

His head lifted at that, and he arched an eyebrow. “Oh? What’re you talking about, pet?”

Rolling the extra, uncut ribbon back onto the spool, I shook my head. “Just feeling nervous.”

Though I didn’t lift my head, I felt him studying my face. “About Rupert? Never known you to be nervous around your Watcher.”

“Yeah.” I suddenly felt like I was back in high school and asking Giles to do fatherly things – things my dad would never do. The recliner suddenly seemed very interesting as tears filled my eyes.

Spike’s hand rested on top of my fuzzy-sock-covered foot. “Hey. He’s going to be very touched by your gesture.”

I blinked and wiped away the tears before they could get too out of hand. “You think?”

“He is. He may have failed you in many a way, pet, but he loves you like a father. He’d do anything for you.” Spike’s blue eyes were steadfast on me. He knew how Giles had hurt me.

I made a face at him. “He tried to have you killed.” And that... that was why I was so nervous. Would he want to be a grandfather to a child tied to me and Spike? I was afraid he wouldn’t. I shouldn’t be afraid, but I was, and I think that said more about me than him.

“Water under the bridge. It’s not like I haven’t done the same. Neither of us has done anything of
late.”

A laugh bubbled up out of my throat. “True.” I sobered. “I’m worried about what this all means, you know? Illyria, Angel, the Slayers, the vampires. I just wish one thing was straightforward about all of this.”

“Oh, nothing is straightforward when it comes to Angel,” Spike muttered as he tackled the other end of Leah’s gift. Discovering that he’d measured out too much paper to successfully fold the other side, he growled with impatience and shoved at the package.

My heart aching for the pain he’d had in his relationship with Angel, I realized I could handle at least this one little problem. “Hey! I got this.”

Slipping in front of him so that I was cradled against his abdomen, I picked up his hand and kissed his palm. Then, I scooped up the scissors, trimmed the paper, and neatly finished the wrapping job. Spike slid the ribbon under the finished product, and together, we added the extra bit of flare to one special little girl’s surprise.

“We make a pretty good team,” he whispered in my ear, giving me the good shivers.

I snuggled into his embrace and sighed with happiness. “That we do.”

Chapter End Notes

The giant knots are so painful and the medications felt endless.

Next chapter, a fun exposition chapter with an appearance from Katie and Liz.
The night of the big meeting

Chapter Notes

Hope you enjoy your parts, yellowb and OffYourBird!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I don’t know what to say, Buffy.” Giles’s eyes were misted over, and he peeled off his glasses with one hand, still holding the grey onesie with “Pop Pop: Because ‘grandfather’ is for old guys” emblazoned on it in the other.

Unable to help myself, I perched next to him on George’s leather sofa and gave my Watcher a big hug. “You’re going to make a wonderful grandpa.” Spike, Dawn, and I had arrived at George’s apartment early to surprise Giles, who had flown in from England the previous day. Spike was in the other room, helping George and Emily set up the technology, so we could Facetime the people who couldn’t attend the meeting.

Giles stared at the words, stroking the soft cotton with his thumb. “Are you certain that you want me to – ?”

I leaned my head on his shoulder. “Yes! Of course! I’m sure. I’m surer than sure.”

Dawn plopped down on Giles’s other side and joined in on the hug fest. “We love you, Giles.”

Giles blinked for a moment before his shoulders relaxed, and he put an arm around each of us, leaving the onesie in his lap. “Oh.” He was quiet for a heartbeat too long and then said, “I believe that I love you both very much.”

“We know you do,” Dawn said, looking him in the eye.

“But it’s nice to hear you say it out loud,” I added so that he regarded me, too.

“You know this news about the pregnancy means that you must be on high alert from this point forward.” His hand tightened in his fear, and I gently extricated my shoulder.
“You know? Isn’t that what parents the world over say?” I asked teasingly.

“This is not a joking matter,” he insisted, his tone equal parts tense and gentle.

“You sound just like Spike.”

“As I very well should.” He frowned. “I can’t believe I just said that.” Dawn and I whacked him lightly at the same time. “Ow!” He rubbed the arm I’d hit. “I can admit that I was wrong.” Giles was referring to something else altogether – to a time when he wanted Spike killed.

“’Bout time,” Dawn said, which made me smile. She and Spike really had made up.

“But I had reason to be wary,” he added.

“You did,” I acknowledged, aware of the continued double meaning of the conversation.

He put his glasses back on and adjusted them until they were in a comfortable place. Then, he studied both of us. “I’m proud of both of you and very excited to be a grandfather though the name you chose for me is very undignified.”

“Spike picked it,” I couldn’t help but note. So, my tone was a bit gleeful.

Giles rolled his eyes. “Of course, he did.” He sobered. “He approves of the role I’ll assume in your child’s life?”

Straightening my dress over my knees, I considered a lighthearted approach again, but I settled on serious. “He is.”

Giles picked up the onesie in both hands, stretching the message taut and staring at the words. He pressed his lips together slightly. “I’m very honored.”
The doorbell rang, likely heralding the arrival of Willow and Oz. They had flown in to visit for Christmas and were staying a condo in the French Quarter. Giles was staying with George, but Willow, Oz, and Giles planned to come over to our little shotgun house on Christmas Day. Willow and I were cooking dinner, a throwback to our efforts at Thanksgiving that one year in Sunnydale. Well, my efforts.

George hurried from his dining room to the front door and peered through the peephole. He swung open the door with flourish and grinned as Liz and Katie, the Slayers from Lafayette and Baton Rouge respectively, barreled in. They bore brown paper bags and wore winter beanies despite it being close to sixty degrees outside. We didn’t get much cold weather in Louisiana, and the girls tended to get excited with the slightest drop in temp. I couldn’t say much. When I was their age, I was always cold and wearing coats in the Southern California winters.

I stood to my feet and gave them each a warm hug around their packages. “What’re you guys doing here?”

“Didn’t Emily tell y’all we were coming?” Katie asked, balancing her grocery bag on her hip. She was my height or a little shorter and fond of wearing the same chunky heels I used to wear before Spike confiscated them. (He still hadn’t returned them despite our earlier conversation. I’d been too tired to drag them inside myself.) The vibrant blue streaks in her dark blonde hair made her sapphire eyes shine.

“Nope.”

Emily poked her head around the doorframe. “Perfect timing! We just got everything set up.” She glanced at me. “Thought we could use some extra eyes and ears.”

“Good idea. Where are Kishan and Michael?”

Liz smirked. She was taller than Katie and wore her long brown hair in twin braids over her shoulders. Though the braids made Liz look younger than her age, she was actually five years older than Katie. “Take a wild guess where our Watchers are.”

“Don’t tell me,” I said. “Avery Island.”

Their Watchers were good friends and often went crabbing, fishing, and camping together in New Iberia. They were also far from their families, so proximity made them close. George was more of a
stay-home-and-play-video-games guy, so he usually didn’t go with. Field work was not his favorite thing to do. Luckily, Emily was proficient and adaptable.

“Bingo!” Katie pointed at me with her free hand. “I swear, I think they have a thing.” She addressed Liz. “I know you don’t think so, but. . .”

Liz shook her head vehemently. “They are not a couple. I asked Kishan.” He was her Watcher. He was Indian but grew up in London and trained with Giles.

Katie’s eyes widened to the size of silver dollars. “What?! You did? When did you do that?”

The corner of Liz’s mouth went up. “The other day.”

Katie stood her ground. “Kishan rechristened your dog, ‘Girlfriend.’ That says something right there.” Liz’s standard poodle was named Gershwin.

Liz cocked her head and looked thoughtful. “Good point.”

Crossing his arms, Giles cleared his throat.

Liz blushed. “Where do we set up?” She held up her bag which was sagging on one side.

“What’d you bring?” Dawn asked the younger woman.

Katie grinned. “Stuff for egg nog. Figured we should celebrate even if we’re having a serious pow wow.”

Liz lifted her bag up, the contents shifting. “And snacks. Fresh cracklins, boudin balls, and crab cakes.”

“Oh my god, I really am in Lousiana!” Dawn’s smile was huge.
Liz laughed, the sound big and welcoming. “You are!”

Katie’s eyes lit on the onesie in Giles’s hand. “What’s that?”

“Oh. Um,” Giles fumbled and tried to tuck the bit of cloth into his pocket but failed.

Spike appeared in the doorway then, gave the situation a once over, and nodded to me. I glanced at Dawn who stuffed her hands in her pockets and shrugged.

I held up a hand. “It’s okay, Giles. Really.” I addressed the group. “Spike and I are having a baby.”

Katie and Liz let out simultaneous shrieks of excitement and gave me more hugs, smashing me between arms and lumpy bags. I couldn’t help but beam at their enthusiasm.

“Congrats!” Katie said with sincerity. She gave me a once over. “You’re not showing yet.”

“Thanks. Well, we’re not quite to the second trimester,” I explained. Spike joined me and slipped an arm around my waist. I smiled up at him, leaning into his familiar touch.

“I heard that the first trimester is exhausting,” Liz noted, concern in her brown eyes. “Do you have morning sickness?”

“Surprisingly no. But grilled meat is disgusting. And it’s hard to tell how much the extra hormones are affecting me and how much is the pregnancy.” They gave me confused looks, and I tacked on, “We did IVF.”

Their eyes lit as if that explained a lot, which it did. The most important question they probably had was how Spike could possibly be the father, but I left them hanging on that one. It’d require too much explanation.

George’s voice was gentle. “We should probably get started.”

The group set up the food, and Liz and Katie whipped up some sort of uber-fast Amish eggnog with cooked eggs. The recipe apparently didn’t call for rum, but the girls were of age and added it
anyway. I certainly didn’t mind not having any, but Spike poured himself a glass. Willow and Oz showed up mid-food prep. They were thrilled about the baby, and Willow appropriately gushed over the Pop Pop onesie, which made Giles squirm all over again.

George and Spike managed to call up Faith and Robin on the computer, which was connected to the flat screen TV that was moved into the dining room, and Giles called Xander on his phone and put him on speaker.

Giles spoke first. “We should each take a turn and lay out what we know.” When no one said anything, he started, “The demon world knows that Buffy is trying to conceive, but they don’t know that she’s actually pregnant yet.”

“That we know of.” Spike stood behind my chair at the dining room table, and I reached back for his hand. He rubbed my shoulder instead, and I couldn’t help but relax.

“That we know of,” Giles echoed. “Angel knows, as does his companion, Illyria, who is extremely dangerous.” Contrary to what Spike (and Angel) initially thought, Giles had been devastated that he had not been able to help Fred, whom Willow had held in high esteem. Willow had been unreachable at the time the scientist needed help.

“Which is why I’m here,” Dawn chimed in from her seat next to me. Her eyes widened just slightly as she realized what she said. She amended, “Still can’t believe she just showed up at my apartment.” Not everyone was in the know about Dawn’s origins at my insistence and now Spike’s as well.

“I don’t blame you one bit, little Summers,” Faith said, a concerned expression on her face. She knew about Dawn being a dimensional key, but she was playing her cards much closer to the chest these days.

“You haven’t heard from Angel?” Spike asked the brunette Slayer.

She shook her head on the TV screen. “No. I swear. He’s completely off the grid. He isn’t even answering his emergency phone.”

“You’ll tell us if you do.” I was making a statement, not asking a question.

“Of course!” So, there was just a trace of defensiveness and irritation in Faith’s words despite the
passage of time and the healing between us.

Giles ignored the dynamic and pushed onward. “Angel’s concern that something might happen to Buffy’s child is likely driven by his own guilt and fears about what happened to Connor.”

“The poofter’s hang ups aside, there is some validity to his concerns,” Spike interjected. He meant that he was concerned. He’d privately told me that he didn’t think the others understood the ramifications of what he knew regarding Connor and for that matter, Illyria.

Giles huffed and begrudgingly nodded. “The concern is valid, and that is why I’ve been diligently researching. What I found is, as usual, a vague prophecy about witches who are trying to gain power by casting a spell at the Hellmouths in the world. That spell requires the blood of women. One possible interpretation is that they are looking for the blood of pregnant women. There is an inherent power in – ”

“Or cows,” Xander chimed in, his voice tiny from the speaker phone at the center of the dining table. “You said one of the possibilities would be that they’d use the blood of cows, right?”

Liz and Katie giggled but sobered when Giles shot them a look. Willow and Oz watched with bemused expressions on their faces. The Slayers were suddenly very interested in their egg nog and boudin balls. Liz hid her expression in her cup, and Katie poked at a pile of rice and meat with her fork.

Giles kept going. “There are three main Hellmouths in Cleveland, Easter Island in Chile, and Jakarta in Indonesia. There are also a number of mini-Hellmouths. The one here in New Orleans and the one in Shediac in Canada are just two. I bring up the one in Canada because the Slayer there, Natalie, has disappeared.”

“We located the one in Minnesota,” Robin said. “She was on mission and was being held captive by a group of demons. She went to their lair without informing anyone. Her Watcher and a couple of locals rescued her. I’d say she learned her lesson.”

Faith stood up for the girl. “She’s young. Only seventeen. We all did stupid stuff at that age.”

Robin did a half-roll of his eyes. “Speak for yourself.”
“But Natalie is still missing?” I asked.

Running a hand through her hair, Faith nodded. “Yeah. Her Watcher is on it, and we’ve sent some of the other Slayers and their Watchers to help with the search-and-rescue.”

“Xander and I are working on contacting the Slayers and Watchers near each of the Hellmouths and mini-Hellmouths to make certain that they are on high alert, particularly for witches and possibly vampire witches.”

After swallowing a mouthful of food, Emily raised her hand a few inches. “Spike and I have been searching for the remaining witch-vampire here in New Orleans.”

Spike added, “We shook down the usual suspects. Nothing.”

“Keep trying,” Giles said firmly.

I felt Spike stiffen behind me, his fingers more rigid on my shoulder, but before he could retort, Willow jumped in, “I’ve been talking with the witches at Falls Church and the ones in England. Some of them are sensing a shift in the magic around the Hellmouths and are aware of a burgeoning population of vampires who were practicing witches before being turned. There have always been vampires who dabble in magic, but this is slightly different because they were practicing before they were turned.”

George’s face was grim. “This is in line with the prophecy, and it makes sense that Buffy would run into vampire witches in New Orleans. The city is known for its powerful ties to magic and mysticism. Katie and Liz, we could use the two of you, not necessarily here in the city but in the outlying, less populated areas where people live near the swamps and bayous.”

Liz, Katie, and Emily exchanged glances, and then, Liz said, “We’ll take our Watchers with us. Divide up the smaller communities among the three of us.”

“I’ll help, too,” Spike offered.

“We’re on it in Natalie’s area, too,” Faith reminded the group.
Adjusting his glasses, Giles stared at the paper on the table, checking off another item on his meeting agenda. “We need to contact all the Slayers and witches across the globe. Make sure that they’re safe and accounted for and are aware of the possibility of a spell with vampire witches that involves women. . . or cows.”

“Oz, Xander, and I will activate the call tree,” Willow said as Oz slid an arm around her shoulders.

“Perfect,” Giles said. “I’ll help with that as well and continue to research the prophecies.”

“Kishan, Mike, and I will help with the research,” George said, “as soon as they get back from camping.”

Liz and Katie studiously looked away from one another, but I saw a slight tremor in Liz’s shoulders.

“Thank you, George.” Giles turned to me and Spike. “As much as I hate to say it, you two might need to try and reach out to Angel and/or Illyria.”

I couldn’t help myself and peered up at Spike. I could tell he was struggling to stay neutral, so I responded for us both, “I’m worried that reaching out could lead to more complications than we already have.” I forced myself to avoid the fear on Dawn’s face.

Luckily, Giles caught my little sister’s moment of panic. “You’re right. Illyria is a wild card. That leaves Angel.”

Spike purposefully sighed and loudly. He addressed Faith. “I’ll need his contact info.”

Faith pulled her iPhone out of her back pocket and held it up. “Texting it to you now.”

“All right. That’s settled.” Giles folded his hands and surveyed the group. “No one is to take action without touching base with the rest of the group. Is that clear? With the number of us involved, we can’t afford to go off on our own willy nilly.”

“That’s pretty clear. You can count on us to be neither willy nor nilly,” Oz said, and Willow grinned at him.
Then, Giles said something I never thought I’d hear him say. “But before we get too far into the work, let’s take a brief break for the holidays.”

“Despite the evil afoot?” I couldn’t help myself.

Giles’s eyes were full of mirth. “Despite.”

Faith smirked. “Go, G-man.”

Chapter End Notes

So, my dad is Pop Pop. My brother picked it because he had kids first. lol

And next chapter is Christmas! I hope you don't mind these indulgences between bits of plot...
Dawn watched me with expectation on her face as I opened the present she’d deposited into my hands. It was obviously a book, and as I ripped off the beautiful red and green paper, tears filled my eyes as I read the title: “That’s Not My Monster.” Blinking back the tears, I flipped through. Each page of the board book depicted a different brightly-colored monster with different textures for a baby to feel until the end when it showed a cute monster that was the reader’s monster.

She sounded worried. “Is it okay? I wanted to get something for the baby, and I just kinda ran across it at the bookstore. Made me smile. But apparently, makes you cry.”

I shook my head with emphasis. “No. No. It’s perfect. It’s just that it’s the first gift I’ve received for the baby, and that’s….” How could I possibly explain how I felt? The emotions were too complicated for a pat answer.

My sister plopped down on the sofa next to me. “I guess part of me knew it’d be weird to get you a gift so soon. It’s why I waited to give it to you until the end.”

Spike, Dawn, and I had just finished opening our presents to one another. I’d been especially excited about the home fetal Doppler that Spike bought me. We’d heard the baby’s heartbeat again at nine weeks. We were supposed to get a follow-up ultrasound with the local OB of our choice at eight weeks, but getting in to have it done before the holidays had been difficult. Spike was starting to be able to hear the heartbeat when I laid very still on the bed, and he pressed his ear to the space below my belly button. He wanted me to hear it, too. He also gave me a gift card for the mall, and Dawn and I planned to go after-Christmas shopping.

Dawn had loved the Kindle Paperwhite that we’d picked out for her, and she said she couldn’t wait to download some books for school. She’d already figured out how to charge and download “Gone Girl” and “The Fault in Our Stars.” I’d helped Spike renew his cell phone contract, and he’d gotten the iPhone 5 – in black, of course. Dawn had given me a coupon for a sister mani-pedi date, and she gifted Spike and me a movie pack with “Ruby Sparks” and “The Dark Knight Rises” and a bunch of popcorn and candy with the promise that she’d leave the house. We just had to name the date.

This children’s book just added the icing on top of a perfect day with my vampire, my sister, and the baby growing inside me.
“Buffy?” Dawn’s voice poked a hole in my reverie.

I sniffled and smiled, running my fingertips over the smooth book cover. “It’s okay. I love it and know he or she will, too.” Though the clinic allowed us to find out the sex of the baby after we heard the heartbeat the first time, Spike and I had decided not to. So far, I had no clue or inkling or mother’s intuition about whether the baby was a boy or girl. Weaning off meds would happen after Christmas, and I was already mourning the loss of my beloved nurse and the connection to the clinic.

Spike pushed open the front door, carrying in the folding table and two metal folding chairs that we were borrowing from Crystal. My co-worker appeared behind him with two more chairs. Leah tagged along at her mother’s heels, supervising the activity. She gave me and Dawn a little wave and skip as she entered the house, her white blond hair in two small buns on either side of her head and her pale cheeks tinged pink from exertion.

Leah paused in the living room, and her smile broadened, her eyes lighting up at all the decorations. “Pretty!” Then, she sniffed the air. “Smells so good!”

To protect me from potential gagging and disgust, Spike had prepared chicken and sausage gumbo and a variety of Cajun-y sides, and I’d made a couple of pies. (If I couldn’t stomach the gumbo even with lots of spicy sauce, I planned to munch on the mashed potatoes, greens, and salad.) We were just waiting for Willow, Oz, Giles, and George to arrive. Emily was spending the day with her family. Four extra people would not fit around the small kitchen table.

“Merry Christmas!” I exclaimed, setting aside the book and summoning the energy to stand and pull the little girl into a big hug. I squatted next to her, and she kept her hand on my shoulder. “What did Santa bring you?”

“A record player, and. . .” she hesitated, her forehead crinkling, “a doll that Mommy used to have.”

Crystal arrived back in the living room, shaking her head and smiling at her daughter. “She didn’t get a used doll. She got a Cabbage Patch Doll. Mommy used to have one when she was little. Did you know that they came out again this year?”

Dawn’s eyes grew round as she addressed Leah. “Whoa. You got a Cabbage Patch Doll?”

Leah beamed. “Yes!”

“I think Buffy had one, but I never did.” Dawn looked impressed.
“Mommy said I had to leave her at home.” Leah said, an apology in her tone.

“So, she wouldn’t accidentally leave it here and be upset later,” Crystal clarified. Leah was known to forget some of her horses at our house when she spent the night. Once, I found a mini-figurine tucked in my dresser drawer, and another time, one was in the refrigerator, between the milk and Spike’s container of blood. Luckily, she had no clue what was in the opaque pitcher.

I stroked Leah’s soft hair. “Spike and I have a couple of presents for you, too.”

Having finished setting up the table, Spike emerged from the bathroom. The light in his eyes told me how excited he was to give her the gifts. “We do, little Bit.”

Dawn was used to having to share her moniker and didn’t even flinch. She patted the sofa cushion. “Come sit by me?”

Leah scrambled up next to my sister scooting all the way back and bouncing her feet up and down. Shutting and locking the front door, Spike delivered the gifts we’d wrapped for her, and she looked between both of us and blinked.

“Go ahead,” I urged, giving up on finding my way back to sit on the other side of her. Instead, I sat on my behind and leaned back on my palms. Spike was suddenly by my side and sitting next to me, his fingers back behind him and nudging against mine. I smiled at him.

Leah began ripping off the paper, and she let out a shriek of joy as the toy horse came into view. She hugged the box close, strands of paper dangling down and her eyes closing tightly.

“What do you say?” Crystal reminded.

Her eyes popped open. “Thank you!”

“You’re welcome,” Spike said as I adjusted so I could lay my head on his shoulder.
“Spike picked her out for you,” I pointed out.

There was a knock at the door then, and Spike kissed my temple and hopped to his feet. I moved to stand, and Spike offered me a hand up before peering through the peephole. He opened the door to reveal Willow and Oz along with Giles and George.

Willow smiled at Spike, Dawn, and me. “Happy holidays!”

“Same to you, Red,” Spike said softly as she stepped into our home.

I hugged my childhood friend and then moved to embrace Oz, but he shifted the stack of presents in his arms the same direction I went and then back again twice more until I giggled and gave up. He ended up slinging an arm around my shoulder and squeezing before pushing past and slipping the gifts under the tree. George patted my shoulder as he went by with a few of his own presents. Giles was last, and he tilted his head in that familiar-Giles-way and pulled me in for a tight hug, shifting his brown paper bag to one side.

“Happy Christmas, Buffy.”

My face was smashed against the black wool of his coat. Seems he’d prepared for a colder winter like Dawn. “Merry Christmas, Giles.”

“Now, where can I hang this bloody thing?” he asked, referencing said-coat.

I nodded at the coat rack by the door.

He glanced at the wooden stand, and his eyes misted over.

“Giles? You okay?”

He shook his head, and the moment was gone. “It’s just so like the one in your home in Sunnydale.”

“Huh. I hadn’t really thought of that.” I accepted his coat as he shrugged it off, hanging it up. “It
does. Watcha got in the bag?”

Giles ignored me and moved to embrace my sister. I shut the door behind him and watched my friends and family all greeting one another and introducing themselves to Crystal and Leah. My heart swelled with happiness and love for these individuals. How long had it been since we’d celebrated a holiday together like this? I couldn’t remember.

The only time I could think of was Thanksgiving in Sunnydale, freshman year of college. I knew the memory of Dawn was false, but she’d been right there in the middle of the fray with the Native American spirit until I forced her to hide upstairs in Giles’s bedroom. Spike had had a chest full of arrows. My heart constricted. One stray arrow could have dusted him that day. . . the day I’d let him in for the first time. (I didn’t count the Acathla fight.) I moved to stand next to Spike and slipped my hand into his. He smiled down at me with such love; we’d hated each other so much then.

Willow broke free from her conversation with Crystal and retrieved a plastic Rubbermaid storage container. Handing it to me, she explained, “Cookies. I couldn’t give you some through the phone, so I thought I’d make them for today. Chocolate chip like you like.”

Spike took the dessert from me. “As I recall, you make a mean chocolate chip cookie. Perfect number of chocolate chips. Good crunch with just enough gooey in the center.”

Willow’s eyes brightened. “Why, Spike, I had no idea that you were such a cookie connoisseur.”

Spike smirked and lifted an eyebrow at me. “While your cookies are memorable, I prefer one kind in particular.” Then, he headed to the back of the house and left me standing there with my mouth open. Was he referring to. . . ? No. It wasn’t possible.

Willow gave me a funny look. “What’s he – ?”

Crystal approached then, holding Leah’s hand. Leah clutched her horse still in the box while her mom held the book Spike had picked for her. “We’re headed out, Buffy. Merry Christmas and thank you again for Leah’s gifts. She loves them.”

“Thank you!” Leah bounced up on the balls of her feet. “Merry Christmas!”

“You’re welcome,” I said, smiling at the little girl’s enthusiasm. “You’ll have to tell me her name
“Okay! And read the books when I come over?”

“Of course! Merry Christmas to you both. Thanks for letting us use your table.”

Crystal nodded. “Anytime.”

“Drive safe. Text me when you get home?”

“Will do.”

After they were gone, I made sure that Oz and George who were talking near the Christmas tree didn’t want anything to drink yet, squeezed by Dawn and Giles’s conversation, and found my way into the kitchen where Spike was stirring the gumbo, and Willow was setting the tables.

“Hey,” I greeted them and opened the cabinet where the glasses were kept, pulling out seven and arranging them on the only available counter space next to the pies and Willow’s cookies.

Spike settled the lid back into place on our largest pot and brought the spoon over. “Smell, love?”

“Funny day when my nose is more sensitive than yours.” I leaned over and barely let myself sniff the spoon. Nothing. No intense urge to run for the hills. I inhaled again.

Spike was watching my face intently. “Anything?”

“Honestly? No.” Relief washed over me. On a normal day when I wasn’t pregnant, I dearly loved Spike’s gumbo. “Maybe all the spices are enough to trick my nose into submission?”

Willow let out a soft peal of laughter.
“What’s so funny?” I asked. It was nice to hear her laughing.

She shrugged, her green eyes dancing as she paused in arranging the napkins. “It’s just funny to see you two together. I guess I’ve just been thinking about the last holiday we celebrated with Spike. Was it that Thanksgiving? The one in Sunnydale when I got all indignant about the Chumash tribe?” She put a finger to her lips as if deep in thought.

Spike regarded Willow, lowering the spoon. “Are we forgetting the bloody bear and the arrows in my chest while I was tied to a chair? Hardly call that a celebration.”

“Sorta deserved,” I noted. “I mean, you were taunting us all day in your state of half-starvation and lack of bite. I’ve never seen anyone quite so pitiful.”

Spike figuratively poked me in return. “And you were furiously stirring the what’s-it and whining about the lack of dinner rolls with your bottom lip stuck out. Pot. Kettle. Black.”

I planted my hands on my hips, feeling a thrill of desire at our moment of banter – desire I hadn’t felt in a while in my constant state of exhaustion. “I was trying to make Thanksgiving special.”

Willow had resumed her duties. “And just like that, you’re in love, Spike’s cooking in your kitchen for the friends who used to hate him, and you’re pregnant with his baby. I like to think I predicted it.”

Spike snorted playfully. “If only it were that easy.”

I flicked his arm with my finger, a far cry from the punch I used to smash into his nose. “Hmph. Seems to me that you had something to do with it not exactly being easy.”

Indignation on his face, Spike flinched away. “Hey, I was just the guy in love with you. You were the stubborn one.”

“Who’s calling who ‘stubborn’?”

He grinned. “Starting to go in circles, love. We could do that all night with a long list of adjectives.”
Willow sighed happily as she adjusted the table décor and stepped back to evaluate her handiwork. “Ah, true love. Do all your fights go this way now?”

I laughed. “This? Pfff. This isn’t a fight.”

“Nope. It’s foreplay.” Spike bit his bottom lip in that way that drove me absolutely crazy, and he leaned in and gave me a gentle, lingering kiss that sent tingles flying all over my body. Those stupid hormonal inserts couldn’t end soon enough for me.

I pushed back on his chest and smiled at Willow. “Don’t you and Oz reminisce like this?”

Her cheeks turned crimson. “Maybe a little.” She paused. “Sometimes. Oz has more energy than you’d think given his laidback-ness.”

A familiar throat cleared from the doorway. All attention on him, Giles entered the kitchen, bearing the brown bag that I’d noticed earlier. Making clear eye contact with Spike, Giles handed over the bag. Spike accepted the offering with reverence, and I felt like I was holding my breath as he slid a bottle of alcohol free of the paper.

Spike was quiet for a moment, more Oz-like than normal. He soberly ran a thumb over the label. Then, when I felt like I might burst out of my skin for a reaction of some sort, he said, “Aberlour is a damn fine whisky. Thank you.”

Giles ducked his head and pretended to study the placemats on the table. “Congratulations were in order, and well, a thank you for... for taking care of Buffy. You’ve been... very good to her.”

“We’ll break it open after dinner.” Spike set the bottle securely behind the sides on the opposite counter.

“That’s what I was hoping.” Giles sounded casual, but I knew there was more there that he wasn’t saying, that I didn’t know if he’d ever say out loud.

My heart full to the bursting, I slipped both arms around Spike’s midsection as he rejoined me, and my eyes filled with tears. Stupid tears. Spike wiped a tear off my cheek, and I laughed a little shakily.
It’s the hormones. I cry at the drop of a hat.”

Spike’s voice was deep with emotion. “Bloody hat. Always dropping.”

The doorbell sang out. I swiped at my other eye. “I got it.”

I hurried to the front room, only to see that Dawn was checking the peephole. She shrieked at what she saw, making my heart jump in my chest, and then, she threw open the door with gusto.

“Xander!” My mouth fell open as I watched my sister bear hug my other best friend, the other part of the Scoobie gang that had been missing this holiday season.

I ran forward and joined my sister in the hug fest. Xander’s arm was strong around me.

When I couldn’t stand the not knowing anymore, I bounced back and stared at him, his dark hair a little longer than normal and hanging slightly over his roguish eye patch. “I can’t believe you’re here!”

He shrugged one shoulder in his familiar, affable way. “Well, I couldn’t let you guys all get together without me on Christmas.” He held up a package that was very squished. “And I had to bring the rolls.”

My laugh was long and loud. He was thinking about that Thanksgiving, too. “Guess you don’t have any diseases to distract you from your mission.”

He glanced behind him and then winked conspiratorially at me. “Shhh. She doesn’t know about that part.”

“Who?” Dawn asked.

A tall blonde appeared out of the shadows. She gave us a little sheepish smile and said with a perfect Giles-ian accent, “Hi. I’m Carrie. Happy Christmas!”
Xander’s Slayer girlfriend was sweet and spunky, had a love of all things kitten, and was old enough that her connection with Xander didn’t seem weird. She bonded with Spike and Giles over British things that I didn’t understand, and she congratulated me on the pregnancy.

Before I knew it, everyone was rubbing elbows around the tables in our tiny kitchen, eating gumbo, reminiscing, and laughing. My heart had never been so full.

Chapter End Notes

The clinic I went to makes you do an 8 week ultrasound with your OB, but my first OB couldn't get me until December 23. So, it was around 9 weeks. Weaning happened after Christmas. I ended up switching OBs because I only ever seemed to see the NP and not the doctor, and I was too anxious. lol Plus, the NP said they only delivered at Women’s, which was an hour away. I asked about this and her response was that first-time mothers would have enough time to get to the hospital because they take longer in labor. Then, she ran a bunch of tests she said that she wouldn't run because we'd just paid for them/had them done. Anyway, I switched. lol

And all the gifts in this chapter were actually available in 2012. Researched them all and best selling books that came out that year. That was kinda fun!

Special thank you to the ladies in the shoutbox for recommendations for what Giles could gift Spike. I have no idea about these things!

Hope you enjoy your surprise at the end, Carrie Ann!

Thanks for all the prayers for my FIL. He passed away Friday morning at around 3 AM. He just had too many things wrong. About to head out of town for the funeral. But I will continue to work on the story with a slight delay. I'm still about eight parts ahead. Thanks for your understanding!
The night of the Krewe of Endymion

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The ground was damp with rain from the earlier thunderstorms, but that didn’t stop the people from showing up in droves for the postponed Krewe of Endymion parade. There was a special energy to Mardi Gras season in New Orleans – one that I didn’t imagine could be found anywhere else in the world in the same way. I had no idea before I lived here that Mardi Gras Day was a state holiday. Everyone got to celebrate Fat Tuesday.

When Spike and I first moved to the Crescent City, I’d laughed when he said he wanted to take me to the Mardi Gras parades. Why would I possibly want to stand around in a crowd, waiting for all those floats to go by? I knew without a doubt that I would not be among the many who screamed my head off for beads, and I certainly knew I didn’t want to be crushed by drunk people jostling for cheap trinkets.

Still, Spike had convinced me that I had to go, and the glow of excitement in his blue eyes convinced me. At that point in our relationship, I didn’t push away his happiness but invited it in. I couldn’t resist him, and he knew it.

So, I’d gone with arms crossed, one stake tucked up a sleeve and another in my boot.

The energy of the crowd was contagious, people of all ages reduced to children with looks of wonder on their faces at the colorful floats, music of the marching bands, and beautiful costumes. As Spike had explained the history of that first parade, I was impressed by how much he knew about the past (though I shouldn’t have been surprised), the importance of the parades, and the decadence of the balls that followed the processions.

When the first masked man on top of a float decorated like a glittery, cotton candy-colored cloud pointed his finger at me, gave me a nod, and tossed me a giant string of beads with a medallion that changed colors from gold to green to purple, I was hooked.

Soon, I was waving my arms around, bouncing on the balls of my stylish but comfortable boots, and screaming at the top of my lungs for the beads and other baubles. Spike was grinning from ear to ear at my enthusiasm.

As the parade passed, I’d ringed his neck with several strands of various-shaded beads, and he’d carried the trinkets I’d garnered: a teddy bear, coins, a few plastic cups emblazoned with the parade’s
theme, and a porcelain doll dressed in Mardi Gras colors. The energy between us had become palpable. After we’d dusted a few vamps on the way back to our car (crowds tended to draw them in New Orleans), we couldn’t stop touching each other and barely made it home without pulling over on the side of the road to make love.

Needless to say, we went to a lot of the evening parades after that, and Mardi Gras became one of our special times together.

One year, I’d spied a demon on one of the floats. He was a shifter demon who fed off human souls and was no doubt headed to the ball to have a feast. George had secured Emily, Spike and me medallions to get into the ball, and Emily and I had had so much fun dressing up and forcing Spike to ditch his usual attire for something fancier and out of his comfort zone. He’d grumbled but had a grand old time “sussing out the soul-sucking git” and helping us slay him.

Now, Spike and I were sharing our love of the season with my sister as well as Shane and Charlotte, who’d flown in for a visit now that my pregnancy was well into the second trimester, and a baby was becoming an inevitability. Charlotte was very excited about having a half-sibling/cousin, and Spike and I had decided to be honest with our son or daughter about the connection the way we planned to be honest about everything else within reason and as was “developmentally appropriate.”

Second trimester had heralded the disappearance of the total exhaustion and brought with it the return of my ability to eat grilled meat but also intense levels of acid reflux and annoyingly persistent constipation that I’d so far held at bay with Zantac and Colace. My poor vampire. Though my sex drive was back and the inserted-and-injected hormones were a thing of the past now that the placenta was well-established, my other symptoms were a force to be reckoned with. Distraction was the name of the game, and luckily, Spike was good – no, an expert – at getting my mind off the not-so-fun bodily side effects of the pregnancy. And he was incredibly patient. Guess he had lots of practice.

Other than that, baby was growing well and passed the nuchal fold test and one more round of genetic blood tests that the OB insisted on despite the results from the CCS testing. I had an anterior placenta, so the placenta attached on the belly button side of my uterus, which would make it harder for me to feel movements at first and might make me appear to carry small, according to Google. I still didn’t have much of a bump, which Charlotte was disappointed in. She made Spike promise to text Shane pictures of my growing bump after she left.

Dawn and Charlotte were excited by the idea of a parade and had taken up residence right next to the chain blocking off the crowd from the parade route along Canal Street. Spike, Shane, and I hung back behind them. We’d arrived after dark, and the parades took a while to make its way to Canal, so we were well ahead of the game. The only thing we didn’t have were the little folding chairs that many parade goers brought to stake out the parade route.
Dawn couldn’t get over how much Shane looked like Spike from the eyes, height, cheekbones, and general appearance to his mannerisms and personality. He was a little less intense than Spike, but he was loving and nurturing toward his daughter. I’d caught Dawn glancing back at the three of us more than once, and she’d made casual conversation with me but gazed at Shane. I wasn’t sure what her attention toward him meant.

I gave her an obvious-much sisterly stare. Her eyes had widened just slightly, and she made an abrupt turn back around. She was now leaning toward Charlotte, who was asking a question or making a comment.

Shifting around the puddle we were standing near and tucking my hand in Spike’s, I smiled up at him. He was smirking at Dawn’s attentions toward his relative. I elbowed him, and he half-grunted, half-laughed.

At my glare, he nuzzled my cheek. “I’m gonna take Shane to grab a beer. Want anything?”

My forehead relaxing at his affection, I nodded. “Water please.” I was working on staying hydrated for baby.

“You got it, pet.” He turned to Shane. “Want a beer?”

Shane grinned. He did look kind of miserable standing in the damp cool air waiting for the festivities to start. “I’d love one.”


“I’ll take a beer. Sam Adams. Light.” Dawn said. It was still weird for my little sister and alcohol consumption to be in the same vicinity in my brain.

Spike snorted. “Abita, it is.” Dawn gave him her patented stare, and he added, “You’re in New Orleans, Bit.”

“Fine.”
Charlotte’s curls were frizzing a little in the humidity, but they framed her face adorably. “Dr. Pepper please, Dad.”

“Got it,” Shane said, ruffling her hair. She was rapidly approaching teenage-dom, but she didn’t seem to mind. I guessed losing your mother made you cherish the little things like closeness with your father a little longer or maybe differently.

Spike ran his hand over the small of my back. “Be back soon. You be okay, love?” He meant: was I going to stay put if I saw a vamp or other demon-y type? He’d made me promise to let him do the dirty work or at the very least let him go with me. We hadn’t sorted much out since our before Christmas meeting with Giles and everyone, so there was a reason Spike was more than a little concerned.

“Of course. I have my chaperones,” I teased. In the distance, I could hear music and the sounds of the crowd screaming for treasures. “Hurry back.”

Spike cocked his head, listening. “They’re still far enough away, pet. You know how slow these things go.”

I felt the anticipation of the upcoming fun. “And I know how long the lines get.” The bars along the parade route often had lines that curved around the street corners.

“I have my ways around that.”

“Of course, you do. No biting.”

He picked up my hand and nibbled my index finger. “Only you, love.”

I rolled my eyes. “How romantic.”

He grinned again and then headed away with Shane. My heart tugged in my chest at Spike’s retreating form. I loved him.
I joined my sister at the chain blockade, clasping the metal links with both hands. “My baby sister is drinking beer.”

“Got news for you, I’ve also smoked cigarettes and had s. . .” She trailed off and glanced at Charlotte, “done other things that adults do in addition to drinking beer.”

“Little sisters aren’t supposed to do that stuff, especially when they’re that much younger than me.”

“If it would make you feel better, I won’t tell you.”

I looped my arm through hers. “Nah. I’m always here to listen.” My eyes widened at the thought of what I was offering. “Just not too many details.”

She hugged my arm in response. “Got it.”

I bent forward and asked Charlotte, “You excited?”

She nodded happily, her curls bobbing around her, as she hugged herself in anticipation. “So excited!” She paused uncertainly. “What if they don’t throw me anything?”

“They throw kids all the good stuff,” I reassured her. “And if we catch something good that you want, it’s all yours, okay?”

She beamed. “Yay! Thanks!”

Spike and Shane didn’t get back in time for the beginning of the parade, and I was amused to see that the theme of Endymion was “Happily Ever After.” Charlotte’s eyes were filled with joy when she caught her first strand of beads, and Dawn helped her put them on. Soon, my sister and the younger girl were caught up in the spirit of the parade, shouting and waving their arms in the air, dancing to the music of the marching bands going by, and ooo-ing and ah-ing over the street performers.

Something about the thunderstorm’s departure drew people out of their homes, and Canal was more crowded than usual. While I was enjoying myself, I was also keenly aware of what was going on around me, especially without Spike there to help keep watch. My hand was protectively over my
belly when one drunk man next to me intruded into my personal space, his elbow dangerously close for comfort. Another woman knocked Charlotte sideways when she reached over the chain in front of her to snag a light up set of beads that were sailing through the air. Charlotte stumbled into Dawn who steadied her and asserted, “Watch it.” The woman ignored my sister. As Dawn traded places with Charlotte, my eyes scanned the crowd on the other side of the street.

My heart nearly stopped in my chest as I saw a familiar tall figure weaving in and out of the oblivious parade watchers.

What the hell? I stared. I couldn’t help myself.

He stopped directly across from us and slowly turned his head to return my gaze, the corner of his mouth turning up.

As he lifted his hand in some sort of greeting or other signal of acknowledgment, I blinked, and a towering float scooted to a halt in front of us, blocking the view.

Charlotte and Dawn’s voices filled my ears as everyone around us called out for prizes and beads, and knickknacks rained down. Panic filled me, but I didn’t want to alarm my sister and Shane’s daughter. Dawn slung a long chain of giant purple beads over my head, and I tensed but managed to smile at her. She gave me a funny look but had to reach out to grab a teddy bear flying at her head.

All I knew was that I couldn’t wait for the float to go by. An eternity seemed to pass before the float continued its journey past us, and everyone was comparing their treasures and smiling.

I startled and emitted a gasp as a hand moved around my waist and covered my belly.

“Hey, love. What’s wrong?” The tightness in my shoulders, neck and back eased at Spike’s touch.

I accepted the cold, damp bottle of water Spike handed me as Shane hugged his daughter, and she showed off her wealth of beads.

My eyes wide, I gazed into Spike’s bright blue ones before turning my head in the direction I’d seen the face of my ex-lover.
The figure wasn’t there anymore, and I scanned the crowd near and beyond where he’d been. Nothing.

Angel was gone.

And I wondered if what I’d seen was a figment of my imagination.

Chapter End Notes

So, I had to research a parade that would be in the dark. This was the best I could come up with. Lucky for me, the parade list is available even years later along with photos. So, the theme was Happily Ever After, and the weather did delay the parade. I knew I wanted to include Mardi Gras because I wanted to bring back Shane and Charlotte and because my husband and I took a trip to NOLA when I was just into the second trimester with my son. My husband got to go to his first real Mardi Gras parade, and we stood on Canal. I don't think it was Endymion...though when I lived in NOLA, Endymion was one of my favorite parades. (Also, I was a bit skeptical like Buffy and then I loved screaming for beads! And contrary to popular belief, you don't have to flash anyone to get the good beads. During my intern year, one guy threw me his parade medal...I still have it somewhere.)
A couple of weeks had passed, and I hadn’t told Spike what I’d seen – or thought I saw – the night of the parade. Part of me thought that I’d imagined the whole thing – my anxieties coming to life in front of me. After all, Spike had reached out through his channels, and I’d reached out through mine, but no one had seen or heard from Angel. I didn’t want to worry Spike and send him into a tailspin if it was nothing.

Still, I knew that keeping something like that from him was not of the good. We told each other everything.

Well, maybe not everything.

There was still plenty about Spike that was a mystery to me, and I loved that about him. . . that he had a long history before me that I couldn’t possibly know everything about. Nor would I want to. I liked that there was more for me to learn about him.

And I still had a pesky penchant to hold my feelings close. He was usually good at ferreting them out of me, but this time, I was careful about holding back. I felt guilty about it but still.

Maybe I was kind of hoping Angel would circumvent Spike and come to me directly because then, I’d get the real truth out of my ex. Not information bungled up by his hostility toward his progeny or a memorandum mishandled by his blue god messenger.

I was also pissed. If Angel was in New Orleans and being all stalker-y and weird, I wanted to call him on it.

Still, two weeks had passed and nothing. So, I was thinking it was my imagination. It had to be.

Being alone to clean and close the coffee shop didn’t help clarify my thoughts. Roger had ducked out early, claiming he had a stomach bug. That information alone made me anxious because I didn’t want to get sick. I was relieved when he practically sailed out of the coffee shop, and I sprayed Lysol on everything, including the cash register. Of course, he left the register unbalanced. I wrote a note to Mary that Roger had been on ringing-up-the-customers duty. Then, I locked the safe, flipped off the shop lights, set the alarm, and locked up.
I found myself on a quiet Royal Street, couples meandering together in the direction of Jackson Square or Bourbon Street and peering into the window displays of closed stores. Spike wasn’t working and had gone to help Emily with a vamp nest. He’d parked the car for me on a side street toward Frenchman, so I headed away from the more bustling areas of the Quarter and into the shadows.

When I was halfway to the car, I heard a sound. . . something like a footstep. My ears pricking, I kept going, not varying my movements. My heart was pounding in my chest, but my body wasn’t giving me any vampy signals. I toyed with calling Dawn or Spike, but I needed to stay alert.

Then, I heard a much closer, distinctive footstep, and I spun, hurtling myself at the tall figure who’d somehow crept up behind me. Slipping a stake from my sleeve into my palm, I slammed my follower’s body against the wall of a nearby building, and a masculine cough filled my ears.

“Buffy. It’s me.” Angel.

Furious, I stepped away from him, letting go of his shirt and trying to draw him in the light. I still couldn’t see his face. “I knew it!”

“Y-you did?” His voice was the same, but something was different. . . off. It’d been a long time since I’d seen him, but in the way that the intimacy between exes remained even if faded, my senses were picking up on something strikingly but indecipherably new.

I continued talking, my brain racing to sort out the signals I was getting. “You were at the parade, weren’t you? When you pulled the disappearing float act, I thought I was imagining the whole thing.”

“Look. I didn’t want to interrupt your family time. And who was that guy with you?” Was that a hint of jealousy? Still?

A flicker of annoyance flitted through my stomach. My forehead furrowing, I crossed my arms, taking care not to draw attention to my still flat midsection. “How is that any of your business?”

“Which part?” He sounded genuinely baffled.
“Either. Both.” And then, it hit me. His chest was rising and falling and not just when he was talking. Impulsively, I re-traversed the distance between us and pressed my palm against his chest. The warmth was undeniable. “You’re human.” I held my own breath, and I felt his heartbeat faintly against my fingertips. “How?” I purposefully dropped my hand away from him and hugged my ribcage as my traitorous teenage heart skipped a beat.

He held his palms up to me. “That doesn’t matter. What matters is that I did it for you – ”

“Did it for me?” What the hell?

“Yes. So I could warn you.” He was serious.

I shook my head. “That makes no sense. Warn me about what? And why did you have to become human to warn me?”

“It was the only way I could get back here with the information you needed.”

“And what information do I need, Angel? And what do you mean about getting back here?” The cryptic was getting ridiculous. Was he just like this with me? In the back of my mind, I didn’t remember it driving me this crazy.

“About the prophecy.”

“What prophecy?”

His brow furrowed in confusion. “You know. The one Giles found.”

“How the hell do you know what Giles found?” So, that came out a little harsher than I meant it to.

“Because I did the same research. Only I have other resources. Resources that I can still access because I used to be head of Wolfram and Hart in L.A.”

“I thought the Senior Partners cut their ties with you.”
He shoved his hands in the pockets of his leather coat. New Orleans was not the place for leather; he had to be sweating. “They did, but that doesn’t mean that I don’t still have people who have access to information. Wolfram and Hart have massive. . . well, you can’t even begin to comprehend the vast resources they have.”

My jaw clenched in impatience. “You’re telling me they’re vast. So, they’re vast. What more do I need to comprehend?”

“Did you always use to question everything?”

“Um, yes.” I laughed despite my determination to hold my ground. “Just tell me. What’s so important about the prophecy? You are talking about the vampire witches and the Hellmouth sitch?”

A light flicked on in the building across from us.

Angel drew his eyebrows together. “We should move. We don’t know who’s listening. Do you have somewhere. . . private that we could go?”

“Our car is around the corner.” I purposefully said the “our.” My heart squeezed a little thinking of Spike. This whole conversation with Angel brought me back to being a kid again when I was head over heels for the mysterious hot guy, and it felt . . . wrong. But I had to get the information. I mentally steeled myself.

Angel’s face flickered with uncertainty. Then, he said, “We’ll turn the radio on.”

“Fine. Whatever.”

In an odd parallel to my intimate conversation with Spike in the Honda not too many months ago, I found myself sitting with my ex in the car, having another serious conversation. I didn’t know what to do with my hands. Put them on the steering wheel? Fiddle with the air conditioner buttons? I settled on putting the key in the ignition and turning on the radio. I purposefully tuned in to a Cajun station, the jaunty accordion, fast tempo, and Cajun French a reminder of where and when I was.

“So,” I said, my voice small and tight. “Spill.”
His knee wedged against the glove compartment, Angel’s form was large in the passenger seat, and he fumbled for the latch to push the seat back. That managed, he asked, “Which part?”

I studied his thigh. “Start wherever.”

“Well, the human thing and the prophecy thing go together but not really,” he hedged.

“Start wherever.”

Angel ran a hand over the stubble on his jaw and was silent for several seconds. Finally, he said, “It started with trying to help Illyria. Well, Fred really. Both of them. Something started happening with Illyria. Several years ago, Wes came up with a way to siphon away the god’s powers that the human body couldn’t contain, but it turns out that that was only a temporary measure. In the last few years, the human . . . shell has been deteriorating. It came with some disorientation, too, but not the time skipping like before. Illyria didn’t notice much at first. She had moments of staring or would lose bits of time. When she finally noticed, she sought me out.”

I had no idea they’d gone their separate ways for a while but decided that it didn’t matter. “What made her notice?’

“I guess in her grief over Wes, Illyria took on Fred’s appearance after the battle in L.A. She even lived for a bit of time as a human. She had a job, lived in an apartment in Seattle. The glitching started, and one day, she accidentally killed the young son of one of her neighbors, a boy she’d befriended. She woke out of the trance covered in his blood, and it reminded her of the time before . . . when she killed all of us because she thought we were out to destroy her.”

“I didn’t know that,” I whispered and felt a funny sensation in my belly. “Spike?”

“Dust. We were both dust in the wind.”

“Oh.” The feeling in my belly rippled again. It was odd . . . like a cross between bubbles and a little tickle. “But that got straightened out. Obviously.” God, I wanted Spike here with me, so I could touch him and make sure he was still whole.
Angel nodded his head once. “It did. And when it happened again, Illyria sought me out.”

“For help.”

“Yeah. I started out by contacting my sources at Wolfram and Hart. Got ahold of Wes’s documentation about what happened with Illyria the first time around, and without answers there, I sought out texts at the al-Qarawiyyin library in Morocco. It was the only place with documents about the ancient ones and has many writings about Slayers and vampires. After we obtained a good bit of information there, Illyria was really struggling, and I had her examined by a physician and scientist who used to work at the Wolfram and Hart in Italy. He’d retired from the law firm and was living at an old folks’ retirement home in Florida of all places. Orange trees on the property and everything.”

“Sounds luxurious. Do the Senior Partners allow you to retire? Does anyone who works for Wolfram and Hart live to old age?” I was trying to picture what their retirement plan might look like. So, there was a little sarcasm there.

Angel chuckled. “Well, he did.”

“Good for him.” I still couldn’t comprehend who in their right mind would ever work for the evil law firm. I still didn’t understand why Angel had chosen that path.

“He did some sort of mix of magic and scientific evaluation, and he concluded that Illyria needed a little bit of humanity in her to maintain the body. One way to do that was to insert a piece of a person’s soul into her. Illyria decided that if she had to increase her levels of humanity, she wanted that bit to be Fred. So, I decided to help the god.”

“Oh my god.” That was . . that was. . . “Oh my god.”

“Right.” Angel’s face betrayed nothing as he stared at the car dash.

“How did you feel?” Now, I sounded like a Dr. Phil wannabe, so I amended the question. “I mean, I thought Fred’s essence was destroyed.”

“We thought so, too, but Illyria admitted that total annihilation was unlikely.”
“She couldn’t have told you that before?” I remembered what Spike had said about the loss of Fred.

Angel glanced at me then, and I could read the sadness in his dark eyes. “I think Illyria was afraid. She knew that we’d stop at nothing to get Fred back. Odd thing for the god, being afraid.”

A thought flashed through my mind, and my voice hoarse with sudden emotion, I blurted, “How did you know Fred wasn’t at peace?” How did he know that Fred wasn’t in Heaven?

“We. . . well, I wanted to make sure of that after what happened to you.” He said this without betraying any lingering emotion he might have about it. “I entered a crossroads dimension on my own and spoke to an ancient being who could tell me more about Fred. He sent me on a journey across dimensions to find her, and in the process. . .” Angel trailed off.

“What?”

He hesitated and then reached across the center of the car, laying his warm hand atop mine. “In the process, I became human without the soul curse, and I-I’ve been wanting to tell you. . . to see if what you said about –”

I jerked my hand away, and his palm landed on my thigh. The car suddenly seemed very small, but some internal resolve kept me rooted to the spot. It was my car, damn it. My hand settled on my belly, and I suddenly realized the feeling I’d had earlier was the baby. I just felt the baby move for the first time. . . in a car with Angel. Tears pricked my eyes, but I set my jaw. “In case you haven’t noticed, I’m having a baby. A baby with Spike.”

Angel got the hint but didn’t remove his hand. “But it’s not Spike’s baby. Right? I’m guessing you used that man’s sperm. The one I saw at the parade. He’s Spike’s living relative, isn’t he?”

I glared at him. “The baby is Spike’s.” There would always be a place in my heart for Angel, but I could never say that out loud. It would be too confusing for Angel, especially when trying to explain that the space was one for old faded loves – the kind that were totally eclipsed by love for someone else. Then, I thought of Shane’s words. “You know, Shane asked me what would happen if you came back into my life with a permanent soul. One that wouldn’t disappear on us.”

“Shane?”

“Oh.”

“He was trying to figure out if he wanted to donate his sperm to us.” That spoke volumes right there. “You know what I realized?” Angel said nothing when I paused, so I continued, “That hurting Spike that way would destroy him. It would destroy me. I couldn’t. . . can’t do that to him.” To make things unquestionably clearer, I said, “I love him. He has my heart.”

“And if Spike were out of the picture?”

What the hell was Angel saying? I closed my eyes and said words that my 17-year-old – no, even my 22-year-old self never thought I’d ever say, “It wouldn’t matter.”

Angel’s warm heavy touch left my leg then. “I get it.” His tone told me that he did, and I felt a mixture of sadness and relief – sadness for him and sadness for 20th-century us.

“You still didn’t tell me what you know about the prophecy,” I whispered. “And if you found Fred.”

Chapter End Notes

I tried really hard in this chapter to portray Buffy's reaction as one of still caring for Angel on some level. It was my thought that she’d still have feelings for Angel, but by now, they are so far distant and she loves Spike so much that she can’t go back. Hopefully, it came across the way I hoped. I also really wanted a parallel to the earlier scene with Spike in the car and the scene with Angel in Chosen.
Later that night

Chapter Notes

Okay, I tweaked and revised and edited this chapter to death. Time to let it go...lol. Hope you enjoy.

Somehow, I drove the Civic home without wrecking it, and I burst through the front door of our house so hard that Spike jumped to his feet out of the recliner where’d he’d been dozing, the TV on low in the background.

Slamming the door behind me and making sure to slide all the locks into place, I scanned the room. “Where’s Dawn?”

Spike blinked in the dim lamplight. “Safe. Wards are up everywhere. She’s spending the night with Emily and George. Hitting the books. Why?” His blue eyes flickered with emotion that swirled from surprise to fear to... hurt as his nostrils flared.

“I saw Angel,” I whispered. I held up a hand. “And he’s gone now.”

Spike’s whole body went rigid, and he covered his hurt with sarcasm. “Can smell him on you from a mile away. It’s strong.”

Still holding onto the pain I saw in his eyes, I managed to stay calm. Now was the time for full disclosure. “I thought I saw him at the parade a couple of weeks ago, but I thought it was my imagination until he showed up tonight after I closed up the shop. He wanted to talk with me about Illyria and Dawn and the prophecy about vampire witches. We sat in the car.”

“At the parade?! You should have told me then!”

“I-I know. I’m sorry. I should have.” What had I been thinking?

“Bettin’ the car reeks.” He turned his head, breaking eye contact. “Did you greet the old poof with a kiss?”
“W-what? No!” Really? He thought that I’d do that after all this time with him? First, Angel being insanely jealous and now Spike. Been there. Done that. Really tired of it. “How could you even think that?”

“Don’t know. Peaches hasn’t been around in a while. No telling what ‘feelings’ might’ve come up when he showed up.” His fists balled. “And you’ve done it before.”

“Spike. Seriously.” I reached out for his arm. “I love you. Only you. We’re having a baby.”

He jerked away before I could touch him. “Probably not such a good idea. That.”

Now, I lost my temper. “Well, it’s a little late. Sorta have a bun in the oven.”

“It’s not really mine.” His voice broke on the last word.

My eyes welled with tears. “The baby is yours. Yours and mine. He or she carries our genes. You can’t deny that. Nothing will ever take that away from either of us. Even with that, genes don’t make a father. You know this. Look at me and Giles versus me and my dad.”

“Now that’s a fine bloody comparison.” Spike angled his face toward me without meeting my gaze, the light highlighting his cheekbones and leaving shadows in the hollows beneath. His nostrils spread again as he inhaled sharply. “Something’s different.”

“If you’d just let me – ”

Spike cut me off by grabbing my wrist and pressing my right hand to his nose. I wrenched away, but he followed my backward motion, smelling my jeans where Angel had touched me. “He’s different. What the bloody hell happened? Tell me!”

I hadn’t seen that level of intense anger in his eyes in a long time, and I felt the blood rush to my head as my heart rate tripped up a notch. “H-he’s human. Spike, you’re scaring me.”
He immediately backed off, practically stumbling back as if I’d hit him with my words. Tears glazed his eyes, and he turned his back to me as he buried his face in his hands. Without thinking, I wrapped my arms around his midsection from behind and pushed my face into the concave space where his backbone was, inhaling his scent. As he trembled, I kissed him and held him tighter.

“I’m so sorry, pet.”

“Shhh. You didn’t hurt me. You didn’t hurt the baby. We’re yours. I love you. You had a reaction. For good reason.”

He took a deep hesitating breath and ran his hands over the tops of both of mine. “Christ. I love you and the babe so much.” A heartbeat passed. His next words were filled with vulnerability. “Are you sure you want me? Angel’s all human and I’m assuming all permanently soul-having now.”

My heart aching for him, I considered how to answer this and landed on, “Do you remember how Shane called us back in the Baltimore airport?”

“Yeah.”

“Want to know what he asked me?” I’d never told Spike exactly what Shane and I had discussed.

“Maybe?” He sounded uncertain, so I pushed my fingers between his.

“He asked how I knew it was you that I wanted, and he wanted to make sure that if Angel showed up with a permanent soul someday, I’d still choose you. Ironic, huh?” It was ironic on more than one level. “I think he wanted to make sure that the baby would have two parents that loved one another. He was sure of you, maybe because you’re his relative, but he was less sure of me. Want to know what I told him?” When Spike waited, I inhaled deeply and broke free of our embrace. Not letting go of his hand, I moved to stand in front of him, so he had to see how earnest I was being. “I told him that if I ever did that to you, I couldn’t bear how hurt you’d be. If I hurt you that way, I’d break me, too. God, Spike, you’ve always been there for me except for that weird year when you were being a dope. I love you. I don’t want anyone else but you. Not ever again. You’re not perfect, but neither am I. We fit. Our strengths and weaknesses. You and me. Always have. . . even when I didn’t know it or didn’t want to. I waivered for a moment and gave him a small smile, gesturing up and down at him. “Plus, you’re not bad looking, and you’re pretty good in the sack.”

“Just ‘pretty good’?” He sulked, sounding offended.
“The best,” I assured him. Had he forgotten all the times that he took me to the edge of oblivion and back the way no one else ever had?

He gathered me close then so that I could feel how much he wanted me. I shivered as a wave of desire overcame me.

He nuzzled into the hair on the top of my head. “Am torn, pet.”

“How so?”

“I want to know what my grandsire told you. I also really want to prove to you that I’m more than ‘pretty good.’”

“Me, too. The second part. Please,” I breathed. For once, I wasn’t scanning my body for symptoms of heartburn or constipation or exhaustion. My body was aflame with need, and I longed to feel him against me . . .

“Only if you shower. Get the Angel stench out.”

I laughed, pulled back, and headed toward the bathroom, snagging his hand again along the way. “Only if you come with.”

His sapphire eyes were dark with yearning and love as he drank me in. “That, I can do, pet.”

An hour later, we were completely sated for the moment and were blissfully cuddled up in our bed, blankets forming a cocoon around us in the darkness.

My forearms atop his, I nestled my hips back against him. “Don’t ever let go of me. Capisce?”

“You got it, love.” He kissed my ear and ran a gentle hand over my bare belly. I had the faintest of baby bumps. How did he never make me feel self-conscious about my body?
I suddenly remembered something. “I felt the baby move tonight. Well, I think that’s what it was.” I decided to leave out the part where Angel was sitting next to me when said movement happened. I wanted this to be a moment to cherish with Spike.

He gently pressed his hand down. “You did?”

“Uh huh. I don’t think you can feel it. It was so light that I almost dismissed it as me digesting something.” Or a message from the baby that Angel needed to go.

“Oh.”

I could hear Spike’s disappointment, so I reassured him, “It’s only the beginning, you know? Before you know it, you’ll feel him or her, too.”

His thumb stroked the skin over my belly button, and goosebumps flew over my arms. “Looking forward to it.”

Now, for the elephant in the room. “We should talk about what Angel told me.”

Spike didn’t even balk. He held me closer instead. “All right. Promise I’ll listen.”

“Without too many interruptions or fits of jealousy?” I teased.

He prickled for a moment but then relaxed against me. “Carry on, pet.”

I told him everything Angel had said about Illyria first. True to his word, Spike was attentive without reacting.

When I finished the first part, he asked, his voice rumbling against my back, “So, I don’t follow the part about how him becoming human is tied to the prophecy and warning us. And what about Fred?”

“I didn’t know the answer to any of it either.” It was almost like Angel was using all of it as an excuse to come back into our lives. “So, I asked. Honestly, it was a little convoluted.”
Spike snorted and said just what I’d been thinking. “Good word for it. Convoluted. He likes to insert himself where he’s not wanted. It’s always been a talent of his.” It seemed Spike agreed with me.

“You promised to behave,” I reminded him, squeezing his arm.

He sighed. “Enlighten me.”

“He found Fred. She was at peace.”

“As expected.” There was relief in Spike’s tone. “I’m glad of it. Thought she was completely gone. Disintegrated.”

“I know. Luckily, unlike some people we both know, Angel left her to be at peace.”

“Good of him.” Spike didn’t sound surprised. Angel and Spike’s relationship was complicated at best. Angel had done a lot to toy with Spike over the centuries. I also knew that Spike eventually learned to give as he got. But when it came to Fred and the L.A. contingent, most of whom were dead, Spike and Angel were on the same page in terms of affection and protectiveness.

“The problem is that Illyria is stuck in a human body that’s falling apart, and she needs a way to obtain a new one. She can’t just insert herself into a new body. Angel was clear about that. He knows Dawn is a dimensional key in a human body, but Illyria does not. And Illyria is frustrated with Angel for sending her to check to see if we were trying to conceive while he went traveling across dimensions.”

Spike was quiet for a few seconds. “My guess is he was trying to prevent Illyria from forcing Fred’s essence into her body or possibly doing something else to rend the fabric of time and space.”

I shrugged. “That’s what he said, but he also said that he couldn’t enter the dimension where Fred’s essence was without becoming human himself.” Now that I was older, I could see the habit Angel sometimes had of leaving out pertinent information.

“He became human for you, pet. No use denying it.” With his arms around me, Spike could acknowledge this without freaking out, but I still wasn’t sure how true that was.
“Maybe.”

Spike didn’t correct my doubt. “And that confirms that we were right to let the Bit come and stay with us.”

“And that confirms that we were right to let the Bit come and stay with us.”

“Yep. We need to warn Dawn just in case.” I wanted to let her have one more night of semi-relaxation.

“What did Angelus say about this prophecy?”

“He knew we were trying to have a baby. He said Andrew told him. Andrew sometimes stays with Giles. My guess was that he found the spell that Giles was working on for us.”

“Nosy, perfidious little wanker.” Andrew had hero-worshipped Spike, and although he put on a big show of being annoyed with the young man’s attention, he’d secretly enjoyed it. . . except when Andrew did something like this.

“So, while Angel was at that library in Morocco, he found several prophecies about Slayers and children.” I trailed my fingertips over Spike’s forearm.

Spike repeated his earlier observation, “You mean, he was looking for a way to insert his nose into our business.”

I ignored this and continued, “He had them translated on his dimensional journey by some ancient benevolent being in the crossroads dimension. The same being who helped him locate Fred. Angel sent the translations to Giles right before we talked tonight.”

“No idea why he held onto them so long.”

“Me either, but I think he got back to this dimension not too long ago, and he said he was adjusting to being human again. He did say that he wanted to be upfront. Unlike Wes.” I shifted around to face Spike and pressed my cheek against his bare chest.
“Funny way of being upfront.”

“Preaching to the choir. We need to talk with Giles in the morning. Supposedly, the prophecy closest to the one Giles has been focused on is not about cows or women or pregnant women in general but about pregnant Slayers.”

Spike’s arms tightened around me. “Agreed. We’ll want to round in the rest of the crew, too. Where did the grand poof get off to? You said he was gone?”

“He left town. I told him to leave.” Angel had wanted to stay. “I think he’s still trying to help Illyria and trying to distract her from Dawn.”

“One thing he’s doing right.”

“That and the Fred thing.”

“That and,” Spike agreed, trailing his hand down my back. He sighed softly. “I’m sorry for the way I acted earlier, pet.”

“I’m sorry, too. I should have told you when I thought I saw him the first time.” I wasn’t sure what to say beyond that but knew I had questions. After taking time to choose my words, I said, “I thought you and Angel. . . I thought you were somewhat okay with each other after that time you spent together in L.A.” I knew things weren’t exactly smooth since they’d been out of touch, but it wasn’t like Spike and I sat around discussing Angel. He simply didn’t come up.

Spike’s voice was a low, deep rumble in my ear. “Grudgingly. On both sides. Angel and I. . . we’ve done a lot of bad things together over the years to others. . . and each other. There’s camaraderie in that. I’d kill for him if push came to shove and I thought the cause was right. I’m pretty sure he’d do the same for me.”

“So, why the reaction?” I knew the answer, but I wanted to understand more beyond my own hypotheses.

“You, love, will always be a sore spot for us.”
“The way Dru used to be?”

His response was quick. “Dru was different. She loved the best she knew how, but her psyche was damaged and twisted. Things are different with you.”

“I’m not damaged and twisted?” I joked. “Good to know.”

“It’s not just that. And before you say it, it’s not about being good or bad. Yeah, you inspired a lot of good in both of us, but that’s not the reason you’re different.”

“What is it then?” I had no clue what he was going to say.

“The give-and-take is different in a relationship with you, pet. When you’re in it, you’re in. Hell, even when you were one foot out the door with me most of the time, you were in it some of the time. I felt it.”

“I was.” Now that the years had passed, I saw it. I knew why Spike kept hanging around, and it wasn’t because I didn’t give him any crumbs.

“The potential for something deeper with you was there. No guy in his right mind wouldn’t want that. Angel included. And when I think about how you and I’ve been in it for so many years now, I realize how terrified I’d be to lose you... to lose what we have. I don’t know if... if my heart could take it. So, when my grandsire comes along and pulls his best Edward Cullen act with his brand-spanking-new human body...”

“You were more terrified than before.”

I felt his shoulders tighten. “Yeah. But that doesn’t excuse the reaction.”

“Do you remember what I said?” I held him closer. “I can’t – won’t do that to you.”

“I remember. I don’t want you to be broken if something happens to us.”
That wasn’t exactly what I meant earlier, but I went with it. “Same goes for you. If something happens to me, I want to know that you can go on.”

“I’d do my best.”

“After a sufficient period of mourning, of course. No pulling a Bella after she and Edward broke up.”

Though Spike knew I was referencing my own inevitable death, he grunted good-naturedly. “Of course.”

“I can’t believe you’re referencing Twilight.” First, Harry Potter. Now, Twilight.

“Look who’s talking. And sort it out with Dawn. She’s the one who’s reading about sodding sparkly vampires and making me watch those insipid excuses for movies while you’re at work.”

Now, my laughter filled the room. “Don’t tell me she likes them.”

“The Bit loves the drivel. And the author can’t even write a proper love triangle without pasting on that weird ending where their kid is bloody soulmates with the wolf.” He sounded so indignant that I had to hold back more of the mirth that was trying to push past my lips.

“Don’t worry.” I reached my arm up and patted his shoulder. “Our baby won’t be soul-bonded with Angel.”

“Let’s hope not,” Spike growled.
Today was another big day for Spike and me: the anatomy scan to make sure baby has all his or her parts in the right place and working properly. The OB sent us to a MFM or maternal fetal medicine doc just because we did IVF; she said that she wanted to make sure we had a good scan given that IVF pregnancies are considered higher risk.

Spike and I were waiting at the MFM’s office very early even though our appointment wasn’t until 11 AM, mostly because there was no covered parking at the MFM’s office. The other reason was that there was a little restaurant downstairs, and Spike was indulging my stomach with beignets and decaf coffee. Surprisingly, I had very few cravings, unlike what the movies and pop culture indicated, but I was gaining weight steadily at a pound or so a week. My tiny baby belly was growing.

Anatomy scan was usually at 20 weeks, but given extenuating circumstances of Angel showing up on our doorstep, the appointment had gotten pushed back a week.

Since Angel’s visit, Spike and I were better than ever together, and all the local Slayers and Watchers were on high alert, but there were more people to bring into the loop.

Of course, this day wouldn’t be complete without Giles trying out a new form of technology. It was his idea to try out Group Me with the group because it would allow us to include everyone in the latest information from the situation we found ourselves in. (I had no doubt that he was doing it in attempt to keep up with George.)

The only problem with doing this was that Giles invited everyone from the contacts on his phone, and people were. . . Let’s just say they were formally named. I was Buffy Summers, and Spike was William Pratt.

Spike’s quiet voice echoed in the empty, dark café, his words jarring me out of my musings. “You know, it’s not so bad. He could have used any manner of other names for me that’d be right annoying.”
Careful to avoid the dusting of powdered sugar in front of me, I leaned on the table and regarded him. “You’re right. I can think of several.”

“Oh really?” His blue eyes twinkled over the rim of his coffee cup as he took a sip.


“That’s not very creative, pet.”

“Oh really? Enlighten me with your creativity please.” I knew my responses were lame, but I wanted to know what Spike would come up with, so I could tease him.

“How about ‘That Devilishly Handsome Bloke Who Fought for a Soul and Won the Heart of the Slayer’?”

I laughed. “That’s really long but admittedly better than mine. Would it even fit in his phone?”

He chuckled. “Probably not.”

My phone beeped, and I glanced down to see that there was a small number in the upper corner of the app’s icon. “Oooo. Messages.”

Spike didn’t bother to pull up his own phone and peered at my tiny, glowing screen as I set it sideways between us. He touched the icon. The list of people who had accepted the invitation appeared, and the first conversation followed.

Liz, a Slayer in Lafayette, Louisiana, USA wrote: “Lol. Guess I don’t have a last name. And who’s William Pratt?”

Spike snorted at this, and I nudged my forehead against his.
Katie, a Slayer in Baton Rouge, Lousiana, USA: “Hey. I have the same non-last name. No idea who WP is.”

“Guess they haven’t read that thesis what’s-her-name wrote about you.” I offered Spike a smile.

“Guess not.” Spike smirked and arched an eyebrow at me. “But you haven’t either.”

“But I have!” I protested. I’d read it in one night after Spike and I were officially a couple. I was curious and wanted to know. Somehow, after reading about Angel’s exploits in high school, I was less weirded out. I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. And I learned a lot about Spike, especially the parts about William and where he came from, which he’d conveniently left out that one time in Sunnydale when he told about how he killed the Slayers.

“Oh?” He grinned, but I caught a hint of worry in his eyes.

I kissed him gently. “It didn’t scare me away, did it?”

George Williams, Emily’s Watcher in New Orleans, Louisiana, USA: “Obviously, you haven’t been studying enough.”

Liz: “Study, schmudy. That’s what I have Kishan for.”

Kishan Patel, Liz’s Watcher in Lafayette, Lousiana, USA: “Trust me. Getting Liz to study or do research of any kind is like herding a group of stubborn cows.”

Liz: “Are you calling me a cow?”

Kishan: “I most definitely am not. I’m using a metaphor.”

Liz: “An insulting metaphor, especially in light of the prophecy that wasn’t about cows but was actually about pregnant Slayers.”

Kishan: “Cows are sacred in my religion, remember?”
Liz: “Oh yeah. Sorry, Kishan.”

Katie: “Still don’t know who William Pratt is. And where’s my Watcher?”

Emily a Slayer in New Orleans, Louisiana, USA: “Hey! I know who William Pratt is. *waves to Spike*”

Katie: “Ohhhhhhh!”

George: “Good girl! See. My Slayer studies.”

Emily: “Hey. I’ve always been an honor roll kinda gal.”

Faith Lehane, a Slayer, Cleveland, Ohio, USA: “Good morning, all you early risers. What’s up? Why the heck is my name all long and pretentious sounding?”

Xander Harris: “Speak for yourself. I’m just plain old Xander.”

Carrie Lewis, a Slayer in Norfolk, Virginia, USA: “Must be Mr. Giles’s way of keeping track of everyone in his phone.” Last I heard, Carrie and Xander were getting serious and fast, and Xander had even relocated to an apartment in Norfolk.

“Harris’s Slayer’s pointing out the obvious.” Spike murmured to me.

Robin Wood, a Slayer’s son, Cleveland, Ohio, USA: “Go to the head of the class, Carrie.”

“He thinks he’s still a principal,” I said with some sarcasm.

“Thought Nikki’s son never was a real principal?” Spike rubbed my cheek with his thumb. “Bit of sugar.”
“You know? I never did figure that part out.” I snagged his thumb in my mouth and sucked off the sweetness. Something dark shifted in his eyes as I let go, and I inclined my head toward the phone to nip what lingered there in the bud. For now. “Should we announce our presence?”

Spike shook his head. “Give us a minute.”


Kishan: “He’s in the shower.”

Liz: “Ah ha!”

Katie: “I knew it!”

Xander: “Knew what?”

Faith: “So, Kishan and Michael, huh? Watchers in love.”

There was a long pause during which Spike drank more coffee, and I ate another beignet. Both coffee and pastry were cold and now completely unappetizing. In fact, the beignet was already getting tough to chew. With a little sadness, I set it back on the plate.

Kishan: “!!! I know that Michael is in the shower because he texted me twenty minutes ago to say that he was getting in the shower. Get your minds out of the proverbial gutter. Not the actual gutter in case anyone was wondering if I was being literal and not metaphorical.”

Kathleen, a Slayer, Washington DC, USA: “Good morning! Anyone else have a late night? Getting up early for these meetings is painful. Couldn’t we at least wait until noon?”

Martin Tremblay, Natalie’s Watcher, Shediac, New Brunswick, Canada: “Hello. How does this thing work?”
Michael Walker, Katie’s Watcher, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA: “Any word on Natalie?”

Martin: “No. But we were able to locate her phone, and Willow helped me hack into her computer. I have information.”

Xander: “We should wait until everyone’s here.”

Faith: “We’re going to find her.”

Martin: “She’s been gone so long. I’m starting to have my doubts.”

“Should we check in?” I asked Spike.

“Why not?” Spike pulled his phone out of his jeans pocket and lounged back in the stiff-backed wooden chair.

I settled back in my own chair, lifting my legs onto Spike’s lap. He rubbed my left ankle as he thumbed through his screens.

Buffy Summers: “Good morning, Spike and I are here.”

William Pratt: “Yep.”

Katie: “I wanna know how you went from being WP to Spike.”

Liz: “Me, too. Inquiring minds want to know.”

Xander: “*rolls eyes* What is it with ladies and bad boys?”

Liz: “Hey. We’re not wondering because of that. It’s obvious where his heart is. I’m intellectually curious is all.”
William Pratt: “Harris, lay off the ladies.”

I lifted my right foot and brought it down on Spike’s thigh so that he grunted in pain but was grinning. He caught my foot before I could do it again and pulled off my sneaker, massaging my sore muscles so that I sighed and relaxed.

Buffy Summers: “How William became Spike is a long story.”

I smiled again at Spike and said aloud, “But I’ll have you know that his heart is still William’s.”

His eyes shining, Spike snorted in faux annoyance. “Says you.”

Emily: “I’ll loan you the copy of the thesis that I have.”

Katie: “Thanks, Em.”

Faith: “Email me a copy?”

Emily: “Can do.”

Willow Rosenberg: “Willow checking in. Oz is working. But I promised to give him the deets later.”

Rupert Giles: “I believe that everyone is here except for the Slayer team in Chile who are dealing with a minor crisis and the group in Jakarta who is in a far different time zone than us. I shall be informing them both about the nature of this meeting shortly after we wrap up. We should get down to the business at hand. Before I do, I just want to say that I very much believe in the power and importance of research. As my Slayer and her friends can attest, research and learning are tantamount to success in the fight against the darkness. Without it, you may find yourself in a disastrous situation that could lead to your death or worse, so even if you believe that it’s your Watcher’s job to cull through the books and documents and nowadays, the internet, you should take it upon yourself to at least understand how to go about a thorough search.”
I didn’t look at Spike but commented aloud, “He’s been annoyed with Katie and Liz since our meeting at Christmas.”

“No doubt,” Spike agreed.

Giles: “Now, on to the matter at hand. As you know, Angel visited Buffy and shared information that he discovered on a different sort of quest.”

“A quest to get you back, pet,” Spike grumbled.

I suddenly felt the desire to be closer to him. Abandoning my uncomfortable chair for an equally difficult chair next to Spike, I leaned against him and adjusted my long hair so that it fell over his shoulder. “A quest that didn’t work. Was never going to work. Is never going to work.” I ran my hand up and down his tense thigh until he melted under my touch.

He sighed softly. “I know.”

Giles: “He brought forth more than one source of information that seems to hold up under the scrutiny of our documents and prophesy experts here in England.” Giles and his small team of trusted Watchers had been researching and cross-referencing and double-checking the documents since Angel shared them. He even had Andrew and another Watcher travel to the library in Morocco to see if there was more corroborating information.

Xander: “And they concluded?”

Giles: “I’m getting to that.” I could almost hear him sighing. Xander and Giles were both anxious. “They concluded that Angel was telling the truth in as much as he understands it to be.”

Faith: “Vague much?”

Giles: “I wasn’t finished.”
Faith: “Oh. Sorry.”

Giles: “The gist is that the prophecy predicts that there are seven vampire witches, who are trying to harness the power of the Hellmouths. In order to do so, they have to perform a ritual at each of the known Hellmouths. The ritual involves bloodletting of an unusual sort. Just like the First Evil used blood to open the seal at the Sunnydale Hellmouth, blood is required as part of this ritual. The source of the blood must be from Slayers. Pre-Sunnydale, this ritual and prophecy were virtually impossible to conduct and fulfill, as it were. However, given that there are many Slayers scattered across the planet – ”

Faith: “So the ritual is possible. B and I are used to thwarting prophecy, so any sort of so-called prophecy amounts to a hill of beans.”

Kishan: “Proverbial beans.”

Willow: “Actually. Prophecies aren’t all malarkey.”

William: “Red’s right. Just because you’ve thwarted them doesn’t make them complete hogwash.”

Buffy: “Spike and Willow are right. I still died at the hands of the Master even though Xander gave me CPR. The prophecy came true.”

Willow: “I’ve put out feelers among the groups of witches that I know, and we are in the process of finding the clusters of vampire witches. At first, we had trouble, but there are several leads now. One is situated near Norfolk, which is close to us and the coven at Falls Church. There is also some talk that they are getting more forward, so they’ll be easier to find. And given Buffy’s experience with the HPV’s, there seems to be some truth to it.”

Giles: “Seven of these vampire witches must perform the ritual simultaneously with Slayers across the world.”

Carrie: “Oh, that’s lovely to hear.”

“I think that was sarcasm,” I said to Spike.
“You think?” Spike replied.

Giles: “There is, however, a catch, which is the reason that Angel was so adamant about speaking with Buffy.”

Buffy: “The ritual requires pregnant Slayers.”

Spike stiffened next to me at the reminder of the danger I was in, sitting up and looking around the empty café.

“No tinglies. Except from you,” I said.

“Doesn’t have to be vamps that come after you, love. Witches turned vampires are likely to be smart. Daytime attacks are a possibility.” Bumping me gently off him, he stood and turned his chair so that we were facing opposite directions.

Giles: “Buffy is correct. And if the ritual is performed, power is siphoned through the gateways to hell, which could either lead to some very potent foes or Armageddon.”

Carrie: “Even lovelier.”

Martin: “I have something to share on that front.”

Giles: “Go ahead, Martin.”

Martin: “Willow was gracious enough to help us hack into Natalie’s phone and computer. Her emails showed records of multiple appointments with her OB.”

Robin: “Natalie’s pregnant.”

Martin: “Yes.”
Giles: “All the more reason to amp up the search for her. Faith or Robin, I need you on it since you’re in Cleveland. Can you reasonably join Martin in Canada for a time?”

Faith: “You got it, G. I’ll stay put to guard this Hellmouth.”

Robin: “I’ll take a couple of the baby Slayers with me.”

Katie: “Baby Slayers? Should we be offended on behalf of our fellow Slayers, Liz?”


I could envision Giles polishing his glasses, only he couldn’t do that because he was typing. But still. Glasses were being polished in his mind. Well, my mind was imagining his mind. . . . Whatever.

Giles: “Thank you, Robin and Faith. And Xander, you and Oz have discovered that there are more Slayers missing.”

Xander: “Yes.”

Giles: “Reach out to their Watchers and find out if any of those Slayers are pregnant.”

Xander: “On it.”

Willow: “Oz will help, too.”

George: “Better go through the whole call tree again. To find out if there are other pregnant Slayers.”
Xander: “Took the words out of my mouth. Or rather, fingers.”

Willow: “And Carrie and Kathleen, I’d love your help to locate the vamp-witches near us.”

Kathleen: “Happily. I’m assuming we need to take at least one alive to interrogate her.”

Giles: “That would be wise.”

Kathleen: “Perfect.”

Xander: “Kathleen is good at fight and capture.”

Carrie: “She is.”

Kathleen: “Aww, thanks, guys!”

Willow: “Buffy, I’m sending someone to increase the complexity and strength of your wards.”

Buffy: “Thanks, Wil.”

William: “Do you think we could get some portable wards, too? One for Dawn as well.”

Willow: “Definitely.”

Spike regarded me. “Until we get those, you and the Bit are on house arrest. Probably after, too.”

Between vampire witches and their prophecies and an unpredictable Illyria on the loose, it made sense. Didn’t mean that it didn’t annoy me. “Fine. Same applies to you.” I wasn’t about to lose him if someone used him to get to me. I hadn’t felt this way since the First Evil.
“Fine. We’ll have to be creative with work.”

I pointed at my belly. “We have an excuse.”

Giles: “Buffy, do be careful.”

Buffy: “We’re negotiating safety parameters now.”

Spike’s amusement was clear in his tone. “You sound like your other ex-honey.”

“Shut up,” I said, playfully shoving him.

He easily steadied himself, kissing my shoulder and running his hand over my belly so that tingles of a different sort soared through my body.

Katie: “We’re here to help with security.”

Liz: “Yes.”

Kishan: “And research.”

William: “We’ll take you up on it.”

Chapter End Notes

So, Group Me was invented at this time point in the story. No idea if it had all the features that it does now. My friend suggested it for my book club, and it helps because you can include more than 10 people in the group chat. But it definitely does do what happened with Giles where it puts in whatever name you have in your contact list when you add people. I learned this the hard way when I added a friend who had gotten divorced but I had not changed her last name in my phone. Eep. I felt so awful about it.

Special thanks to swifthorse for brainstorming with me about how Giles might have
people in his phone. I initially thought silly nicknames, but she said he wouldn't do that, so I decided with all the Slayers and Watchers in the world, he had to have some sort of system, especially if there is more than one Slayer or Watcher with the same name. (And is there a limit to how many people you can have in your contact list?)

Next chapter is super short because it's the anatomy scan. So, I will post it soon.
The morning of the anatomy scan, Part 2

Chapter Notes

The shortest chapter but they needed their moment... After all, this story is about Spike and Buffy starting a family.

The screen before us was black as night, and then, there was an electronic beep from my right and the sound of static. Cold gel covered the bare hill of my belly, the skin pale in the glow of the low background luminance, but my eyes only flicked to these other distractions and remained mostly fixed on the large monitor hanging on the wall before us.

My heartbeat picked up, and in response, I felt strong fingers push between mine, cool flesh relieving the heat of my anxiety. I squeezed back in response, but still, my eyes were steadfast.

Then, the technician pressed the wand against the barrier of my skin, sweeping the gel over and around until I was coated. The screen flickered in and out with white, indecipherable lights that came and went until I was impatient for something concrete and definitive to fill my vision.

Then, without fanfare, there was a hand. The most beautiful hand I have ever seen. Fingers splayed and then curled up and then splayed again. Another hand bobbed close by. The source of the movement I’d been feeling inside of me, growing stronger and more frequent each day, was real... was human.

And I was breathless.

The wand moved some more, and there were an arm and a shoulder, and then, the beautiful round curve of a skull, the sweet incline of a nose, and the smallest hint of lips and the bone of the jaw. The neck was invisible, the space giving way to the swell of chest and plumpness of the belly.

The technician deftly avoided the genital area at our request, and the legs came into view next, long and bent, the feet each bearing five toes.

I sighed with happiness. There was the squeak of someone sitting on the stool to my left, and Spike’s arm pressed against mine, our hands still clasped together. He exhaled, too – a soft sound of awe – as he nuzzled his head against mine.
Time seemed of no matter as each tiny body part was measured and each organ examined. I was most enthralled with the chambers of the heart contracting and opening in a perfect rapid rhythm, the sound filling the room and letting us know that yes, he or she was real and very much alive.

The hour-and-a-half long procedure was much too short, and when the screen flickered off and the sound of the heartbeat ceased, I felt an unexpected sense of loss. My eyes filled with tears, which Spike stroked away as I pushed myself up and swung my legs around.

“The babe’s perfect, love,” he whispered before tenderly kissing my lips.

I didn’t even have to hear from the doctor to know that he was right.
The thirty-third day of lockdown

Chapter Notes

Before the chapter... because this fic is about fertility struggles. March is endometriosis awareness month, which is what I have: http://natural-fertility-info.com/march-is-endometriosis-awareness-month.html

And the last male northern white rhino passed and the only hope for the survival of the subspecies is IVF and possible surrogacy. Wow! https://newatlas.com/experimental-ivf-white-rhino/53890/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I closed my eyes and resisted the urge to scream in frustration and run out the front door. I just wanted to curl up in my most comfy maternity leggings and baggy T-shirt in Spike’s chair and shut out everything for a little while.

“Bit, you’ve been in the bathroom for over an hour!” Spike’s shout was muffled by the fact that he was two rooms away, but the razor’s edge of annoyance was sharp and clear even from where I sat in his recliner in the living room.

The recliner was the only space not covered in something Dawn- or baby-related. She was still living out of boxes, but said boxes were stacked in haphazard piles on one side of the living room, lids off some and tight on others, a blanket spilling out of the top of one and dangling toward the floor as if hanging on for dear life. Her textbooks were scattered across the sofa, interspersed with ancient volumes from George’s collection of old books, prophecies mingling with modern communication theories.

To have a break from the tedium of being in a small space for hours, Spike put together the bassinet that Giles purchased in England and had shipped to us. Piles of gifts from the people who knew about the pregnancy were clustered in and around the small bed. The gifts in plain sight included a stuffed alligator and nutria rat from Liz and Katie; a collection of matching, gender-neutral outfits from Xander (obviously helped by Carrie); a basket of herbs sewn in patterned pouches with various protective and soothing properties from Willow; and a vibrant black and red tummy time mat from Faith. More seemed to arrive daily, taking up more space. The gestures were generous and lovely, but if more boxes came, there’d be no room for us.

Spike pounded on the door when my sister didn’t respond, a swift, clipped beat. I knew why he was upset. He was going to be late to work. Though I had a forged doctor’s excuse to be on bedrest, Spike had to keep up appearances and at least some money coming in.
“I’m relaxing!” Dawn hollered. “Alone time! Ever hear of it?”

“Turn off the Netflix and get out of the tub! Some people have to go to work!”

As they yelled back and forth, I ran a hand over my burgeoning belly. Ever since the anatomy scan, Spike and I had been talking out loud to the baby every day, sometimes multiple times a day. None of my clothes were fitting, and I was living in loose dresses and soft low rise maternity leggings paired with flowy tops. People were starting to be able to tell that I was pregnant. Or rather, people could tell if I were allowed to leave the house. I was starting to tire more easily, and holy heartburn, I was taking Zantac on the daily.

I spoke to the baby, “Some people in this house are very grumpy.” The baby stirred in reply, and I smiled. “So much for our nap.”

The sound of water sloshing and the drain being unplugged followed by a loud thump clued me in on Dawn’s unspoken fit of temper. “I’m out! Give me half a second before you break down the door!”

“Two minutes, Dawn!” Spike’s accent when he said Dawn’s name made me grin. He was really pissed when he didn’t use a nickname.

There was more thumping accompanied by various grunts. Then, Dawn burst into the living room, a growl escaping her lips. She caught me staring at her and tried to appear casual, pulling her damp hair into a low bun and raising both eyebrows in a call back to her teenage years. Her nose in the air, she groused, “He’s driving me crazy!”

In response, Spike slammed the door behind her. Seconds later, water was running in the shower.

I gave my sister a rueful smile. “We’re all driving each other crazy. I mean, we’re trapped in the house 24-7.”

Her shoulders sagged a little. “It’s kinda like that time I made that wish. . . you know the one about –”
“The one about how we could never leave, and I had the birthday party that almost never ended? Who could forget that?” I had been thinking about that party a time or two in our month-long...over a month-long self-imposed-by-necessity period of hunkering down.

She shoved a pile of books out of the way and sank on the sofa, slouching back and drawing up her legs. “Yeah. At least, he gets to leave every now and again.”

“Thank god. I think I might kill him if he didn’t.” A hover-y, cooped up Spike was no fun to be around, and we couldn’t even blow off steam in our usual way because my sister was camped out on the sofa. We were quiet but the efforts were not enough to exercise all my muscles. Thank goodness for online boot camp videos. Baby was oddly quiet and unmoving when I did a workout. “I just hope he’s careful.”

“Me, too. If Glory’s bumbling minions captured him...” Dawn’s remaining annoyance was gone from her expression.

“At least we have some sort of portable wards.” Willow had made us some, and George had helped connect them with our phones like the wards around the house. So far as we knew, none of the wards had been truly tested yet.

“Yeah. I thought you said Spike said we were on house arrest until we got these?” Dawn held up the shiny metal with the carved symbols that was strung on the leather cord around her neck.

“Guess he changed his mind. Well, we changed it.” The vamp-witch that Kathleen had captured had borne the combined force of Willow, Xander, and Carrie’s various forms of magical and non-magical attempts at “torture” with a little too much aplomb. All we got out of the captive before she managed to dust herself was that forces were gathering around each of the Hellmouths and mini-Hellmouths. Hence, the house arrest was extended. Xander and Oz had turned up a few missing Slayers in their call tree, but none were known to be pregnant, not that that little fact meant anything. Natalie, the pregnant Canadian Slayer, was also still AWOL.

Dawn sighed, and we sat glumly while Spike continued showering.

After a few minutes, my sister’s face brightened, and she sat up straight, tapping a finger on her bottom lip. “What should we have George bring for dinner?” Dawn had developed a crush on the young Watcher, but she was also having daily text conversations with Shane. My sister was playing the field and seemingly enjoying every minute of her flirtations. At first, I hadn’t been too sure about either situation, but in a calm moment, Spike had convinced me that keeping my sister occupied in captivity was worth it.
I shrugged one shoulder, and as my stomach growled, the baby moved. “You choose. Anything related to food. Food is of the good.”

Dawn smirked at me. “So says baby?”

“So say both of us.”

“Okay.” Dawn’s face took on a dreamy expression. “How about a bowl of gumbo and some of that fresh from the oven crumbly French bread?”

“Mmmm. With pecan pie and ice cream for dessert?” I fidgeted in the chair; I was going to have to do some serious distraction if we were going to wait to eat.

“From Mr. B’s?”

“You read my mind.”

“George is going to kill us.” Mr. B’s was in the Quarter but was at least closer to George’s place than ours.

“He could bring enough for three and stay and eat,” I offered.

Dawn brandished her phone and began texting. “On it.”

Spike came out of the bathroom then, his hair freshly washed and styled with loose curls, cologne applied, portable ward on a leather cord slung around his neck, and his blue eyes bright with an apology. “Sorry for being a grump, Bit.”

Dawn smiled up at him. “Sorry for being a bathroom hog.”

Spike bent to kiss me and ran a protective hand over my belly, his fingers slightly splayed. “Be back
soon. Love you.”

I lifted my lips for a second kiss, which I deepened just a little. “Love you, too. Be careful.”

He stroked my cheek, and then, he was out the door, locking it firmly behind him. I heard the car start and drive away as Dawn continued to text.

“Done and done,” Dawn said with flourish. “Food’s ordered, and George is on the way to pick it up.”

I smiled at the thought of George rushing around the French Quarter to please my sister. “Sounds perfect.”

Thirty minutes later, the doorbell rang. Dawn leaped up from the sofa and virtually lunged for the door, and I flicked off the show we’d been watching on the television – a show I’d been dozing through. Sleep had chased away my grumbling stomach. Blinking away the haze of sleep, I managed to bring the recliner back upright without too much trouble.

Dawn swung open the door without bothering with the peephole and gasped. She should have bothered.

I blinked for a moment and then realized that the woman on the other side of the threshold was the human form of Illyria. As we stared, the god-king slipped from the sweet-faced woman with kind brown eyes to the blue, eerily alien creature, her legs spread wide. In the space of a heartbeat, she cocked her head and reached across the threshold. Her hand clasping a fistful of Dawn’s shirt, the blue god jerked my sister forward. “Hello, little key.”

Dawn opened her mouth to scream, but Illyria clapped her free hand over her mouth.

Then, they were both gone, Illyria moving so fast that my mind didn’t even register the movement. All that was left behind was Dawn’s cell phone clattering to the hardwood floor, the sound echoing in my ear.

I rushed to the sofa and squatted awkwardly to retrieve the sword hidden underneath. A little dizzy with the movement, I hurried to the door, scooping up Dawn’s phone, wedging it in my pocket, and dashing after them. I halted on the edge of the street, looking left and right. In the dim glow of the
streetlights, I thought I glimpsed a flash of blue to the left, and without thinking, I held the base of my belly with one hand and the sword with the other and ran. . . harder than I’d run in a while.

As I pursued the distant blue of Illyria’s form into the thick humidity of the spring night air, random thoughts tumbled through my mind. I silently thanked Spike for making Dawn and I wear our sneakers in the house “just in case.” I also realized that the wards hadn’t worked on the blue god. Anger welled in my chest because Angel hadn’t kept his word about keeping Illyria at bay. What the hell had happened? How did Illyria even know about Dawn?

After several minutes, I was panting despite the Slayer stamina, and I felt a sharp pain in my belly. Panicking, I stopped running and sagged against a nearby tree as a car rounded the corner and sped by, honking at me for barely getting out of the way. Almost immediately, Illyria’s form was undetectable, and I felt a despair that I hadn’t experienced in years nipping at my heels.

I couldn’t lose my sister. Not again.

Her phone wedged uncomfortably against my thigh, and I tugged the small device out, flicking it on. I hurriedly dashed out a text to Spike, “Come home. Illyria. Got Dawn.”

As I hit send, I blinked and looked around. Despite the stray car that’d almost hit me, the street was quiet and darker than the other roads had been, and the sound of the cicadas was deafening. The pain in my belly was no longer hot and jagged, but the ache in my heart was strong. The baby kicked me then, and I smiled in partial relief at my round bump.

Just as I was deciding to head home, the phone sang out with a snippet of Katy Perry’s “Roar,” Dawn’s chosen ringtone for text messages. I glanced down, but before I could read the new message, I saw that the ward around my neck glowed a brilliant green color, Willow’s favorite color for magical lights.

Fuck.

Tingles flew up the back of my neck, and strong arms grabbed me from behind. The blade of the sword clanged against the concrete of the road, and I vaguely heard the thump of Dawn’s phone in the grass. The leather cord was snapped off my neck, and I inanely thought that Spike was going to kill me for leaving the house.

Then, something hard collided with my skull, and the world went completely black.
Chapter End Notes

Get ready, y'all...
Later that night

Pain was the first thing my mind registered as it rushed quickly back to consciousness. My first coherent thought was of the baby, Spike, and Dawn. A gasp of air escaped my lips before I could stop it.

So much for surprising my captors. Yes, captors. My Slayer senses detected several vampires all around me.

I did my best to push aside my fears and to sink back down into a semblance of unconsciousness by breathing deeply, relaxing all my muscles, and doing what Giles and Spike always bugged me to do. They never seemed to realize that I was a Slayer, and I didn’t have to really hone my senses. It just came . . . as naturally as breathing. Having my powers stripped on my 18th birthday drove that point home.

So, I breathed.

The source of my discomfort was not in my belly like before. Instead, the pain was in my back, and in more than one place as evenly placed hard poles dug into my flesh. My fingers twitched, and the fine grain of wood was rough against my fingertips. I couldn’t move my arms, so I was tied to something wooden . . . something that rocked back and forth just slightly. A rocking chair!

The musty scent of mold filled my nose – the smell of a place that had probably been flooded during Katrina and then left to decay instead of being repaired. Lots of places smelled like that in and around the city, so that didn’t give me too much of a clue. Just underneath the thick smell was the lightest trace of power and magic – a heady mixture that I only ever sensed around a Hellmouth. The blend was one of those things I got used to when I attended Sunnydale High. I had to shove it to the back of my mind, so I could focus on geometry proofs and grammar lessons, my friends’ latest dramas, or Giles’s expositional speeches that used to make me roll my eyes. The mixture was also one of those things that came back sharp and fresh when I hadn’t been close to a Hellmouth in a while. Combine that with my ultra-sensitive pregnancy nose, and my location was clear.

I was at the New Orleans mini-Hellmouth and tied to a rocking chair surrounded by vampires.

The crazy thing about New Orleans was that the city was built on a swamp, which made the Hellmouth – mini though it was – fluid and movable. The reason there were so many Slayers in such
a small geographical region was that the mini-Hellmouth changed places. Calling in Liz, Katie, and Hana for back up was commonplace. Spike and I didn’t think too much about it because we were used to it, but getting kidnapped added a whole new layer to the dilemma of a slippery potential gateway to hell.

Now, I just had to wait for the witch-vampire to show up. That’s why I was here, right?

The baby kicked me then, a reassuring hard motion that filled me with so much relief that I almost laughed but didn’t. I telegraphed him or her a silent hello and a promise to get us out of here alive and well, Mommy instinct pushing its way forth stronger than I ever thought possible. Whoa. I hadn’t expected that at all.

I forced myself to continue breathing evenly and centered my mind, opening my eyes the tiniest of slits. Numerous candles illuminated the small space, casting a golden sheen over the cracked, pitted, and water-stained wooden floors, the dirt-crusted windows, and the high-pitched ceiling. A few stray metal chairs and tables and askew, broken decorations on the walls marked the place as an old bakery or candy store, perhaps a praline shop of some sort. Ten burly male vampires were clustered together. They wore some sort of odd costumes that looked like they came straight out of Game of Thrones. Their weapons were sharp and pointy and made of metal and chains. They reminded me of the Three that the Master sent after me. Peachy. I couldn’t take the Three by myself, let alone ten of their identical cousins.

I was situated with my back to a wall. On the open floor before me, an ancient circle with archaic symbols were painted in what appeared to be some sort of dark fluid. If the dead calf nearby was any indication, the fluid was blood. The blood of a cow. Huh.

The front door banged open, the metal thudding heavily against the wall. The vampire – Miney – from the St. Louis Cemetery stalked toward the male vampires. They silently hastened to attention.

“Idiots!” she hissed, her curly hair unruly and frizzy from the humid night air that trailed inside behind her. She gestured angrily at me. “Can’t you tell she’s awake? You’re supposed to be paying attention! You’re supposed to tell me if she makes a peep!”

One vamp summoned the courage the others didn’t seem to have despite their obvious strength. “But she hasn’t made a sound.”

Miney glared at me. “And yet, she’s awake. Don’t you notice anything? Pay attention! You’re worse than Harold and Ron.”
Ah, well. No use pretending. I opened my eyes. “You clearly don’t have a very good handle on your minions. Either that or they’re just all brawn and no brains.”

The male vampires grumbled in displeasure but didn’t make a move because their boss was clearly pissed.

I tested the restraints on my arms and ankles. Rope. Interesting choice. Maybe they were magically enhanced because they weren’t budging. “Can’t even form a coherent sentence. You shoulda chosen a brighter bunch. Maybe done round two of interviews.”

Miney regarded me, her sharp nose pointing my direction. “Didn’t want them smart. Gets minions in too much trouble.”

“Huh. That’s not what I heard.” Spike once told me that he and Dru turned different types for different functions. Having too many of one type of minion often led to badness or at least heightened irritation.

Miney narrowed her eyes. “What have you heard?”

“Just that you and your little friends are planning to cast a spell to gain some sort of power from the Hellmouths so you can go all dark-vampire Willow on Earth. Well, I hate to break it to you, but someone else already tried that.” I rolled my eyes heavenward. “Actually, more than one bad guy’s tried it, and wanna know what happened. . . Every. Single. Time?” I met her furious gaze with a steely one of my own.

She crossed her arms and hitched one hip up. “You’re going to tell me, so spit it out.”

“They failed. Wanna know why?” In the open doorway, I caught a glimpse of a familiar form moving past. Hope sprang in my heart, but I carefully hid my reaction, banking on my poker face being better than it used to be.


“Me.” Me with friends and enemies turned friends. . . and sometimes lovers. Well, one lover. I was also acutely aware that since I was trapped, my past response to Angelus felt weaker and more lackluster in this situation.
She snorted. “You? Hate to break it to you, missy, but you’re a bit tied up. And your time is up, too.” She held up an iPhone and shook it at me. “Technology’s been a big help. It’s making what’s about to happen possible.” She meant the spell. No doubt, she’d be calling up witch-vamps from six other parts of the world to chant some ancient language and open the Hellmouths using the blood of pregnant Slayers. Guess they found five others besides me and Natalie.

I shrugged, working to sound nonchalant. “You sound like a very bad phone commercial. And I’ve been tied up before. Hasn’t worked.”

Miney edged closer to me and pointed a finger at my vulnerable belly. “This time, you have an Achilles heel. Your baby.”

Without hesitation, I countered, “Actually, a Slayer with family, friends and loved ones survives better than without.” God, Spike and my sister better be okay.

Right on cue, the sound of a dog snuffling at the door interrupted our little battle of the wills, and Girlfriend, Liz’s standard poodle, burst into the room. Her light brown fur was matted and dirty like she’d been rolling in the mud, which was unusual for her, and her bling-y collar with her nametag was missing. I noticed that instead, she wore a brown collar that almost blended in with her fur. She didn’t bark or make any noise as she typically did when she greeted friends. Instead, she simply darted and weaved around the room as the vampire guards bellowed and swung their weapons.

Miney was furious and shouted, “What’s wrong with you morons! How hard is it to kill a dog?”

“We’re trying not to kill it, ma’am,” one vampire admitted. Southern vamps were sometimes so polite. “Figured you wouldn’t want dog blood messing with the spell you got set up here.”

Maybe they weren’t so dumb after all. Marking that observation in my mind, I didn’t react to Girlfriend and forced a dispassionate expression on my face. “Wow. Can’t even get rid of a stray dog.”

Ignoring me, the vampire-witch bellowed, “Just get it out of here!”

At that moment, Girlfriend’s wet nose sniffed around my ankles, not lingering before she moved on to the blood circle. Then, as the vampire warriors dashed around, running into one another in an effort not to disturb anything, the dog angled for the door, nudging a rickety table that held a cluster
of candles. A tall candle wobbled and teetered before tumbling to the floor with a soft splat of melted wax. The flooded, rotted wood caught fire, and more chaos ensued, in which one of the male vamps’ sleeves went up in flames as he tried to stop the problem before it spread. With a cry of anguish, he burst into dust. The other vampires eyed one another and the growing death trap as it licked up more of the delicious wood.

Now calm in a way that worried me more than the rage, Miney muttered a few words under breath, raised a practiced hand, and cast a spell that seemed to suck all the oxygen out of the room.

The fire winked out in an instant.

Too dizzy and lightheaded to be relieved that I wasn’t going to burn up, I wheezed in desperate need of air, and as darkness regained a hold on my brain, I hoped that Girlfriend would let someone know where I was before it was too late.

Chapter End Notes

Special cameo by yellowb’s dog...

You will find out about Spike and Dawn soon...

Thank you so much for all the kind reviews and thoughts...
An unknown amount of time later that night

I clawed my way awake again, and I discovered that the uncomfortable rocker had been swapped for a long wooden table that was equally uncomfortable. I winced as I opened my eyes. The stronger pounding in my head told me that someone had hit me again, likely to keep me out. I was supine this time, belly up, which left me feeling woozy and nauseous. The candles were still lit, and the ceiling was high above me, letting me know that I was in the middle of the blood circle. The calf carcass was gone and so were the minions, but the sharp tang of the blood and some sort of incense filled my nose.

Testing the bindings on my wrists and legs, I called, “I can’t lay like this. It cuts off blood flow.” The last words were fainter as sparkly stars flew across my vision, and I swallowed and whispered, “Probably not what you were aiming for. . . yet, anyway.”

The vampire-witch was noticeably calmer when she peered over at me. I squinted through the physical discomfort. She wasn’t wearing her game face, and her expression looked innocent and youthful. . . and worried? “Oh. Give me a minute.”

She started by my feet, which brought me a moment of hope that she was really that dumb, but she mumbled some sort of spell under her breath as she worked. My arms and legs felt like lead weights, and I couldn’t move them myself. She gently released me and helped me roll onto my side. Almost immediately, the symptoms abated, and she began replacing the physical restraints. She left the new spell in place. Damn it.

“T-thank you,” I said, following my instincts. Now that I could think, I was more curious by her change in demeanor.

As she worked, she said quietly, “I didn’t want to be. . . what do you call it? Turned, you know.”

“You didn’t?”

She didn’t reply for a few seconds. “No. The boys decided to turn me. We were part of this Wiccan group in Gulfport. Well, me and Ron were. He was my boyfriend. We joked around with each other. I was Hermione to his Ron. Those aren’t our real names, and contrary to what you might think, doing magic was only a side gig. It was a hobby. . . a lark that I could do. Something I inherited from my Aunt Megan. She used to tell me I was special. Like her.”
“Oh.” I was keeping it simple, giving her just enough, so she’d continue.

“I had an internship at the Institute in Gulfport.” She’d moved from my legs to my hands now, and she read my confusion. “I wanted to work with marine life. But then Harold turned Ron who turned me. Harold was a real piece of work. Honestly, I think he was a bit of a sadist. Always skinning people’s pets and leaving them on the porch for them to find.” She shuddered. “I think he thought it was funny. . . seeing their expressions, watching them cry and scream.”

“Know someone a little like that,” I whispered, shivering, too, despite my efforts to not reveal much. Killing pets and eating humans were apparently very different in Miney’s mind.

“Well, then, you know that he caused a lot of fights between me and Ron. He was good at driving a wedge. Harold frightened me and pissed me off. That night in the cemetery?” She paused for effect, and I filled in the blanks.

“When I ran across the three of you?” I tried desperately to remember exactly how our interaction had played out. I thought she was the one being all snarky with Harold and Ron.

“He was from Falls Church. . . a coven there. He and some others got themselves kicked out when they started researching and practicing darker magic several months ago. They ended up moving away from that Podunk, country place and ended up in Memphis. That’s where they were all turned.”

“That’s where they came up with this plan?” This horrible plan to simultaneously open several Hellmouths and potentially cause Armageddon? Did Willow know about this subset of her beloved Falls Church coven?

“Yes. Fanned out away from Memphis. Followed some leads. Ended up in Canada and Norfolk, of all places. And I’d lost everything else in my life, so why not?” Miney’s line of thinking had taken an abrupt turn that I didn’t quite get, and her eyes were shiny with unshed tears that she quickly blinked away.

Then, the truth hit me over the head like a two by four at one of Xander’s old construction sites. It seemed too much of a stretch to think that Miney and her vampire-witch pals knew about the journey that had taken Spike and me to Norfolk. Occam’s Razor and all that. Harold had probably killed her family and her dreams, and Spike and I had killed her Ron. I had killed her Spike. They’d been on the hunt for a pregnant Slayer, and they’d found one. For all those pieces to come together. . . well,
that was a bit mindboggling, but just my luck.

“Why not?” I said gently. “I’ve been there.” Losing heaven came to mind.

She placed a hand on my belly, palm flat and fingers splayed. I resisted the urge to draw away, especially when the baby shifted in response to her touch. “It’s hard.” It took me a second to realize she was referring to the baby bump and not her life. “What’s it like?”

Miney had skipped again, but I followed her lead, hoping that I’d get some clue about how to stop the spell. . . stop her from killing me and the baby. “Honestly? A bit strange but not. It’s hard to explain.”

“Like an alien growing inside you?” I couldn’t quite read her face in the shadows.

The baby pressed toward her hand. My senses were on high alert despite her calm, and I forced myself to keep breathing slowly and evenly. “It happens so gradually that it doesn’t feel alien. It just feels. . . right.”

She spoke to my belly, running the tip of her fingernail over the thin cotton of my t-shirt. “Hello, little one.” She smiled when the baby nudged her direction again, and then, she sighed. “I’ll never get to do this.”

I almost retorted, “Well, yeah, because you’re dead.” But, I didn’t. Instead, I said, “I never thought I would either.”

“Oh, really?” Her eyes brightened in surprise. “I heard there were more Slayers now than you can shake a stick at. Makes it easier to have a family. Y’all get to have it all.”

Anger flared inside me again, but I tried hard to douse the flames to keep a cool head. Still, my emotions led me to say, “Not exactly. I used to be the only Slayer. Monsters and sacred duty and all that jazz aren’t – weren’t conducive to family life.”

“And yet, clearly,” she gestured at my body, “here you are.”
She was right. Here I was. Here I was bringing a baby into this world: a world full of vampire-witches and prophecies and danger.

Before I could reply, she asked without any trace of emotion, “If the baby came out now, would it survive?”

My blood ran cold at that. She wanted my baby. I knew it beyond a shadow of a doubt. I saw it in the renewed gleam in her eyes and the set of her jaw in the candlelight.

“I-I don’t know,” I managed.

I did know. I knew because Spike was always spouting off the latest facts he’d read about my stage of the pregnancy. He even had a copy of that book, “What to Expect When You’re Expecting,” and he’d dog-eared and highlighted the pages. The baby had an over 90 percent chance of survival at this stage of the pregnancy, but I didn’t want Miney to know that. “I don’t think so,” I said, infusing my words with confidence.

Her eyes hardening again, she gave me an almost-rueful smile as she stepped away from me. “If something happens to you, I won’t let your baby die. I promise.”

“If you destroy the world, I doubt you’ll be able to keep that promise.” I still wasn’t sure why she was participating in this ritual. When so much of her own choices had been taken from her, why was she taking the same choice from potentially millions of others? Oh, wait. She was a vampire now without anyone to remind her of her humanity.

“If it comes to that, I’ll have the power to guarantee it.” She sounded so sure of herself that I almost believed her.

Before I could reply, her phone rang, the ringtone Pink’s “Blow Me (One Last Kiss)” echoing through the abandoned, dilapidated store. As Miney answered the call and paced out of the blood circle, her magic hold dissipated from my arms and legs. Summoning all my Slayer strength, I pulled with all my might against the remaining physical restraints, the metal digging into my skin. I kept quiet at first but then, my voice rang out in frustration and fear.

Miney was speaking in hushed whispers, bits of gibberish I couldn’t make out, and she whirled mid-conversation to catch me fighting for my life and the baby’s. She held the phone away from her ear, pointed a finger at me, shook her head like I was a disobedient child, and cast a spell, which
slammed me back against the table. Already vulnerable from earlier injuries, my head hit the hard surface with a sharp crack, and I battled tooth and nail against the resulting sparklies to stay awake and alert. When I opened my mouth to shout at her, no sound came out. Apparently, she took my voice with that last spell.

The vampire-witch strode across the room to a position where I couldn’t see her. There was some scuffling and a click or two, and then, a speaker came to life. The sound of chanting in some foreign, ancient-sounding language bounced and wove its way around and up through the air. Multiple female voices were weaving together, sounding like a warped female version of a Gregorian chant with a decidedly evil bent, and I felt the tug of magic through my chest and abdomen as the spell took hold in and filled the room.

Like she was being fueled by the magic and chanting, Miney began to dance, pointing her toes and sweeping around the outside edge of the blood circle the way my sister used to do when she took ballet lessons after we moved to Sunnydale. The swell of the chanting dipped low like an invitation for the vampire-witch, who plunged low in an elegant bow, her fingertips trailing over the blood like they had my abdomen. The magic surged then, and Miney’s voice joined the others until they were all a chorus together. The blood began glowing a muted red color that brightened with each repetitive note, and I felt it... felt the Hellmouth opening beneath me, and unlike when I was in Sunnydale, there was nothing I could do.

The scarlet light began slipping through the outlines of the archaic symbols painted inside the circle, a new thin stream of illumination appearing and then brightening and changing colors with each shift in the rhythm of the chanting. Miney flitted in between the symbols with an elegance I hadn’t expected. With a flick of her wrist, a knife appeared in her hand, the blade glinting in the now orange and golden lights.

To avoid panic taking hold of my mind, I centered myself the way I learned with Angel so long ago, finding that quiet space amidst the chaos around me. If I couldn’t find an opening here, I had to hope that my friends and family were out there, searching for me and for my sister.

A scream of agony swept over the other voices. The incantation continued incessantly, not changing tempo or speed, and as the scream ended, the entire ground around me and Miney seemed to faintly glow around the already bright symbols. Great. This was followed by another scream from a different woman this time, and I wondered which Slayer at which Hellmouth was being bled for the spell.

My eyes remained fixated on Miney, who appeared heedless of me. She was caught up in the magic of everything now – her eyes closed as she got lost in the spell and the dance. Recognizing this, I remembered that she forgot about me not so long ago, and I tested my arms and legs. I could move! Yahtzee. As the ear-piercing cries continued and the room glowed with more brilliance, I realized that the metal of the bindings was much flimsier than I initially thought. The vampire-witch’s magic
was what made them so tight, and now that magic was being siphoned elsewhere.

As the next young woman’s blood was spilled onto another Hellmouth, the whole room began to vibrate and almost pulsate with the energy of what was about to happen. I tugged on my right leg, snapping the chains. Miney was hardly phased.

Crap. I hadn’t kept track of the number of different Slayers who’d been harmed.

Miney lunged then, eyes flying open, curls streaming behind her. I kicked out at her in the exact moment that she plunged the knife, and I felt the blade slide into my flesh like butter.

Now, it was my turn to scream, the sound of my voice ringing out with Miney’s as my foot connected with her torso and flung her away from me. She slammed hard into the shop window, cracking but not shattering the glass. In my fury, I snapped free of the other chains and landed on my feet. Too late, my mind registered that blood was pouring fast and hot out of my thigh and onto the circle.

Miney struggled to her feet, somehow continuing her chant with the other vampire-witches despite the disruption to her pattern. She advanced on me, and I fell into a ready stance despite the pain.

“You can’t have my baby!” I half-snarled at her.

Feeling suddenly unsteady, I collapsed to my knees, and as I fell into my own pool of blood, the lights in the Hellmouth dimmed.

I only vaguely heard Miney screaming in anguish and rage as someone kicked down the door. A dog barked, and I was out again.

Chapter End Notes

Promise you'll have info about Spike and Dawn in the next chapter...

And you do definitely feel lightheaded if you lay on your back at a certain point during the pregnancy. Side sleeping is your friend. I'm a stomach sleeper so side sleeping was no fun.

And feeling the baby was like how Buffy described it...at least for me. It didn't seem
weird to have the baby moving...it happened so subtly and slowly that by the time there were big and hard movements, it felt right.

Hope you enjoyed Miney's backstory.

Thank you for reading and for all the reviews. Sorry this chapter is late. I didn't get to work on chapter 55 until after the weekend because of Easter. And 55 needed some time.
The next night in the hospital

Chapter Notes

So, I know I posted a new one day before yesterday, but I couldn't wait to post this one...if you can wade through the first part, you'll see why!

The first sound I heard was a steady heartbeat – much faster than a normal heartbeat. My eyes flew open, and I discovered that I was in a dimly lit hospital room. Running my hand over the bare skin of my baby bump, my fingers encountered a strap across my belly. My bump was still round and firm, and I sighed in relief. My leg throbbed in pain, and my right hand had an IV in a vein.

“You’re awake,” a familiar voice said to my left. His tone was gentle, and for a moment, I was brought back to a time when he was the center of my universe. I loved him so much, and then, it all fell apart. My heart was shattered.

I closed my eyes. The memories were so long ago and so faded. “Angel,” I tried to say in my unused voice, the sound coming out hoarse. I glanced at his large form sprawled almost comically in the low chair. “What – ?” I tried to sit up, my left arm pushing against the thin mattress. Pain asserted itself more forcefully, and the baby’s heartbeat increased in tempo.

Angel sat forward in the chair, and he made to stand, his arms reaching for me. “Buffy, try not to move.”

“My baby.” I ignored his suggestion and tried to decipher the machine that was monitoring the baby.

“The baby is fine. I promise. The doctor repaired the torn artery in your leg. George did a good job of putting a tourniquet on it while we were busy with the fight.”

“But why am I hooked up to this contraption?” I didn’t remove my eyes from the inexplicable numbers and buttons and the little piece of paper that was trailing out of it in a long stream.

“They’re monitoring the baby’s heart rate and movements just to make sure all is okay while you heal. The doc said something about possible contractions, but so far, you haven’t had any.”

He hesitated as if he didn’t want to tell me or was afraid to. “That’s a long story.”

I motioned at my body, wires coming off from different directions. “Apparently not going anywhere. Why don’t you start at the beginning.” It was a statement. Not a question.

“Do you want anything? Water? Jello? We should call for a nurse to check your vital signs.” Angel was as reasonably concerned as anyone would be, but to me at that moment, it felt like he was being evasive. Again.

“Story first. I don’t need an army of medical professionals in here yet. I seem to be reasonably stable. Where is Spike? Where is my sister? All I know is that Illyria showed up on our doorstep. I guess hell gods can get past magical wards. She took Dawn, and I went after them but ended up with the vampire-witch at the Hellmouth.” I lifted my hand palm up to him in invitation. “And go.”

He sighed and sank awkwardly against the seat, studying his clasped hands. “Illyria’s instability got worse, and she got desperate. She wasn’t listening to me anymore. We were following some leads to find a solution, but each one was a dead end.”

“How does that have anything to do with her coming after Dawn? How did she even know Dawn was a dimensional key?” As my irritation increased, the baby’s heart rate picked up again, and I forced myself to breathe in and out slowly.

“I didn’t tell her if that’s what you’re thinking,” he said gingerly, meeting my gaze.

I felt my anger easing just a smidge. “I know you wouldn’t. But how?”

“She sensed something about your sister when she went to her apartment in Denver. That shouldn’t have surprised me given what I know about Illyria, but it did. If I’d have known she knew anything, I would have warned you.” His words were sincere.

“Sensing something and knowing something about my sister are two different things,” I pushed. Spike and I should have known. We should have known that the hell god was as dangerous as she was.
“She didn’t exactly explain it to me. She just took off. We were in Albania. She has a cell phone but doesn’t understand how to use it very well. I, well, I have a parental control on her phone just since she came to me. It lets me track her when the phone is on. She had it off for a number of days. We’d originally planned to return to the States, so I flew back. Tried to find her in our usual haunts. Nothing. And then, she turned her phone back on. That’s when I knew she was close to New Orleans. Funny thing about Illyria, she prefers to drive.” He smiled ruefully. “She said it gives her power to ‘drive such a machine’ since she can’t teleport or travel across dimensions now. That, and she likes to stop at Waffle House. She’s keeping track of the ones she’s been to in her phone. Likes the pecan waffle and bacon.”

“You should have told us she took off.” I wasn’t letting my anger show too strongly yet. I had to keep him talking, so I forced myself to momentarily soften. “And let me guess. She takes selfies at each Waffle House?”

He laughed. “She does. She even has an Instagram page. She’s very proud every time wafflehouseofficial likes her posts.”

I sobered as anxiety pushed to the forefront. “So, let’s get back to Dawn. Why Dawn and why now? And where is Spike?”

“My best guess is that she was going to try to access Dawn’s key-ness to cross dimensions to try and get to Fred. Force Fred to give up herself.” Brow furrowing, Angel appeared stricken by this idea.

The questions poured out of me. “Wouldn’t she have to be made human to do so? And how could she possibly know how to use Dawn? Does Dawn even have powers anymore?” The thought of this made me more worried. Did my sister still have the latent ability to open gateways between dimensions?

“I don’t know the answers to those things. Illyria kept many things from me.”

“Apparently. And I repeat: where is Spike?” God, where was he? He better not be hurt or worse – dust, but I knew because he wasn’t here, one of the two must be true.

Angel drew a deep breath and looked down at the ground. “He went after Illyria.”

“What?!” This was worse.
“He got your text, and he chose to go after Dawn.” There had to be more to the story than what Angel was telling me, but I didn’t interrupt. “He took Willow with him.”

“She’s the only one who could help him follow Illyria across dimensions.”

“Yes. I think that Willow teleported herself.”

“Teleported? Teleported like Anya could do as a vengeance demon?” My friend didn’t tell me she could do that.

“Yeah.”

“And that’s where they are now. Traipsing across dimensions, chasing after Illyria and Dawn?”

“I think so.”

“Oh god.” I could potentially lose a lot of people that I loved very much. Spike and Willow better come back in one piece and with my sister. Then, I thought of something else, which helped me push back the tears that were threatening to come. “The ritual. Was it stopped? I mean, the vampire-witches. What happened?”

The tension not leaving his eyes, Angel smiled again. “You successfully thwarted another prophecy.”

“H-how? I mean, I knew that someone arrived to help me, but I also have this vague memory of the lights from the Hellmouth going out.”

He nodded. “More than one someone arrived to help you, and the New Orleans Hellmouth was shut down, successfully ending the ritual across all the Hellmouths.”

“Girlfriend showed up first.” I had to remember to give Liz’s dog a big bag of treats later. “She was disguised as a stray.”
“After Spike chose to follow Illyria, I joined George. Is that his name? He was delivering food to you and Dawn.”

“Yes.” Was Angel trying to make me pissed at Spike? If so, it wasn’t working the way Angel hoped. I was holding off on pissed-with-Spike until I spoke with him again, but first, I planned to kiss him until he couldn’t see straight.

Angel continued, oblivious to my thoughts, “I joined George and the three area Slayers. The other two Watchers stayed in their respective cities to hold down the fort there. George filled me in on the nature of the Hellmouth here. I’ve never heard of a moving Hellmouth.”

“Me either. George says it’s mercurial. Spike just says it’s slippery. Sometimes it stays in one place for weeks at a time, and other times, it might move more than once in a night.” I couldn’t help but slide Spike in there. My heart ached without him. “We’re used to it.” So used to it that I rarely thought of it as an anomaly.

Angel danced around my attempt to incorporate Spike into the conversation. “Mercurial is a good description. Anyway, we had no idea where you could be. George tried a tracking spell, but you were hidden and so was the Hellmouth. Our guess was because of the witch-vamp. No one had any idea that she was so powerful. But we did find your trail out of the house because of Liz’s dog.” I had forgotten that Angel couldn’t use his sense of smell anymore – not the same way. “I think her name is Gershwin. Or maybe something else?”

“Her Watcher nicknamed her Girlfriend.”

“That’s it.” Angel pointed at me like we were connecting on something – connecting buddies. Yeah, right. “Interesting choice.”

I threw him a bone. “Right? Liz and Katie think that Kishan and Michael are secret lovers, but I think that really Liz has a crush on Kishan, and he has kept his boundaries since he’s her Watcher.”

The corner of Angel’s mouth lifted. “Interesting times in general with all the Slayers and Watchers.”

“Agreed.” I found myself lowering my guard a little. “Continue.”
“So... Girlfriend tracked you to this abandoned shop by the lake. There were lights in the windows but all the buildings around it were dark.”

“Abandoned after Katrina.” While a lot had been rebuilt, there were some places that were left untouched either because the owners were forced to relocate from New Orleans or they didn’t have the finances to rebuild, especially in some of the poorer areas.

Angel nodded. “Yes. Emily explained that. Liz came up with the idea of having Girlfriend roll around in the dirt to look like a stray and then sending her into the building to check out the situation, so we knew what we were getting into.”

“Smart.”

“That’s what I thought. I noticed a couple of stray cats and at least one other dog in the vicinity.”

I tried to make sense out of how this would work. “Did you use magic to see what she saw?”

“Actually, no. We discussed that, but Katie thought that the witch would know, so George pulled this small camera out of his bag.”

I was amazed by how Angel threw out names of the people I knew and worked with daily as if he knew them now. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. It was maybe a little disconcerting, and I felt my loyalty to Spike pushing forward again. “He calls it his Watcher’s kit... like a doctor’s kit but for a Watcher.”

Angel skipped over my correction. “He managed to conceal the camera in the dog’s fur, and we were able to see what she saw in real time. After Girlfriend came out, we came up with a plan of attack. Liz and Katie wanted to charge in, but George and I knew that those vamps were likely very powerful.”

“Like the Three.” My mouth suddenly felt very dry, and I reached for the pitcher of water on the small rolling table nearby, which was just beyond my grasp.

Angel rose and poured me a glass. “Exactly.”
“Thanks.” I accepted the cup, my fingers brushing his, the ghost of a relationship trying to assert itself and failing, at least on my end. “So, what did you decide to do? Because there were no vampire-warrior types when I woke up again.” At Angel’s confused expression, I clarified, “Miney. . . the witch knocked me out. She was pissed off at them because they didn’t catch Girlfriend, especially when she almost set the place on fire.”

“The witch. She took it out on you.”

“Yep.” My head throbbed in response.

Angel dragged the chair closer to the side of the bed, perhaps because we’d just touched. He was continuing to get the signals crossed despite the clarity of my earlier message that I wasn’t interested, but I wanted him to keep telling me the story, so I continued to say nothing. . . not yet. “Once Girlfriend rejoined us, George cast a small spell – something just enough to attract the witch’s attention. She sent them all out. They were strong – as expected, and it took a while, but the Slayers dusted them all with a little help from George and me. They worked well together. Only had minor injuries after all was said and done.” He sounded impressed.

I sipped my water. “They train together a lot. The Watchers, Spike, and I designed a training space here in New Orleans. The Slayer from Beaumont drives in sometimes, too. And New Orleans has many of its own field opportunities.”

“You and Spike have taught them well,” Angel said, acknowledging Spike for the first time without the undercurrent of jealousy. “I could see it.”

“Thanks.”

“By the time, we made it back to the house, the spell was well underway, but you stopped it. Girlfriend tackled the witch, and Emily staked her while George tied off your leg. I brought you to the car, and we raced to the closest hospital. You were unconscious. I thought – well, I haven’t been that terrified in a long time. I never thought that I’d be in that position again.” Angel’s eyes were misting over, and I felt a wave of compassion for him.

“What position?” I asked with gentleness in my tone.

“Carrying you into an ER and not knowing if you’d wake up.” A tear slipped over his cheek.
“Well, I’m here. You know it takes more than that to keep me down,” I teased. “Miney was no Glory.”

“Yeah. I know that.” Angel glanced away, clearing the tear away with the back of his hand.

I frowned at the cup in my hands. “I still don’t know how I stopped the ritual.”

“The witches – for all their power and research – didn’t take into account one particular detail.” Now, he sounded amused.

I glared. “It’s not funny. What detail?”

“The fact that the prophecy called for powerful females.”

“I don’t understand. I already knew that.”

His dark eyes were clear. “Powerful women – Slayers pregnant with girls.”

“Ohhhh.” The baby’s heartbeat thrummed, declaring itself throughout the small room. I pressed my hand onto my belly where I felt a gentle motion. Exhaustion exerted its hold on my body. Not moving my gaze from the swell of my abdomen, I quietly said, tightness in my voice, “Please go find out where Spike, my sister, and Willow are. Don’t come back unless you can tell me that they’re okay.”

Angel stood for a long moment as if waiting for something, but when I turned my head further away, he exited the room without another word.

Once he was gone, I curled up on my side, drawing my legs and arms around my belly as best I could with all the wires and straps. The healing wound in my leg throbbed. As the tears slipped over my cheeks in hot streams, I whispered, “Hello, my son.”
Taking Xander’s offered hand, I pulled myself out of the front seat of his rental car and found myself on the sidewalk in front of my house, the sky above grey and heavy with clouds. I stared up at the front door and felt a wave of sadness filling my heart. I’d managed to set aside the melancholy in the hospital because between the doctor and nurses and visiting friends, my body and brain had been otherwise occupied.

Now, the front door loomed, and though I knew Carrie was inside freshening things up, I knew seeing the empty house would stir some long-forgotten depression lingering in the back of my mind. Beyond simple sadness, I felt it there, threatening to drag me back into the dark pit I’d barely pulled myself out of so long ago.

Carrying my small tote bag, Xander didn’t say a word and waited for me to move forward. Though there was a small smile on his face, the fear behind his eyes told me that he was as worried about Willow and Dawn (and maybe even Spike) as I was. That was validating at least.

I matched his smile and headed toward the door, my feet dragging although my leg was healed. The doctor and nurses had been amazed at how quickly that happened. Maybe it was something about how sad I seemed, but they didn’t question me.

“Hard to think about going inside,” Xander said, a tinge of knowing in his voice. “Empty houses are . . . empty.”

I glanced into his kind brown eyes and gave him a close-lipped smile. “Yeah.” My son kicked me, a reminder that I had to keep going. “Better to rip off the Band-Aid.”
Xander put his arm around my shoulders, reminding me that I was not alone, not really. “C’mon. Carrie and I are staying a while. We can even forego the hotel and stay here if you like.”

As if on cue, the front door opened, and Carrie appeared in the doorway, a broad smile on her face, the same softness in her eyes as my friend. “Hi! Are you coming in? It’s awfully humid to be standing about.”

Xander and I joined Carrie on the porch, and as Xander removed his arm, Carrie gathered me up in hers, her long blonde hair silky against my cheek. She smelled of sugar, syrup, and chocolate, a scent that trailed out from the front door as well. I simultaneously felt grateful and disheartened by the difference between now and what the space smelled like when Spike and Dawn were home.

As Xander eased around us and entered the house, Carrie pulled away. “I hope you don’t mind, but I tidied things up a bit and made a syrup sponge pudding. If you’d like, I can serve you a bit with some hot chocolate.”

Tears filled my eyes at the mention of hot chocolate, but before Carrie could look dismayed, I pushed past the despondency and said, “Sure. I’d love some. Thank you.”

Trying to stay detached, I forced myself to look around my small home as I followed Carrie through it. She’d arranged Dawn’s scattered belongings and the bassinet in the corner of the living room, straightened the bathroom countertop, and made the bed, which Spike always left a rumpled mess. Xander was already in the kitchen and had placed my bag on the end of the bed. On any other day, I would have thought the kitchen smelled heavenly, but today, I sagged onto one of the kitchen chairs.

Before I could say anything, Carrie deposited a plate full of dessert in front of me with ice cream on the side. Xander brought over spoons and handed me one along with a napkin.
Carrie sank into the chair across from me after retrieving plates. “I didn’t have time to make a custard to go with it, so there’s ice cream instead.”

I accepted a mug of hot chocolate from Xander, who’d poured three mugs from the pot on the stove. “That’s fine.”

I poked at the dessert with the tip of my spoon as the pair of them watched me expectantly. I wasn’t sure what they were wanting from me. Evidence that I was okay? My review of their efforts? I certainly didn’t feel okay, and I didn’t have the energy to reassure them. Instead, I slowly ate, focusing on the sweetness in my mouth. Xander and Carrie seemed to relax into the food consumption as well, and we were all quiet.

After Xander scraped the last of the syrup and ice cream from his plate, he settled against the back of the chair and took a sip of hot chocolate. “We’re going to find them. They have to be okay.” The uncertainty in his tone despite his determination made me realize again that he was terrified, too.

When I didn’t say anything right away, Carrie said, “Willow is a powerful witch, and Spike is a powerful vampire. And your sister is apparently powerful in her own way. I don’t doubt that they will all be okay even if Illyria is a god of some sort.”

Xander took her hand in his free one. “It’s the god part that worries me. We faced an unstable hell god before, and well, it didn’t turn out so well.”

He glanced at me with the last part, a lingering pain in his eyes over my death and the way they’d brought me back. I smiled at him and shrugged. It was a long time ago.

“The positive reframe isn’t so helpful, is it?” Carrie said in defeat.
“No,” I said, sitting up in the chair and leaning forward toward her. “Positive reframes are needed. I need them because my head is all with the doom-and-gloom. The funk is not my friend.”

“The funk?” Carrie asked in amusement. “Is that what you call the dark cloud over both your heads?”

“Yes,” Labeling it chased it away for a moment, and I stood, bringing my dishes to the sink. Then, I returned to my seat but didn’t sit down. I needed to stand. “You two haven’t told me what you know about what happened.”

Xander laughed, a little half-hearted snuffle.

I frowned. “What’s so funny?”

“You. Standing there being commander-y Slayer with your baby…” Waving his hand up and down at me, he trailed off at a loss for words.

“Her baby bump?” Carrie asked, emitting a giggle, which made Xander snicker.

I turned sideways, ran my hand over my shirt, and stuck my stomach out further. I lifted both eyebrows. “You mean this?”
Xander responded by laughing harder, and soon, we were all laughing. Several seconds later, my ribs started hurting, and I was gasping a bit for air. I plopped back into the chair with a sigh. Baby was just starting to push closer toward my lungs.

“I give up.” Propping my elbows on the table, I put my head in my hands, the dregs of despondency creeping back in. “What do you know?”

In response to my query, Xander slung an arm around the back of Carrie’s chair, his face serious. “The first I knew anything was happening was in a group text I got from Willow. She knew, even across state lines, that the wards had been tripped. All of us got a text alert, but the first notification was from Willow. I think she somehow attached the wards to her psyche, so she was first to know.”

“Damn. She is bloody powerful.” Carrie said almost to herself, her voice full of awe. “I’m thinking she could take Illyria.”

“Dawn’s phone got a text at some point, and when I went to check it, I noticed the ward had gone off.” I gestured at my chest. “It was all green and glow-y.”

“Willow sure loves her green,” Xander mused.

“That’s what I thought. Right after I noticed the ward though, I got knocked out, so I never saw the text.”

Xander continued, “Spike was in the group text, and all he said was that he was on it. He left work and raced to the location that Willow sent him. I’m assuming that’s where you were last. The next thing I knew was that he was texting us to say that Illyria had Dawn.”
“I sent him a text from Dawn’s phone,” I explained. “But I’m sure he also smelled them.”

“The vampire smell thing is so fascinating,” Carrie added. “I sometimes wonder why we don’t have heightened senses. Aren’t Slayers also part demon?”

Her light comments were helping me stay afloat, and I offered her a grateful smile. “Yeah. You’d think we’d get that, too, but trust me when I say, you wouldn’t really want it. The smells alone would drive me crazy. I can’t imagine how the Quarter would smell if I had vampire senses.”

Xander had taken Carrie to Bourbon Street during their visit at Christmas time. She’d not been a fan, but she had enjoyed the quieter and decidedly less malodorous Frenchman Street when they’d gone to the bar where Spike worked. She wrinkled her nose at the thought of a heightened sensory experience in the Quarter. “Good point.”

With a grimace, Xander set aside his mug of hot chocolate, pushing it to the middle of the table. “As soon as Spike texted about Illyria having Dawn, Willow texted that she was going to teleport to Spike. When Spike didn’t reply, Willow said she was leaving and to get in touch with Oz.”

I reached for Xander’s mug for something to do with my hands. I fidgeted with the handle, tracing my finger on the inside of the ring. “Angel told me that she teleported. I had no idea that was in Willow’s wheelhouse.”

“I don’t think she likes doing it. She said it hurts. Makes her nose and ears bleed. Once she does it, she can’t do it for a long time.”

“Oh, golly,” Carrie said, frowning and running her hand through her long hair to push it off her
forehead. “I don’t blame her then.”

“Angel must have shown up in there somewhere because he said he saw Willow. What I don’t know is how Spike decided to go after Illyria and my sister.” I was still confused by this. I had no doubt that Spike had chosen to do so for good reason. I only hoped I got the chance to ask him.

Xander shook his head. “No idea on that part. All I know is that Willow and Spike were planning on looking for a demon of some sort that could travel between dimensions. Something about how they help their meal ticket get pregnant in this dimension by eating some form of plant. It sounds way ridiculous.”

“But not unheard of,” Carrie noted. When we stared at her in surprise, she added, “I mean, there are a handful of demons who can. Kathleen and I are. . . what does she call it? We’re study buddies.”

“You’re right about other demons,” I said, thinking of D’Hoffryn, my college roommate, and others. “And Giles would be proud.”

She gave me a conspiratorial look. “Don’t tell him, but we just started after that last Group Me chat.”

I laughed. It seemed like the last laugh was helping me find humor again despite my underlying anxiety. “I won’t.”

Carrie pointed a finger at Xander. “You either, mister.”

Xander raised his hands, palms to her. “You don’t have to worry about me. Speaking of Giles, he’s
on his way. I think he’s on a flight with Oz. You probably saw it in all the texts.”

“How’s Oz holding up?” I asked. He had to be so worried about Willow and Dawn. “And I haven’t seen any texts. My phone’s been here the whole time.”

Carrie snapped her fingers as if she’d forgotten to tell me. “I found it by the recliner. The battery was dead, so I plugged it into the charger on the bedside table. It should have power now. I’ll retrieve it. Just give me a sec.”

“Thanks.”

While she was gone, Xander answered my question, “You know Oz. When someone he cares about is in danger, he’s serious about finding a way to get them back.”

“I still remember that one time when Willow got kidnapped by the mayor. Oz was definitely not his usual laid-back-self.” God, that felt like so long ago. We were such kids, saving the world from evil.

Xander’s expression told me that he was thinking something similar. “We were so young.”

“We were.”

Carrie passed my fully-charged phone over my shoulder before she reclaimed her chair. I pushed the home button and saw that I had too many texts to take in all at once. The group ones were there, and there was one from Spike just to me. I opened that one first.
The text read, “Red showed up, and we’re going after the Bit. Spoke with Angel, and we agreed that me following Blue was the best plan. She’s dead tired of the ole poof, and I don’t blame her. The god trusts me in a different way than Angel. I’m banking on that. Got to get your sis back for you and well, for her, too. You know me and promises. Trusting you to hold up your end and not die on me. Love you.”

Tears welled again, but this time, I blinked them away with ease. Spike needed me to be strong, especially if he and my sister were in danger. I caught Xander studying me, and I wondered if he was trying to figure out if I was going to retreat inside my own brain like all those years ago. The difference was I was older. My brain and heart had overcome so much, and those pathways of healing were well traversed.

Before I could respond, there was a knock on the front door, and all three of us went to the door together.

Carrie hovered behind us with a stake in hand, and Xander and I took turns peering through the peephole. He and I exchanged glances, and he shrugged.

“What’s the password?” he boomed in a lighthearted tone.

“Xander, you know very well that there is no bloody password. Let us in!” Giles was already annoyed.

Carrie let out a breath of air, and Xander and I grinned. With a flourish, he swept open the door to my Watcher and Oz.
“Eyes lingering on my abdomen, Giles gave me a once over as Xander confiscated his suitcase with a groan at how heavy it was. “Buffy, you look lovely. How is your leg?”

“Right as rain.” I lifted my knee into the air to demonstrate that my wounded leg was healed. My thigh hit the bottom of my baby bump, and the baby stirred. The change had been so subtle that I hadn’t realized how big he’d gotten.

“Good. We have much to discuss. Your home is temporary headquarters, so you can be as comfortable as possible. We’ll invite over George, Emily, and the other local Slayers and their Watchers. We need a plan for Illyria.” Giles hugged me and scanned the living room as he stepped inside. Though the space was neater thanks to Carrie, there were still a lot of new baby-related things. “I don’t remember it being so small.”

“Isn’t our bigger problem getting everyone back in one piece?” I asked as I smiled at our next guest.

Oz was carrying a grey duffel bag over his shoulder, his eyes heavy with concern, but his face impassive. “I have news about that. I’ve been in communication with Willow.”

Chapter End Notes

Carrie Ann, I hope you enjoyed your bigger role here and your dessert of choice.

Thank you so much for reading!
The night we left for Texas

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Interstate-10 in the middle of the night was eerily dark, the shining oasis of rest stops in tiny Louisiana towns few and far between. Seeing all the brightly lit, yellow Waffle House signs along the way was disconcerting after what Angel had told me about Illyria, and I couldn’t help but wonder if the blue god had forced my sister to stop at each one to take a morbid selfie. That thought alone added to my growing urgency to do something - anything.

Oz was driving one of the giant trucks in our two-truck caravan because there was no way anyone would let me drive anything bigger than a car. Liz slept in the extended cab’s back seat with Girlfriend’s fluffy head in her lap, her hand twined in the dog’s soft curly fur. The dog’s bright eyes were open and alert, but she remained still, mindful of her person’s state of relaxation. I smiled at her, and she lifted her head just a fraction, her tail thumping twice against the leather seat.

“How far behind are we?” I quietly asked Oz, desperate for some conversation to keep me grounded and awake. Liz’s dog and I had to take regular breaks to use the bathroom and stretch our legs, and Giles, Xander, Carrie, and Kishan were piled in the other truck we’d rented. Katie and Emily and their Watchers were staying in Louisiana in case of continued trouble there or in case any of our missing loved ones showed up.

Giles had entrusted George with communicating with the Slayers and Watchers at all the Hellmouths and mini-Hellmouths to collaborate with them on how to manage the aftermath of prophecy that had been foiled by Spike’s and my unborn son. All we knew was that two Slayers had died, but the rest had survived, and in all cases, the witch-vampires were dusted. One horrible fact played in my head over and over: three of the Slayers were forcibly impregnated by the vampire-witches. The good news was that the ritual couldn’t be repeated for another couple of centuries.

Oz flipped off the radio, which had been playing tunes from his iPhone almost inaudibly in the background. The music was just loud enough to cover up the rushing sound of tires over the pavement. “I think about 30 minutes or so. We should be coming up on Texas soon.” I had to strain to remember what I’d just asked. That’s how distracted I was.
Texas was normally about a five-hour drive from New Orleans, and we were meeting the Beaumont Slayer, Hana, at her mother’s small camping store. Her mother had graciously agreed to give us camping gear for official Slayer business. We were headed deep into the wooded heart of East Texas, which Hana had informed us was vastly different than Southeast Texas where she was stationed. She was also tagging along to help us in case Illyria came back to this dimension fully loaded and ready to fight. I wasn’t sure that three-and-a-half Slayers, two Watchers, a werewolf, one of my oldest friends, and a dog could take on the blue god, but I knew we’d put up a hell of a fight. We weren’t sure what we were going to do once we found the place where Spike and Willow had crossed over, but we knew we planned on at least staying for a bit.

“Have you heard anything?” I asked for what felt like the umpteenth time.

“Not since we were in New Orleans,” Oz admitted. Shortly after his arrival, he’d explained that before Willow teleported, she’d done some sort of mojo with him, connecting them together so that they could telepathically communicate with one another across the country. Interdimensional communication had been another kind of distance altogether, and he’d only received a handful of messages since then.

“How does it work again?” I tried to sound perky, the co-pilot helping to keep her captain awake without the benefit of caffeine. My attempt was admittedly more than a tad wilt-y. Our little caravan left the night after Giles and Oz arrived in town. We’d have left sooner, but people had to pack and plans had to be made, including little things like calling Spike’s place of work.

Oz kept his eyes steady on the road, the familiar timbre of his voice easygoing even with the strain of our mission. “It’s kinda like how one of those old-fashioned walkie talkies would sound. You and your sister ever have a set of those when you were kids?”

“Yeah.” Dawn had wanted them for Christmas, and I used to get so frustrated with her because she would turn them on and then whisper faux urgent, almost indecipherable messages at all hours of the night. Little did I know, I’d be up all hours of the night dealing with crises of a different sort on a regular basis not too many years after that.
Oz’s left hand slipped to the side of the steering wheel, and he turned on his blinker to pass a slower 18-wheeler. “Well, it’s static-y and not very clear. I mean, it was clear as a bell when she was in this dimension.” Willow had sent him a message of her and Spike’s location because they had had to act so quickly to follow the dimensional rift left by Dawn and Illyria. There had been no time for texting. She’d also conveyed that we should all gather there because they planned on coming out the way they went in, if possible.

“Willow was clear as day in Sunnydale when she communicated in our heads in a different way. Makes sense. And the latest message?” I’d heard him describe it, but I wanted – no, needed to hear it again. Somehow, it seemed like I might hear something new or think of some nuance to it that wasn’t so negatively tinged.

Oz eased us back into our original lane, glancing briefly at me. “I’ve been playing it over and over in my head since we’ve been out on the road.”

“This long, unending stretch of road.” I gestured in front of us into the darkness so thick that the headlights barely penetrated it. The lights from the truck’s dashboard made the cab feel small and safe. For some reason, I thought about how safe I felt with Spike in the rental car in Norfolk, the poorly lit parking lot boxing us in.

Oz’s voice still even, he said, “Right. And I don’t know if it means they’re in trouble or okay. All I get from it is that they’re all together. Willow, Spike, Dawn, and Illyria. And hey, they’re alive.”

“Or undead at least,” I half-heartedly joked, running my right hand over the firm swell of my belly. Baby wasn’t moving. He was probably asleep. Little bugger was starting to make me feel hot.

Oz was silent for several seconds, and then he said, “I heard, ‘Illyria. . . Dawn. Got power coursing through. Spike and I kill. Fred’s soul.” He sighed. “That’s all.”
I smiled at him. “It’s okay. It sounds ominous, but maybe it’s not?” Nope. I still couldn’t wrap my mind around how it wasn’t worrying.

“Maybe.” He paused for a few breaths and then added, “I’d know though.”

“What?” I picked up my plastic water bottle and forced myself to take a sip of the tepid liquid. I made a face, wishing there was a trace of cold in it.

“If Willow was dead. I’d feel it.”

I frowned. “I don’t know if I’d know if Dawn or Spike were. . . gone.” I couldn’t bring myself to say “dead.”

He tilted his head toward me again with raised eyebrows. “It’s because of the connection Willow created. Not sure I’d like it to be permanent. But for now, I’ll take it.”

“Ohhh. I wouldn’t want to be permanently connected to someone else. . . Spike or Dawn. My head is loud enough already.” I shuddered as I thought about how awful I felt when everyone’s thoughts were in my brain because that weird, mouthless demon infected me during senior year. “Plus, hearing all of their thoughts might piss me off. Especially lately when we’ve been confined to the house.”

Oz breathed out an amused huff. “I hear you.”
I decided to change the subject. “How’s it been? Being back with Willow.”

“Good. Really good.” His eyes briefly narrowed as if he was considering something. “Better.”

“How so?” I was really curious to hear his take on how it was to be with my best friend after what transpired between them.

Oz didn’t hesitate. “In some ways, it’s kind of like being together like before. When we were first together. We were really happy.”

“I remember.” Their puppy love was incredibly sweet. No pun intended.

“And it’s better because we’re older. We’re not so . . .” He pressed his lips together as if searching for the right way to say it. “Confused and full of angst, for lack of a better word. We both know that we want the other person. Only each other.”

“I get that. More than you know.” I sighed. “We were young once.”

“We’re not old,” Oz added.

I played with the loose ring around the opening of my water bottle, the plastic pressing into my skin. “I never thought I’d be this old.”
“I’m glad you are. I know Willow’s glad you are.” There were so many layers to Oz’s last sentence. I wondered how much he knew. Surely, Willow had told him about the time she brought me back from the dead and then later almost destroyed the world. She did say they’d done a lot of talking.

“Me, too.” That was at least honest at this point in my life. The memory of not wanting to be alive lingered in the back of my mind; it probably always would. But now, I had so much to live for, and Spike better be here with me to live it. He was the one who’d reminded me to live in this world in the first place. “I’m glad that you and Willow found each other again. She’s been not herself since Tara, and I think that you remind her of the pieces of her that can be happy. And if being old means we’re far less confused and angsty, I’ll take it.”

“You and Spike love each other.” Oz was making a statement.

But I answered him anyway. “Uh huh. He never gave up on me.” This was the well-accepted part of our story, but the truth was, I’d believed in Spike, too, a fact he often underscored.

“And you can’t give up on him now. They’re going to make it out of this.” Oz sounded unflappable, but I knew he was reassuring himself, too.

“You’re right. I have to believe that they will.”

“I believe that they will. I spent two evenings with the guy, and I could tell that he’d move mountains for you.”

“He would. . . he has.”
Oz closed off his air conditioning vents, and a push of extra cold air washed over me. It felt like heaven. Pregnancy was slowly forcing me into a state of being chronically hot. I needed the cool. Oz was kind enough to accommodate me even though it wasn’t the same as my nice cool vampire.

“You’ll be a good dad someday,” I said, grateful that he’d noticed my discomfort.

Oz half-grinned, his mouth slightly open for a moment before settling into a smile. That was his surprised expression. “What?”

“If you and Willow... you know. Have little werewolf-witch-y babies. Do werewolves have a litter? ‘Cause, you know, that might make Willow cranky.”

Oz’s laugh was refreshing amid all the seriousness. “No. No litters as far as I know. I should ask my cousin, Geordie. Last I heard, he got a girl pregnant right out of high school. He and I lost touch a while ago, but I could get his number from my aunt. I probably should find out for Willow’s sake.”

I couldn’t help myself. I pounced. “Does that mean that you’d consider it? Having babies with Willow?” Suddenly, I wanted my son to play with their someday kids.

The corner of Oz’s lip stayed up. “We’ve talked about it. Call me old-fashioned, but I want to make her an honest woman first.”

“Good for you.” I didn’t know how Willow felt about marriage; maybe she’d even prefer some sort of earthy Wiccan commitment ceremony.
“Have you and Spike talked about it?” he asked nonchalantly.

“What?” It was my turn to feign confusion. My hand reached up to touch the heart pendant Spike had given me at Jacques Imo’s. I’d put the necklace on for this trip, just to be close to him.

“Marriage.” Damn. He clarified. “I mean since you’re having a kid and all. Or even, despite that.”

At that moment, the bright blue sign of a rest stop flew by, lit by our headlights. A bathroom was close. “You’re going to kill me, but I have to pee.” It was the vicious cycle of pregnancy: drink lots of water to prevent dehydration and spend lots of time in the bathroom. I’d discovered that all the peeing that came with pregnancy wasn’t just about a big baby pressing against his mom’s bladder.

Oz gave me a funny look but let his original query go. “Okay. No need for killing. We’ll stop.”

As we pulled off the highway, I pulled the subject even further away. “What do you suppose Kilgore, Texas is like? And why do you think they call it Kilgore? Kill and gore. Is that supposed to be some sort of really bad pun?”

Chapter End Notes

Interstate 10 between NOLA and Beaumont is a long, straight highway with little in the way of scenery. I used to drive it all the time from internship to my parents' house and back again.

Credit to yellowb for putting the bug in my ear about the witch-vamps forcing pregnancy on a few of the Slayers.

This is my first time writing a whole chapter with Oz, and he's a man of few words, so I tried to capture him but don't know if I did. I sorta tried to channel Oz as he was in the
van with Willow while they were waiting for Xander and Cordy to steal the missile launcher.
The twenty-eighth morning in Kilgore

Morning sunlight streamed in golden rays through the tall trees of the woods north of Kilgore. Hana, Liz, Carrie, Oz, and a reluctant Xander were engaged in a session of Tai Chi led by Angel in the small clearing near where Dawn, Illyria and later Spike and Willow had crossed dimensions. Girlfriend lounged at the edge of the group, head high and alert, her eyes alternately watching Liz and Angel.

His eyes clearly reading “rescue me please;” Xander kept glancing at me where I sat in a chair observing in the marginally cooler shade, feet propped on top of an ice chest. I smirked at him and shrugged a shoulder. He was as annoyed with Angel as I was, but the Slayers were enjoying the meditative movements and relaxing activity, and Carrie had wrangled her boyfriend into doing it with her. Xander sagged a little in response to my lack of save-age, and I gave him a short-lived grin.

I still wasn’t sure how Angel found this location given that I’d sent him away at the hospital, and no one had seen or heard from him since then. He’d just been here when we arrived. He said he solved the puzzle through good, old-fashioned detective work because he was lacking the extrasensory skills that came with being a vampire, but I wasn’t so sure. If Cordy were around, I would ask her if he’d become that good at on-the-ground detecting since he left Sunnydale, but she was gone, long dead, a casualty of this eternal war we were inevitably waging.

At my dismayed expression upon seeing Angel, he’d told me that he was worried about everyone involved, including Spike. There had been something in my ex’s eyes that told me that on that count, I could believe him. So, my trust was tentative, but he seemed eager to help, burying his nose in books with the Watchers, chatting with Oz about who knew what, and helping spar with the Slayers with a focus on technique due to his lack of preternatural strength. I, on the other hand, stayed as far away from physical contact with my ex as possible, out of loyalty to Spike but also because I was realizing that I couldn’t fight. Not now. I could never live with myself if something happened to my son out here in the woods, far from my trusted OB in New Orleans.

Slipping a Zantac under my tongue and taking a sip of my ice water, I felt the baby shift inside me. He tended to wiggle more if I drank something cold or ate something sweet. I’d taken to talking to him if I thought no one was listening. I ran both hands over the hill of my abdomen, marveling not for the first time how taut and stretched my skin had become in making way for my son’s growth.

I patted the place where I’d felt the movement. “Hey. It’s day 28 of our Texas campout. Daddy, Aunt Dawn, and Auntie Willow better get home soon. I’m tired of the heat and the mosquitos. And did I say the heat? Going back to New Orleans won’t help much with the heat or mosquitos, but at least, there will be air conditioning and snuggles with your daddy who is inevitably room
temperature unless I warm him up.” The baby fluttered in response, so I kept going. “Speaking of which, I better check in with – ”

Chocolate-colored eyes sparkling with good humor, Hana flopped onto the ground beside me, knees bent as she pulled her long wavy hair into a messy top bun. Once her hair was situated, she crisscrossed her legs and grinned at me. “Talking to your little guy?”

I smiled at the taller Slayer. “Giving up on Tai Chi?”

She laughed and leaned over to me conspiratorially. “To be honest? It’s not my cup of tea. I mean, all the movements. They’re so slow and drawn out and dramatic. No offense to you if you like it. Or any of them.” She waved a hand at the group being led by Angel. “They seem to be enjoying it. Maybe it even helps them. Oz was telling me that all the Eastern philosophy stuff really helps with the werewolf. Me personally? I just need to move around a bit more and a bit more quickly.”

“I get that.”

Something about the younger Slayer reminded me of Faith – a kinder, gentler Faith who grew up with a loving single mom. Well, maybe she also kind of reminded me of me. Hana continued, “I just get caught up in my head when I attempt to meditate. The Watcher – well, mine – tries to get me to, but ugh, I just hate those days. Anything else? Sparring, patrolling, etc. I’m golden.”

Hana’s Watcher, Sam, was on the older side like Giles, and like Giles, he was tweed-wearing. He tended to stick with the more traditional training, but he did, at least, have a sense of humor, and he loved music. He even had his own country band that played at the local music festivals. Hana had told me that she pretended to be a reluctant tagalong, but she secretly loved his cover of George Strait’s “Adalida.”

I made a face at her. “Patrolling? Really? For me, that always involved a whole lot of alone time and with the waiting by the graves. Lotsof thoughts.”

“A little birdie told me that you weren’t alone very often.” She nodded toward the group.

My heart tugged for the people in our group who were part of my original behind-the-scenes team – the team that Spike was initially insanely irritated by. Sometimes, he still was, but that was part of the Spike package. “This is true. I had more company than most past Slayers.”
“You had your friends. And you had Angel.” Her tone told me that she was trying to sound curious in a nonchalant way but failing miserably. She sighed. “Well, that was a little obvious, huh?”

I laughed. “Um, yeah.”

She leaned back on her palms and looked up at me, squinting a little as a ray of sun caught her line of sight just right. I saw a smattering of freckles on her nose. As she repositioned, she asked, “So, is there a reason he’s here now? I mean, the two of you obviously had a thing. Why is he here helping? I mean, I have an ex that I loved, but he isn’t hanging out, helping me stake vampires or stop apocalypses. Not that we have any apocalypses in the Golden Triangle. Or many vampires for that matter.”

“Kinda drew the short end of the stick for slayage, huh?” I drank more water. There was no forcing myself here; it was hot. . . or as Spike would say, “Bloody hell! It’s sodding sweltering.” I missed his voice. Even my voice for him in my head didn’t sound right.

Hana rubbed her lips together. “My mom’s relieved about that. She doesn’t love that I’m a Slayer. And I didn’t tell her you were the reason I am one.”

“I’d come to expect and had experienced many consequences to the spell we’d performed in Sunnydale to empower all the potentials. This was one of the least problematic. Still. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s no skin off my back. I enjoy it. Like a lot more than I ever thought I would. I mean, if I ever thought anything like that would ever happen to me.” She shook her head as if clearing her thoughts and gazed out at the group. “But I don’t really think about it like that anyway – like something that happened to me.”

“How do you think about it?” She said she didn’t care, but I wondered if part of her did.

“The short of it is: shit happens to everyone if you live long enough. My dad died when I was six. My mom never let it get her down. She let herself grieve and wanted me to, too. There was never any doubt about that. But she always told me that things happen for a reason even if it seemed senseless at the time and that I’d end up touching someone else’s life because of my experiences. I’ve saved some people since I’ve been a Slayer. Real lives.” She drew her knees up then and hugged them to her chest. “That counts for something.”

I stopped studying her and focused instead on the movements of the group before me, realizing she’d
just assuaged my lingering guilt for the moment. “It definitely counts.”

Everyone was following Angel with intent expressions on their faces. Even Xander seemed caught up in the motion despite the sweat pouring down his temple.

I sipped my water, the ice melting more rapidly than I would like. “I didn’t answer your questions about Angel.”

“Ha. It’s okay. You don’t have to.” I could tell she meant it, so I answered anyway.

I thought back to what Spike and I had talked about when Angel showed up in New Orleans. “Angel’s here for a lot of reasons. Spike and I thought it was because of me, but he also cares a lot about Spike despite a long history of competition between them.” The dynamic was oversimplified, but I was tired and didn’t feel like re-hashing the past. Slayers could read about all of it if they chose to read Giles’s diaries or the thesis on Spike.

“He probably also feels guilty about Illyria,” Hana said quietly. A bird let out a string of urgent chirps overhead, and another called back with another trill of notes. “For taking your sister and going after Fred.”

“Agreed.” I was starting to think there might be more reasons that he felt guilty about Fred than I would ever know. “God, it’s hot.”

“At least the mornings are somewhat cooler?” Hana offered in response. She was good with the positive outlook.

There was some excited chatter – human voices and not bird – from behind us. I tilted my head back and sideways to view Giles and Kishan huddled in one of our three large tents, peering at a volume on top of a pile of ancient-looking texts. Stainless steel coffee cup in one hand, Kishan was pointing at a particular line of text, which Giles hunched over, fingers touching the frame of his glasses.

“Ya know, you guys could come out where there’s actual sunlight. You’d be able to see the tiny words in that book better,” I said, half-teasing, half-serious. To the outside observer, I might look casual, but I was eager to know what they’d found now.

Giles conferred with Kishan and headed toward us. Kishan gathered up the large tome they’d been
pouring over and followed.

“I could use some water.” Giles smiled at me, the tension in his eyes lightened just a smidge. That was a great sign.

I moved my feet and stood, squatting a little to flip open the cooler lid. Passing him a cold bottle, I asked, “So? You found something.”

“We did indeed.” My Watcher twisted open the top and took a couple of large gulps. I’d never seen Giles dressed so casually except that one time when he and my mom ate the enchanted chocolate bars that made them act sixteen. Now, the heat of the woods had driven him into shorts, a short-sleeved button up shirt, and Nikes that I had no idea he even owned.

Kishan bent and pilfered a water. “You know how we were worried if they could find their way back here to this time and this dimension?”

I shifted from one foot to the other. Was that even a question? I’d been worried about that from day one. “Yeah.”

Kishan poked at the page. “We found a spell that will allow us to send them a signal, especially since Oz only receives messages from Willow but can’t send them.”

“Cool. How does it work?” Hana asked, peeking over the crook of the younger Watcher’s arm. “Oh. It’s in another language.”

“Correct,” Kishan sounded amused. “It’s Sumerian.”

“Oh! The language Dawn knows.” I smiled at the thought of my sister knowing how to translate an ancient language. . . and more than one now.

“It works,” Giles said, “by means of a spell that Kishan and I will cast at the exact site of their transition.”

“Unknown exactly what will happen when we cast said spell,” Kishan admitted grudgingly.
“But the basic premise is that the magic will send forth some form of signal that will hone in on our missing friends and family and allow them to find their way back here,” Giles continued.

“Like magical bread crumbs?” I asked brightly. “Like Hansel and Gretel in reverse.”

Giles huffed with impatience but nodded. “A close enough metaphor.”

“And presumably Illyria will be included in receiving this signal?” Hana asked.

“Yes. The god will also receive the signal because it’s tied to whoever crossed over in this spot.”

“So, we should be prepared,” I said, crossing my arms.

Giles pressed his lips together. “We should.”

“Mainly,” Kishan said, “because other things can follow our comrades and come through into our plane.”

“Sounds peachy,” Hana said before stepping to one side.

Oz and Xander appeared in our little circle with Angel, Liz, and Carrie not far behind. Girlfriend wove between the group members to bump her head against my hand. I petted her without much thought. Everyone but the dog was sweating, including Angel. I wasn’t used to seeing that.

“News?” Oz asked, his jaw set. He’d received another message from Willow a few days ago, but he said it’d been so garbled, he couldn’t make out any of the words. Since then, we’d all been more apprehensive. Xander, Oz, and I had taken a short walk through the woods that evening, and the werewolf had teared up, something I didn’t remember seeing before.

Kishan smiled. “News, a little hope, and a simpler spell than we expected.”
True to what Kishan said, by mid-afternoon, the necessary preparations were complete. Giles and Kishan stepped carefully into the ring of stones surrounding the crossover point while the rest of us hovered on the periphery to watch. The Watchers each held one side of the book with the spell and had painted what looked like mashed up herbs on their cheeks, forehead, and forearms. Kishan started by chanting, foreign words pouring out of his mouth in a hard staccato. After several seconds, Giles joined in with a melody that was haunting and delicate but just as powerful. His notes wove between and around the steady beat of Kishan’s deeper voice.

The sun was high and the heat almost unbearable. Sweat trickled down my back and over my right cheek. As the magic filled the circle and reverberated out into the surrounding areas, a wave of dizziness overcame me. I blinked and spread my legs in attempt to stay rooted to the spot, but the spell rose in a rapid crescendo, and too late, I realized that I should have been listening to my body instead of pushing ahead and helping set up the spell.

I woke up on the ground with several worried pairs of eyes staring at me. I distantly heard Xander say, “Give her some room.”

Cool air swirled around me as the group stepped back, a moment of respite from the heat that rapidly settled in place again.

“Are you okay? Buffy?” Giles asked, kneeling next to me and pressing a cold washcloth to my head. God, that felt good.

Without putting much thought into it, I abruptly pushed up on one elbow. “The spell. Did it work?” Dizziness hit me again, and I collapsed back onto the densely-packed earth. “Damn it.”

“It did,” Oz assured me.

“Good. How long ‘til . . . ?” I put a hand to the damp cloth that Giles readjusted onto my head.

“We don’t know,” Kishan said.

“All I do know is that I insist you check into. . . what do they call it in this godforsaken town?” Giles grimaced in disgruntlement. “Comfort Suites.”

“No worse than the motels in Sunnydale,” Xander pointed out. “And there’s probably air
conditioning and a nice comfy bed.”

“And a shower,” Liz said dreamily somewhere in the background.

“No,” I said, glaring at my Watcher.

“He’s right, Buffy,” Angel said softly, bending a knee at my other side. “The baby needs you to rest.”

I scowled at him, too. “Fine. I guess I need to call the nurse at my OB’s office, too.”

“We’ll be here if anyone . . . or anything comes through.” Giles’s words were less than reassuring.

“Text me,” I insisted.

“Will do,” Xander promised.

Chapter End Notes

Incidentally, we evacuated to Kilgore when I was a senior in high school for Hurricane Andrew...it didn't end up hitting us, but it was an interesting adventure.

Also, this is National Infertility Awareness Week!
I was eating brunch with Illyria and Katie at the Waffle House just outside of Baton Rouge. They sat across from me, their heads so close together that the blue of their hair mingled together.

Her eyes bright and her body full of live-wire energy, Katie filled me in on her night of patrol on the LSU campus. She’d busted a couple of Grappler demons, who were trying to sneak into a frat party. As Katie got to the part about one of the Grapplers hitting his head on the keg and a frightened frat boy spraying him with beer, I felt a familiar tingle on the back of my neck.

Out of the corner of my eye, I swear I saw a flash of white-blonde hair and a black t-shirt. I turned my head in that direction, and Katie raised her voice, telling her story louder. Her laughter was too bright and long.

I saw nothing. Spike wasn’t there.

The vampire signal reasserted itself with greater strength. My hand on my belly, I knocked back the metal chair as I jolted to my feet, scanning the opposite side of the sunny restaurant.

Nothing. My heart sank into the depths of despair.

Katie was sipping her coffee, and I righted my chair, sitting back down and trying to hide my sorrow. The younger Slayer explained how Michael had to come out to help her dispose of the Grappler bodies.

My senses on hyper-alert, I half-listened, saying, “Uh huh,” and laughing, the sound false and exaggerated in my head.
Meanwhile, Illyria wasn’t paying attention to the conversation at all and was instead picking the pecans out of her waffle and staring with almost-crossed eyes at each one before depositing it in a tiny pile in the middle of the table.

Katie glanced at Illyria to ask whether she could have her pecans, but before the question was even verbalized, Illyria transformed into Fred, blue giving way to soft browns and a kindhearted smile. She said, “Of course.”

I startled awake.

The room was darker than a moonless night, the blackout curtains doing their job. My brain felt weighed down like I was trying to peer through a murky fog into reality. Through the cobwebs of my dream, I thought I heard the shower at the front of the suite and felt the faint tickle of the tingles from the Waffle House, but sleep sucked me back in before I could make sense of what I was sensing.

An indeterminable amount of time later, I felt the rush of cool air of the covers being lifted, the slight movement of someone sitting on the bed, and then a familiar form curl around me from behind. A gentle hand roved over my belly, and I settled back against him with a sigh of release. When he nuzzled my hair, my mind woke up.

“S-spike?” I whispered, my voice loud in the void.

His voice was deep and soft in my ear. “I’m here, Buffy. God, I missed you. So much. So tired.” He sighed heavily and snuggled closer to me like he didn’t want to let me go. I smelled the faint hint of the hotel soap and felt the dampness of his hair near my ear. He was real, right?

I couldn’t help myself, I had to see his face. Pushing up against the mattress, I flicked on the low lamp and shifted around. My senses weren’t deceiving me. His blue eyes squinted in the light, and he smiled at me like I was an oasis and he had been lost in the desert. His hair was wet, but I could see
that it was longer and dark at the roots. He also looked like he’d lost weight, his clothes hanging loosely about his hips and belly.

After threading his fingers through my hair and then tucking some errant strands behind my ear, his eyes slipped from studying my face to the baby bump. “Good lord, pet, the babe is huge! I thought I might have missed it.”

Shoving aside my feelings of self-consciousness, I slipped closer again to him, my belly a wedge between us, our heads on twin pillows. Then, I gently asked him the question that he’d asked me so long ago. “How long was it where you were? It was 28 long days here without you.” I suddenly remembered my sister and stiffened with anxiety. “Dawn? How’s Dawn?”

He was quick to reassure me. “Your sis is just fine, love. Whole and healthy and happy next door. Think she had the same plan as me. Shower and then sleep. Red’s good, too. She and Oz are bunking down in the room with the Bit. They have a couple of beds.”

I relaxed. “Thank god.”

His exhausted, disbelieving eyes searched my face, moving his arm from my waist to cup my cheek. “I’m really here? With you.”

Bumping my head against his hand, I turned and kissed his palm. “You are.” I smiled. “And you didn’t miss anything... well, you missed a lot. But you didn’t miss the baby being born. Seriously, how long?”

“A hundred and eighty-five days.” He’d counted again, too.

I wasn’t surprised by the length of time. Not at all. Time always seemed to move faster in other dimensions. We were the slowpokes. In this instance, I was grateful for that. Thank goodness Spike, Dawn, and Willow hadn’t been gone a hundred years or more. “How many months is that?”
“Six, give or take. Longest six months of my unlife.” He pressed his hand with fingers splayed against my abdomen again. “Which is why. . .”

“You thought the baby would be here.” The baby began moving. “Baby woke up.”

Spike’s mouth hung open, and the fatigue in his eyes was pushed aside by pure wonder. “I felt her. . . or him.”

This whole moment felt surreal, especially after the bright confusion that was the Waffle House dream with Illyria and Katie. I layered my hand over his larger one on my abdomen, tears filling my eyes. “Are you really here?” I had to know before I told him about his son.

He shifted his hand, rubbing a gentle circle on my hip. “I already asked that, love.”

“It’s just I was having this dream, and – ”

Spike interrupted me by pressing his cool lips to mine, coaxing me into a lingering kiss that was full of longing after months of nothing. My heart thundering in my chest and my body coming alive with desire, I returned his affection in kind, reaching for other places and finding a strong welcome to greet me. He groaned as I touched him, and I smiled against his lips. In no time at all, we shed the barriers between us, and he turned me around and joined me. Consumed in sensation, we got lost in each other.

Not long after, we were both warm and satisfied. Spike laid on his back, one hand on my belly as I curled up facing him on my side. “Believe I’m here now, pet?”

I squinted my eyes and pretended to be uncertain. “Hmm. Maybe? I think so. Show me again? Slower this time?”

Turning his head on the pillow, he grinned over at me. “Later. We should talk before sleep.”

“I thought you were tired.” Now that he was here, I didn’t want to leave our little cocoon to face
real. Not yet.

His blue eyes were bright and much more alert than earlier. “Not anymore. Gratified one type of appetite, and now I’m peckish in an entirely different way.”

“Oh! We have blood.” I sat up with an awkwardness that was becoming more frequent. “I’ve been buying fresh every week. The butcher here thinks I’m crazy. He stares at my pregnant belly and wonders what I’m doing with all the blood. He’s very judge-y.”

Spike snorted, pushing himself up, too. “Pregnant ladies have some strange cravings.”

I located my clothes and redressed before heading for the cooler in the corner of the room next to my suitcase. “That’s just it. I don’t really have cravings anymore. Not since the first trimester. I’m thinking the whole cravings thing is a myth.”

“So, I won’t be driving to the grocer’s in the middle of the night for ice cream or spicy buffalo wings or jalapenos?” he teased, tugging on dark lounge pants he’d likely borrowed from Kishan.

I squatted sideways and opened the cooler, pulling out two containers of blood. “Um, no. All a myth perpetuated by the movies and TV. Well, at least, maybe for me. Heartburn, on the other hand, is way real. I’m taking Zantac and Prilosec now with my prenatal. All the acid apparently means our son will have a lot of hair.”

“What did you just say?” Oops. I didn’t mean to tell him like that. Spike was by my side almost before I realized he was moving.

Setting aside the blood, I smiled up at him. His beautiful face was full of wonder. Seemed we were both all with the shock-and-awe tonight. “Your son. My son. Our son. I didn’t find out on purpose. It was all tied to –”
Spike knelt on the ground before me, pushing up my maternity top and putting a hand on either side of the roundness that contained our child. He pressed a kiss near my belly button. “Hello, son. I love you and your mum more than either of you know.”

I slid my fingers through his now dry, un-styled curls. “And we love you. You need to eat.”

Ignoring me, my vampire turned his head to press his ear against my belly. The baby did a somersault. My hands remained tangled in Spike’s hair, which tickled my sensitive skin, and he stayed motionless for what seemed to be an eternity.

Then, he whispered, “His heart is beating, and he’s rustling around.”

“He is.” I was so glad Spike could feel him now, and I wondered how much more I’d have a vampire attached at my hip. . . literally. Somehow, at that moment, I didn’t mind at all. I’d give anything to be crammed in the tiny house in New Orleans with Spike and Dawn.

“We’re having a boy.” He sighed with such happiness that my heart swelled with love for him.

“We are, and he already saved our lives.”

Alarm was written all over Spike’s face when he lifted his head. “He did?”

Several minutes later, I’d heated up Spike’s blood, and we’d settled on the sofa together with my legs slung over his lap and my aching lower back against a pillow. As he ate, I filled him in on what happened with Miney, Girlfriend, Angel, and the prophecy. I also explained what I’d since found out about the other pregnant Slayers. My brain still had a hard time grasping the magnitude of all of it. The three Slayers who’d been artificially inseminated had essentially been forced to do a twisted form of fertility treatment.
Setting aside the second empty blood carton, Spike patted my belly with affection as I finished the tale. “Good lad,” he said about our son making the ritual go kaput. “Already bucking the system.”

“He’s his father’s son for sure.” I couldn’t help smiling at this thought.

Spike arched an eyebrow at me and matched my smile. “And his mum’s.” Then, his eyebrows drew together slightly. “Pet, I’ve had some time to consider a lot of things. One of them involves Angel. We need to have a conversation with him.”

I wasn’t surprised by his thought. “No argument here. I’ve been thinking the same. We should talk with him together.”

“Yes, but not tonight. Tonight, I don’t want the poof involved at all because I might end up throttling him.”

“Agreed.” I needed to be with Spike. We needed each other, and I wanted to hear Spike’s side of what happened. I’d already heard enough from Angel. “Your turn. But first, can we skip to the end for a minute?”

“Right. You have questions about Blue?”

I shifted a bit at the mention of the god-king. “You read my mind.”

His expression grew serious. “Her body’s stable, and she came back with us, but how we got there is complicated. I’m thinking that we should wait for the Nibblet and the witch to tell the tale.”

I emitted a sigh of relief at the news about Illyria, and though I was disappointed, agreed with Spike. “We should.”
There was knock at the door, and I almost jumped out of my skin. All of this talk about what happened brought up memories. Spike and I both stood on alert.

Spike tilted his head, listening. “It’s okay, love. I believe it’s…” He headed for the peephole and peered through before swinging open the door.

Dawn rushed across the threshold and flung her arms around me. Her hair was cropped short in a jagged haircut, there was a gash on her cheek, and she, too, was thinner than she needed to be. She was wearing some of Hana’s clean clothes because I recognized the George Strait tee. The baby bump got in the way of her exuberance, and she glanced down and then back up at me with wide blue eyes. “The baby is huge!”

“Gee, thanks. So, I’ve been told.” My eyes flicked briefly to Spike who was smirking proudly, and then, I pulled Dawn into another hug. “I love you.”

She held me tighter. “I love you, too.” Then, my sister stepped back so that I could view my best friend, her pale face bright with joy despite the dark circles under eyes. Oz was holding her hand, probably for the same reason I’d clung to Spike. There were two large pizza boxes atop his other upturned palm.

Willow gave me a little wave. “Hey. Mind if we join you? We couldn’t sleep.”

Chapter End Notes

The heartburn is real... My aunt, who is a nurse, used to work in labor and delivery and said there is something to the anecdote that heartburn leads a baby to have a lot of hair at birth.

Thank you to everyone for reading and leaving wonderful reviews and likes. They are so appreciated!
Pizza consumed, I climbed onto Spike’s lap, and he grunted good-naturedly, his hand encircling my belly possessively. He’d polished off another couple of containers of blood, and his coloring was much better.

“Now that we’re all full, can we talk about what happened to you guys?” I ran my hand over Spike’s forearm. Still solid and whole.

Spike kissed my temple. “All right, love.”

Setting her empty plate aside, Dawn lounged next to us on the sofa and tucked her legs up under her. She’d even eaten the crust – something she never did. My poor sister had been half-starved, too. I stared at the healing cut on her face and her messy haircut and wondered how both happened. “Sounds good to me.” She tilted her head back as she took a large swig of Dr. Pepper. “I’m caffeinated and ready.” She held up the can. “I missed this. So much.”

“Here, here.” Willow licked tomato sauce off her pinkie as she laid on her stomach on the re-made bed, her feet swinging lazily in the air.

Sitting next to her, Oz was finishing one of the last pieces of the pepperoni, his thigh fast against her side.

“Where should we start?” Willow asked, finishing her task.

No one said anything for several seconds.

Then, Dawn spoke, “So, Illyria took me. Good place to start?”

My heart thumped in my chest. “I haven’t been that scared in a long time, Dawnie. When I ran after you, I felt this pain here,” I touched my abdomen, “and I had to stop, and then, you were gone. That vamp-witch was watching and grabbed me.”
“I got your text from the Nibblet’s phone,” Spike said, trembling almost imperceptibly, and I laced my fingers with his. Dawn laid her head on his shoulder.

“What was Illyria like?” I asked, studying my sister’s face.

She lifted her head. “At first, I was scared out of my mind. She took me to this car. I think she’d stolen it. It was dark, so I couldn’t make out the model, but it had leather seats. She drove fast and wouldn’t say a word to me. I did what you said I should do, Spike.”

“What’s that, lil Bit?”

“I talked with her about my life, about you and Buffy and how much I love you both, and about my hopes and dreams.”

“Good call,” Oz said, shifting around so that Willow could cuddle up against him.

“But she didn’t give me anything in return. She didn’t say anything. Didn’t look at me. Just kept on driving. She sat funny in the car. All stiff and straight-backed, but she drove like she was an Indy 500 driver down I-10. I swear, she almost hit a bunch of other cars.” Dawn sat up, one leg dangling off the sofa. “Wanna know the really weird thing?”

“What’s that?” Spike asked, nodding at Oz and then at the mostly empty pizza box. Oz took the cue and passed Spike a slice of the now cold pie.

“Even though we were going ninety miles an hour down the highway, she pulled off at every exit where there was a Waffle House. I still don’t understand it.” My sister shrugged.

I perked up and pointed at my sister. “Ooo! I heard she has a fixation with Waffle House.”

Dawn made a face. “Fixation is an understatement. She’d make herself look like the person she was before – ”
“Fred,” Spike clarified, his sure, affectionate, sad tone telling me everything about how he felt about the scientist.

Dawn didn’t miss a beat and kept going. “She’d make me sit with her in a booth, and I had to order a pecan waffle and bacon. Coffee. Same as her. Just that. She wouldn’t talk to me at all. Just stared out the window until the food arrived. Then, she made me take a selfie with her. She made me smile, and when I didn’t, she’d command me to in the god voice. We didn’t even eat the food.”

“That’s majorly weird,” Willow commented, the worried line appearing between her green eyes. She addressed me, “How’d you know – “

“Angel told me when I was at the hospital.” I peeled a piece of pepperoni off Spike’s slice of pizza. I wasn’t supposed to have cold cuts, but if the meat was heated before, I figured I was safe. In my mouth, it was like a little bit of heaven.

Spike jerked the pizza away toward Dawn who also snagged some pepperoni.

“Hey!” he protested. “Nicking the best part is not allowed.”

I could tell he secretly loved it and kissed him on the cheek. “Pregnant woman’s prerogative.”

Spike sobered and said with only a hint of edge. “How was he at the hospital. Did the grand poof try to steal you away again?”

Honesty was the best policy. “He did in his own subtle way.”

“I knew it. He just can’t keep his mitts off – “ Spike closed his eyes, his jaw clenching and hollowing out his cheekbones. A few seconds later, he drew a deep breath. “Sorry. You’re not my property. It’s just – him.”

Rubbing Spike’s arm, I added, “I told him to get out until he had news about you, Dawn, and Willow.”

Spike’s expression was one of self-satisfaction. “Good on you, pet.”
“How many Waffle Houses were there?” Oz asked.

Dawn glanced up at the ceiling, mentally tabulating. “At least ten. I stopped counting after a while and went with it. I thought about taking the opportunity to sneak off to the bathroom and find a way to borrow a phone or to run, but she scared me. She’s hella fast. Once we got past Beaumont, she started talking.”

“The fast thing must have been part of her body deteriorating again,” Spike said thoughtfully.

“What’d she tell you, Dawnie?” Willow asked.

“She told me that she needed my help. When I told her that my key-ness was dead and had been dead for like over a decade, she gave me one of those crazy blue stares. She said that I didn’t know my own power and that living energy could not be snuffed out by a thin cover of magic. Then, she said something even crazier.” Dawn paused for dramatic effect continuing, “She said that she could show me how to tap into it.”

“I’m going to go out on a limb and say that she showed you.” Oz’s smile was small and tight-lipped.

“She didn’t really give me a choice.”

Willow frowned and addressed Oz, “Didn’t you get my message about Dawn?”

Oz shook his head. “Mental messages weren’t exactly clear across dimensions. I got bits and pieces.”

I added, “And boy did those mixed-up messages give us the worries.”

Willow sighed. “Oh. That makes sense. Damn, I didn’t account for that.”

“Hey, it let me know you were alive. That’s the main thing in my book,” Oz reassured her.
“Want to see?” Dawn asked. I could tell she really wanted to show me and Oz, but she glanced at Spike and Willow.

Spike nodded. “You don’t need permission from us. Show them, lil Bit.”

Planting both feet on the carpet, Dawn sat up straight, her short, jagged bob making her slender neck look more vulnerable. She closed her eyes, her brow furrowing in concentration as she held up both hands with fingers spread and facing each other like she was holding a small ball. There was the sound of a pop and the scent of smoke that came with blowing out a candle. Then, the tiniest of sparks came alive in a glowing blue-purple color. The glimmer whizzed back and forth between my sister’s fingertips and palm as if trying to escape.


Dawn slowly opened her blue eyes as if afraid that the little world between her hands would disappear if she moved too quickly or looked at it directly. When nothing happened and the spark grew larger and more brilliant, she smiled. “I had no idea either. I’m still not sure I want it, but I think I am it. When I access it, it makes me feel like my body is humming. I feel more like . . . me.”

“I feel it, too,” I said softly, worry jetting through my heart.

Oz rubbed a finger over his lower lip. “I’m assuming the magic you’re channeling opens portals to other worlds.”

Dawn nodded. “It does.”

“I-it’s not going to attract baddies that we don’t want to attract?” I took in Willow and Spike’s calm demeanor. “Let me guess. You helped her with it.”

Willow nodded. “Yeah. It’s taken a bit of time – months actually, but your sister has it under control now. And no, it’s not unduly going to attract baddies like a moth to a flame.”

“Or a Hellmouth,” Spike interjected.
“It’s like any other magic,” Dawn said with a serene smile on her face. She was almost glowing.

“Does that mean you didn’t have it under control?” God, we should have known. Somehow, we should have known that my little sis had untapped magic. She was, after all, created from an ancient living power source that the monks had been protecting for centuries. Odds were, she’d been around for a lot longer than that. . . maybe even before Illyria’s time.

“I didn’t. But Illyria helped me unlock and siphon the power, so it wouldn’t tear me apart with the dimensional doorway between here and the other dimension.”

“How nice of her.” My sarcasm was strong. Baby kicked, and I smiled. Even he agreed with me. “How’d she even figure out about your . . . key-ness?”

 Spike spoke up then, “According to her, she and Angel were researching ways to help her in that godforsaken library in Morocco, and she read something there about an ancient key. She didn’t tell Peaches about it because well, he’s Peaches. She started doing clandestine research as a side gig. Angel never even knew.” He sighed then added, “I think she did a lot of the digging when he was off traipsing through dimensions.”

“So, when she came to see us in Denver?” I asked.

“She picked up on something but didn’t know what it was.”

“You see. I was right to get out the sword!” Dawn said, giving me a pointed look. She closed her eyes again and delicately moved her fingers so that the lights winked out. Almost immediately, I couldn’t sense anything different about my sister. She grinned at me.

Oz addressed Willow, “So how did you and Spike find Illyria and Dawn?”

“I sensed the portal open. I was attached to Dawnie with her ward, and I think the combination of the two tripped something inside me.” She gave him a close-lipped smile and shrugged modestly.

Spike picked up where she left off. “I pulled us off the highway at the nearest rest stop when she got the signal, and she teleported us again.”
“Again?” This seemed impossible even given what I knew about Willow’s abilities.

She met my gaze evenly. “It was Dawnie.”

“Oh,” I whispered. A moment later, I thought of something else and asked Spike, “So, our Civic is parked at some random rest stop on I-10?”

This time Spike looked amused. “Nope. The witch here teleported the whole kit and caboodle.”

This startled me. “What? Where’s the car then?”

Willow sighed as if she was disappointed in herself. “My aim was a little off, so I’m pretty sure we left it in the parking lot at the Dairy Queen, but it is in Kilgore.”

“Still very impressive, Red. ‘Bout knocked her down for the count, too.”

Oz hugged her close. “You’re not doing that again anytime soon.”

“Don’t think you realize how powerful your woman is, mate. She did much more than that across worlds.” I could tell that the respect Spike had for my best friend had grown over the past six months.

Willow countered him with a dismissive wave of her hand. “I have better control over the magic inside of me, but it’s like anything. I’ve honed it, but I want more than that. I want to be more than that.”

Oz inclined his head at Spike. “I get what you’re saying.” Then, he spoke to Willow, tweaking her words just slightly, “You’ve always been more than the magic you wield.”

Her smile was lopsided, but her eyes shone with happiness that he saw her, that he got her. “Thanks.”

I poked Spike, and his blue eyes found mine. With one glance, he knew that I was thinking that was
how he saw me – as much more than a Slayer. It was just as I saw him as much more than a vampire. He loved all the parts of me... the powerful-kickass-super-powered-Slayer parts and the vulnerable-tender-woman parts.

Dawn let out a happy sigh, her hands clasped and her face dreamy. “There’s a whole lotta love in this room.”

“Are you telling us to dial it down?” I teased. “Or get a room?”

“Not at all. I just want to find what you guys have someday.”

“You will,” I insisted, shifting out of Spike’s lap to sit next to my sister. I hugged her shoulders.

“Just not anytime soon. I’m having fun playing the field.” Spike gave my sister a funny look, and she added, “I’m enjoying my twenties. Thank you very much. Though George is pretty hot.” She hesitated and then, “As is Shane.”

Both of Spike’s eyebrows shot up. “No.”

“Why not?” Oh, my sister’s obstinate side was creeping out.

“We already discussed this, lil Bit.”

“And you never answered my question.”

“Because you only ever asked at right inconvenient times. And I did answer your question. The answer was and still is no.”

“But I asked why the no.” She glared. “And when was it inconvenient?”

“Let’s see. When we were fighting that gang of Phut demons.” Somehow, I wasn’t sure I wanted to know what demons Spike was referencing. “When we were chasing after Illyria when she got in that snit. When I was trying to get fifteen minutes of shut-eye after 48 hours of none. Should I go on?”
“That doesn’t seem like a good enough reason to not answer a very important question,” my sister countered. “You could’ve waited until the end of the fight or after we calmed Illyria down or after you got some sleep and come back to it.”

“It was my prerogative to not answer. You ever think I was purposefully forgetting you asked, hoping you’d drop it? He’s my relative, and I said no. The first no should have been enough. No need for a bloody long explanation. And this whole thing here was longer than any explanation I should’ve had to give!”

Dawn huffed, crossing her arms. “I only asked twice.”

“Five times. Five sodding times.”

Willow and Oz were glancing back and forth between Spike and Dawn, seemingly enjoying the two of them trying to out-stubborn the other one. Apparently, during six months of traipsing across dimensions, my sister had mentioned her crush on Spike’s lookalike cousin. A giggle almost escaped my lips, but I tamped it down. That would do no good.

I decided to nip the situation in the bud – for now. “So, you two followed Illyria and Dawn how?”

Taking my hand, Spike caught my hint, but I knew that he was only letting the other go for now. “We sussed out the exact spot they crossed over, and Willow was able to put a magical wedge in the leftover weak spot to pry open the portal.”

“We caught up with Illyria and Dawn in this crossroads dimension,” Willow explained.

“What does that mean? A ‘crossroads dimension’?” Oz asked.

“It’s a dimension that’s a weigh station of sorts between other dimensions, so there’s a lot of traffic going through.” Spike’s explanation didn’t tell me much.

Dawn caught my confused expression. “Traffic that involves a lot of different creatures. Did you know that it’s a place where creatures from our dimension travel to get away from humans? Like take the Loch Ness monster. She spends a lot of time there.”
Oz stared off into space. “Huh. That explains the pictures and the subsequent complete lack of evidence of her existence.”

“Right! She’s really nice, too.” Dawn was very exuberant about this.

Now I crossed my arms, which was more than a bit awkward given my belly was coming up under my breasts. “You met her? And just how do you know she’s nice?”

Spike rolled his eyes, which was big of him considering he’d distracted the whole conversation with his insistence about Dawn not dating his cousin. “The better question is how we handled Blue.”

I remembered Spike’s text. “You said Angel wanted you to go after Illyria. That she was tired of him. So, was Angel right?”

Willow nodded. “He was. Spike was nothing short of amazing. I was too weak after all the spells to do a whole lot at first, and he really stepped up for me and Dawn.”

“S’no big deal. I was doing what had to be done,” Spike said modestly.

“They caught up with me and Illyria in the crossroads dimension. Before they got there, I honestly thought that I was doomed to be wandering around forever with her.” Dawn’s face paled at the memory.

“Thanks to Red, we saved a lot of time,” Spike noted.

“So, what’d you say to Illyria?” Oz asked, stroking Willow’s upper arm.

Spike was quiet a moment and then said, “The god’s a bit like a big cat. You have to come at her with caution and a bit sideways because you don’t know how she might react. She might swipe at you with her claws out of anger or a desire to test you. Either way’s dangerous. But when it comes down to it, she wants connection. Even as a centuries-old being.” He picked up my hand, and I squeezed as he ran his thumb over mine. “There was a moment when I got her. It was when we were in L.A. She was feeling lost in her limited body with powers that had been drained, and I related to her feeling of helplessness.”
“How so?” I asked. I always wanted to know and understand more about that year he’d been with Angel at Wolfram and Hart.

He gazed at me knowingly. “You know how I was a ghostie for a time?”

“Yeah.”

“Didn’t know if I’d ever be able to touch anything, connect with anything the same way again. Couldn’t drink, couldn’t fight, couldn’t shag. And you know me.” There was sadness in his tone.

I hugged his arm. “You’re the touchy-feely type.”

He shook his head just slightly as if remembering the rest of the people in the room. “I figured she must be terrified with her body rebelling again. I mean, according to Peaches, she was trying to fit in with the world as it is now, and then, everything went sideways.”

I could relate to that. Spike and I were just getting used to our settled down, normal-ish life with a baby on the way, and then, the prophecy and Illyria showed up to mess with things. Such was the life of a Slayer and vampire. Then again, such was the life of most people. Life happened to throw things out of whack. The other shoe dropped. Ours just had a little more of a dangerous element. Something about it still worried me, but I filed that away for later.

“Spike convinced her to let us help her,” Willow said. “At first, she just let us tag along. I think she was pretty wary of us.”

“But, once we’d crossed a couple of dimensions – ” Dawn stopped when she saw the alarm on my face. “I got better at it. The first time was . . . painful. But it got easier, and Willow helped. She taught me about honing and mindfulness.”

“And Red here got stronger again as we went along,” Spike interposed.

Oz looked pensive. “How’d you know where to go?”
“Illyria knew where to go to find the dimension where Fred was,” Dawn explained. “She just didn’t have the power to get there. I’m guessing from the research she and Angel did.”

“Ah.”

“And as we went, Spike had us talk about what we were thinking out loud in front of Illyria,” my sister continued. “I think it earned us trust points. And we figured out this plan for how to help Illyria stabilize while also not causing Fred harm.”

“How?” I thought it seemed impossible, but I’d learned that with my friends and family, anything was possible.

Willow’s face lit up as she sat up away from Oz. “You know the magic the monks used to make Dawn?”

“Ohhh.” The monks made Dawn out of me. I never felt a thing. She just appeared in our timeline, and I thanked my lucky stars every day for my little sister.

“Well, I figured out a way to do the same type of magic.”

“Ohhh,” I breathed.

Oz seemed to be thinking. “You could stabilize Illyria by joining her with a piece of Fred without hurting Fred.”

“Exactly,” Willow confirmed. “That’s what we did. When we finally got to Fred.”

“It was right brilliant,” Spike noted. “And thanks to the Nibblet, we were able to get to Fred without disturbing her place of peace. And most importantly, without having to become human. I’m thinking the poof exaggerated the need for that.”

“Somehow, that doesn’t surprise me,” I said, rolling my eyes.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!
Alarms filled the darkness, and as everyone roused abruptly, Spike flipped on the lamp on his side of the bed. I squinted in the sudden brightness as Spike examined his phone and climbed out of bed.

“What? What?” Dawn was fumbling with her phone across the room where she’d slept on a cot that we’d requested from the front desk.

Willow and Oz were bleary-eyed on the sofa pull-out bed. We’d all decided to sleep in one room. There was comfort in that and reminded me fondly of long-ago slumber parties with Willow and Xander.

“They need our help at the portal,” Spike announced to the room as he tugged on his boots.

“I thought the portal was closed,” Dawn said in confusion. “I thought I closed it.”

“There’s a weak spot for a while,” Willow clarified.

“Oh. Damn.” She rubbed an eye before running fingers through her short hair. She looked half-surprised the length wasn’t there anymore. I made a mental note to ask her about what happened soon. Maybe when I took her to the salon and for coffee after.

“What are monkey demons?” Oz laid his phone to the side as he got out of bed.

“Hitchhikers. Tagalongs.” Spike paced in the small space, seeming jittery with the need to act while the rest of us held him up.

Oh! I knew this one! “They followed the bread crumbs Giles and Kishan laid out for you.”

“Exactly.” Spike paused a moment when I slid to the edge of the bed. He offered a hand to help me to my feet.
Holding fast to him, I made sure he saw the resolve in my eyes. “I’m coming with you.”

His eyes narrowing, Spike exhaled in annoyance, letting go of my hand. “No.” His second emphatic “no” in the space of hours.

“Yes. I’ll stay on the sidelines, but I’m coming.” I couldn’t let all the people I loved out of my sight again. Not yet. Not so soon.

Willow caught my drift and reassured Spike, “I’ll cast a protective barrier around her. She and the baby will be safe as houses.”

“I don’t like it.” I could tell that despite the firmness of his words, he was softening. His eyes gave him away every time.

“Noted,” I said, marking his protest the way I always tried to do nowadays. Long-past me would have totally steamrolled him and maybe even told him to shut up, but I couldn’t do that to him now. I took his hand in mine and waited until he was looking directly into my eyes. “I need to be near you and Dawn.”

He nodded in response, and we all dressed and gathered up weapons before piling into the trucks. Oz and Willow in one, and Spike, Dawn, and me in the other. The drive to the site of the portal was tense. None of us spoke. Luckily, the roads were empty in the small Texas town in the middle of the night, so we drove fast and ignored red lights and stop signs. Spike almost raced past the turnoff because the unmarked dirt road was partially hidden by vegetation. I had to hold onto the door assistance handle because the motion was so jarring. Tree limbs scraped over metal and glass as we entered the forest. The headlights were on bright, but the trees were thick, and I couldn’t see beyond where light touched. I assumed Spike saw more as he continued to drive as fast as he did on the paved city roads. The bumps were rough, and I glanced back to see that my sister was bracing herself on my seat to prevent herself from jerking too much. Willow and Oz fell somewhat behind but not too far.

The site of the battle seemed to take forever to reach, and being stuck with two tense family members only added to the atmosphere of unease. Just when I felt like I couldn’t stand the wait any longer, a large form hurtled through the air toward us, whamming hard into the windshield. Dawn screamed as Spike cursed when the truck tried to jackknife from the hit. A suction-type mouth was glued fast to the glass, and as Spike managed to get the truck back under control, I turned on the truck’s inside lights stared at the creature.
The beast’s dark-colored mouth was wide and large and oozing some sort of liquid that streaked the windshield. The arms and legs were equally long and mammalian, and the torso was covered in thick grey fur.

“W-what is that thing?” Dawn asked between panicky gasps.

“I’m assuming the monkey demons,” I said, much less freaked out than my sister. I’d seen all number of odd ball demons in my day, and nothing surprised me. Dawn had seen a lot, too, but many more in books than on patrol.

“What’s wrong with his mouth?”

I held onto my abdomen, and the baby kicked, nice and firm. Good boy. Momma’s got you. “No idea.”

“Probably some sort of poison or paralyzing fluid,” Spike said as he curved the truck off the path, effectively pinning the creature to the clear surface with a thick tree branch.

The monkey demon squirmed, limbs flailing and its mouth unlatching with a loud pop as it bellowed in pain.

“Bit, pass up the weapons.” Spike accepted the box and flipped it open between us. He handed me the ax and Dawn a long hunting knife. He kept the sword. Then, he regarded both of us. “Ready?”

Dawn looked a bit pale, but she gripped the handle of her weapon, steel in her eyes. “Yep.”

“As always,” I said.

Willow and Oz screeched to a halt to our left, and Willow leapt out of the vehicle, magic crackling about her fingers. Spike jerked open the door, and I slid out behind him. Spike gave Willow a nod, and she cast a spell over me, a green arc of magic sliding over my head and around my body and the soft swell of my baby bump in a gentle, warm wave.

I grinned. “Thanks.”
Spike strode around the front end of the truck, jumped up on the hood without a sound, and sliced off the demon’s head. It landed with a soft thump on the ground. Then, we ran toward the clearing where the fray was loud with grunts, the pounding of punches being thrown, monkey calls, and screams of agony.

The clearing was lit by a campfire burning in the middle and nothing else. My eyes adjusting to the darkness and the sting of smoke from the fire, I made out the fast-moving silhouettes of humanoid figures swinging and fighting with what looked like what I estimated to be about forty monkey demons of various shapes and sizes. Unmoving forms of fallen monkey demons littered the ground, one of which was on fire, the flames licking at what looked vaguely like a giant fluffy coat.

Dawn hovered at my right, and at my left, I heard Willow murmuring a quick spell. As soon as the last word passed through her lips, she flicked her wrist, and hundreds of tiny green lights flitted up into the tree branches and grew into a large emerald blanket of radiance that lit the whole clearing.

Spike and Oz were already in the fray and tangling with their own monkey demons, and Willow moved past me to join them, casting spells with concentrated intention.

Dawn swung her knife at a monkey demon that flew at her head. My sister missed because the creature quickly ducked and spun back toward her. Following my Slayer instincts, I pulled her aside, arced my ax and sank the blade into her attacker’s chest. The monkey didn’t make a sound.

As I jerked the ax free and the carcass thumped to the ground, Dawn nudged me and shouted, “Look!”

I followed her gaze, but before I could say anything or make sense of what she was trying to show me, my sister was off and running.

“Damn it.” I dashed after her, giving myself a slower start than I was used to with the baby.

Squatting to the earth, I dodged a monkey demon, who crashed hard into a tree trunk, and Carrie came out nowhere, tackling another who was gunning for Dawn. Although the other fighters seemed to be moving all around the wide clearing, Hana seemed to be guarding one location and was fending off multiple monkey demons. When I got closer, I saw why.

Giles was slumped against a tree, one sneaker ripped off his foot and his shorts torn. Kishan was
crouched next to him and was tending to a bright red, round wound on his thigh. Liz was sprawled out unconscious next to Giles, a twin wound high on her chest. Girlfriend was sitting on high alert and growled as Dawn and I closed in.

“What’s going on?” I shouted at Kishan.

He glanced up at me and Dawn. “Those monkey demons. They came through in the middle of the night. Giles and Liz were on watch. They barely alerted us before they were both attacked. They’re some sort of vampire monkeys. Only with suction cup mouths. Carrie and Hana managed to pry the demons off before Giles and Liz were killed, but they’re unconscious. Thinking it’s some sort of poison. Been trying to tend to them, but it’s been hard.”

“I can imagine. What can we do? I’m sidelined.”

Kishan held up the first aid kit. “You handy with these?”

Was that even a question? Slayer here. “Yep.”

“Hana needs some assistance. The monkeys seem to see our fallen comrades as easy targets.”

“Um, understatement!” Hana shouted as she kicked a monkey demon back before head-butting one to her right and then sliding her sword through the gut of a third who slowly slid to the ground, still trying to latch onto her ankle. She tugged her weapon free, pulled the creature up by the scruff of the neck, and reinserted the metal through the monkey’s eye.

Kishan retrieved a weapon, and Dawn took the bag from him, which left us to the injured Slayer and Watcher. Dawn and I exchanged glances, and I propped my ax against the nearby tree. With the sounds of the fight raging all around us, I knelt in the dirt next to my Watcher’s unmoving form. My belly covered half of my thighs, and the baby nudged me while I examined Giles in the green light. His wound was washed and covered in some sort of ointment and only needed a bandage. I rummaged around in the unorganized bag, pulling out sealed pouches until I found one that appeared to be the right size.

Looking up at Dawn who was going back and forth between watching me and keeping an eye out, I caught her attention and handed her the bandage. Pushing myself up more slowly than I would have liked and trading places with my sister, I turned my attention to Liz and Girlfriend.
Girlfriend growled again as I approached her, her teeth bared and her eyes fierce with fear and protectiveness.

I put a slow hand out for her to sniff. “Hey. You remember me, right? You found me at the Hellmouth.”

Girlfriend watched me like a hawk and delicately smelled my fingers. As soon as she caught my scent, her tail started thumping, and she pushed her long nose under my palm. I rubbed the soft fur before walking past her.

“I owe you a steak or something equally delicious,” I said loud enough for Girlfriend to hear as I resumed my kneeling position next to Liz. “Maybe some ketchup? Liz said you like that.”

Girlfriend made a little whining sound before turning back around and standing guard over both of us.

Liz’s wound was round like Giles’s but bright, scarlet red and raised. She was also lying in an awkward position next to a thick tree trunk, and I couldn’t reach the injury, not with this darned baby bump. “Dawn!”

Dawn had finished with Giles and was keeping an eye out for danger with Girlfriend, but she glanced back. “Yeah?”

“Help me move Liz.”

Between the two of us, we rearranged the unmoving Slayer. Then, I found the ointment that Kishan had thrown uncapped back into the bag. Using some clean gauze, I blotted the ointment onto the injury.

As I worked, Liz roused, winced, and then squinted her brown eyes at me. “W-what’s happening?” She lifted her head a fraction and then fell back down. “Damn. I’m dizzy. What’s that on my chest?”

“Monkey demons came through the portal, following the bread crumbs that Kishan and Giles sent out.” I continued applying the medicine.
“Oh yeah. They have totally crazy mouths. And with the suckage. I swear I felt like my life was draining away.” She closed her eyes. “Like monkey vampires.”

I snorted. “Creepy monkey vampires.”

She emitted a feeble laugh, putting her hand to her forehead and slitting her eyes again. “Y-yeah. Why’s everything so green?”

Ripping open a clean bandage, I applied it to her chest. “Willow. It was too dark, and there are a lot of demons. Your dog has been guarding you.”

Liz glanced at Girlfriend who was nosing around my elbow, eager to get to her person. “She’s the best. Good dog.”

Girlfriend emitted a soft bark.

“She is. I’m going to help Hana now.”

Liz drew a deep breath and pushed up on her elbows. After only a moment, she reached for her boot and unsheathed a wicked sharp-looking blade. “W-we’ll be good.”

As I resumed standing and brandished my ax, I glimpsed Xander and Angel tag-teaming with four or five monkey demons, Spike gouging a monkey demon of his own, Kishan and Hana barreling after two or three trying to rush off into the darkness, and Carrie dancing around the fire with a huge flaming stick in one hand and a weapon in the other. Willow was zapping monkey demons in the butt and herding them toward Illyria who stood wide-legged and caught them in her arms, breaking their necks with little effort. There seemed to be fewer living foes in sight and many more corpses.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a form flying at my sister who was guarding Giles. Leaping with only a little inelegance in her direction, I whacked a demon monkey’s head off.

Chapter End Notes

yellowb, hope you enjoy your part here! Your dog rocks!
Lots of monkey demons from Taking Chances. Scary critters.

And more soon...coming up, Angel gets confronted.

Thanks for all your wonderful support!
The night on the road home

Chapter Notes

This was such a fun chapter to write...and I couldn't wait to post it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I’ve never been on a more awkward car ride.

Spike was in the driver’s seat in our Civic, the headlights lighting our way down Interstate 10, his music playing softly in the background. I was in the seat next to him like normal with his hand on my thigh. No matter how many road trips I took with him, I never tired of just being next to him. I once heard somewhere that if you can do a road trip with the person you love, it’s the sign of a good relationship.

Only problem was that on this road trip, we had two unwelcome passengers behind us.

Illyria was slumped to one side, her eyes closed tight and her breathing slow and steady. I couldn’t tell if she was asleep or just resting her eyes because her hair was half over her face. Angel was behind Spike, his tall form squashed up, his knees spread wide. He stared glumly out the window into the night.

After the last remaining monkey demons had surrendered, we had discovered that they spoke broken English in guttural intonations. They had begged to be sent back the way they came. While Hana and Carrie guarded them, the rest of us had convened and agreed to show mercy, especially since Liz and Giles were alive. Giles had woken up but was still weak while Liz was bouncing back much more quickly. She was a Slayer after all. Consensus reached, Dawn had then opened a small gateway, and just like that, the monkey demons were gone albeit with much fewer numbers.

We’d all collapsed back at the Comfort Suites, and after several hours of solid sleep, Spike and I had decided to take Angel and Illyria in our car back to New Orleans after dropping Hana off in Beaumont. The plan had been to have some sort of conversation with them, but so far, they hadn’t been cooperating.
I mentally tabulated how long it would take to get back home and sighed.

Spike turned his head a half-turn, arching an eyebrow. “What’s going on, love?”

“I need to stretch. And pee.”

He ran his hand over the swell of my abdomen. So far, he’d not been too over the top with rubbing it in Angel’s face, but by the glint in his eyes, I could tell he was loving every second of Angel bearing witness to us. “The little one bouncing on your bladder?”

I laughed. “Not quite yet, but I’m sure that’s coming. I know you think I’m huge now, but I’m – the baby’s going to get bigger. A lot bigger. I’m barely in the third trimester, you know.”

“I don’t mind that. I hope you know,” Spike said in a serious tone, adoration in his expression.

“I know.” He really loved me, and I wasn’t taking that for granted.

A bright blue sign swept by, and my mind registered something familiar.

I sat forward. “This exit!”

Spike didn’t say a word and pulled off the highway.
“There. We’re going there.” I pointed at the yellow roof and glowing Waffle House sign.

Spike shook his head, a grin spreading across his face as he guided the Civic into the parking lot. Once the car was parked, he cut the engine, and ignoring Angel and Illyria, he clambered out, slammed the door, and hurried around to open my car door for me. I had already opened my door and was halfway out when he offered me his hand, obviously putting on a show for Angel. He never opened the car door for me, mostly because I didn’t let him.

Half-smiling, I rolled my eyes at Spike’s display and placed my hand in his. “Is this a date?” I teased, an echo of Spike’s woe-begotten attempt at chivalry from long ago.

He winked at me, a little too much glee in his eyes. “Maybe.”

I pushed myself out of the car and pushed my fingers between his. “In that case, I accept.”

Illyria opened her door next, and instead of the blue god, out stepped a slender woman with dark brown waves, soft doe eyes, and a shy smile. “Waffle House,” she said, her accent light and Southern. “My favorite.”

Spike was gentle with her. “I know, Blue. You told us many times.”

“Why do you like it so much?” I asked, somehow emboldened by her new appearance. I still wasn’t sure what to expect from the god now that her body was stable and she contained a bit of Fred inside. She seemed definitively more human in this guise, but I wasn’t sure if that was how she always was as Fred.

She shrugged one shoulder as Angel climbed out of the backseat. “My parents always took me when I was younger. Every Sunday morning after church. My mom and I always split the pecan waffle, and we’d get a huge order of bacon to share.”
“I didn’t know that was why,” Angel said quietly, appearing at her elbow. “You never told me.”

Eyes sliding his direction, Illyria pressed her lips together, the corners of her mouth still slightly lifted. Hugging her elbows, she said, “You never asked.”

“That explains the selfies,” Spike noted.

She nodded. “Made me feel closer to them when things were. . . what’s the word? Wonky.”

“I get that,” I said, thinking of all the times that I pulled out my baby book and traced the loops of my mother’s writing. Dawn and I had each chosen special belongings to tuck in our bags before Sunnydale was destroyed. I’d taken our baby books, the photos off my bulletin board, and Mr. Gordo. My sister had taken the biggest photo album from the shelf in the living room, stuffing in random photos from the other albums so that they were in haphazard order – kindergarten pictures next to photos from our move to Sunnydale to start a new life. My baby book was one of the only things I had left of our mother.

“You do?” Illyria’s tone highlighted her surprise.

I nodded. “I lost my mom when I was barely out of high school.”

“The way I lost Wesley.” Her eyes misted over.

I glanced at Spike, and he added, “Fred and Wesley. They were starting something just before. . .” He trailed off and glanced at Angel.

Something passed between Spike and Angel. . . something like a shared memory of loss or comradeship, but then, Angel scowled and turned his head away from all of us. Putting his hands on his hips, he said, almost petulantly, “Are we going inside? I thought Buffy had to use the bathroom.”

My full bladder declared its presence. “I do.”
“I’m hungry,” Illyria announced.

“C’mon, love,” Spike said to me, heading toward the door and tugging me by the hand.

I followed without hesitation and then entered the restaurant as Spike held the door for me. This he usually did, but he managed to do so in a half-grandiose way that again reminded me of his first attempt at a date. This time, I didn’t roll my eyes but instead grabbed the front of his shirt, pulled him slightly forward, and planted a gentle kiss on his lips, which parted just slightly in surprise. I left him smirking behind me as I entered the Waffle House, the chilly rush of Southern central air conditioning rolling in delicious waves over my skin.

After my bladder was relieved, I washed my hands and sent Dawn a quick text. “You ok?” My sister was riding back with Willow, Oz, Xander, and Carrie. Giles, Kishan, Liz, and Girlfriend were taking the other truck, and the Watchers were likely doing . . . Watcher-y stuff. Poor Liz.

The three dots of her return typing appeared almost as soon as I pushed send. “All’s well. We haven’t stopped at any Waffle Houses. Thank god. Xander made me try fresh cracklins. SO delicious. Melted in my mouth. I can’t believe I didn’t try them at Christmas.” A pause and then, “You and Spike ok?”

“As we can be. Most-awkward-car-ride blue ribbon winner here. Yay me! About to do the thing.”

Another guest pushed her way into the bathroom, and I took one last look at my face in the mirror, smoothing down my hair and pressing my lips together to spread out the leftover lip gloss.

With a sigh, I peeked at my phone one last time to see Dawn’s spirited “Good luck!!!” Then, I pushed my way back into the restaurant proper. My fellow car riders were tucked into a booth on the far side of the dining space. Angel was up against the window with Illyria-disguised-as-Fred sitting next to him, her feet crossed at the ankle. When I approached, Spike slid over, and I eased down, careful to not hit my abdomen. Spike’s hand found my leg in no time. I resisted the urge to cuddle up close to him. I wanted our conversation to be heard and not dismissed because Angel was too distracted.
“So. . .” I started lamely.

The young waitress appeared as I trailed off, plunking down waters for everyone. “Would y’all like something to drink while y’all look at the menu?”

Just noticing the plastic-covered menus with pictures of food, I said, “A coffee would be nice.” Spike shot me a look, and I reassured him, “I haven’t had caffeine all day.” I didn’t say that I wanted to be alert.

“I already know my order.” Fred-Illyria smiled up at our waitress, her voice almost a little too perky. “I’ll have the pecan waffle, an order of bacon, and a coffee, too. Make the bacon extra crispy. Please.” She passed over her menu with a wide smile.

Angel didn’t make eye contact with anyone. “I’ll take the same.”

“Love?” Spike asked me.

My stomach felt hollower than I thought it should be. “The same here.”

Spike gathered up the remaining menus. “Looks like the same all around.”

Tucking the pencil behind her ear, the waitress read off her notes. “So, four pecan waffles, four orders of bacon, and four coffees?” She gave us a once over. “Let me guess. Separate checks for the two couples?”

“Well,” Spike verified, squeezing my leg.

Angel stared out the window and then down again.

The waitress returned Spike’s grin. “Well, y’all are easy. It’ll be right out.”

“Thanks!” Illyria chirped.
As soon as the waitress was gone, I decided to jump in. Better for me to start this little discussion. “So, Spike and I have something to discuss with you.” I made sure to make eye contact with Angel’s forehead.

He lifted his head enough, so I could see the hurt in his brown eyes – brown eyes I used to love diving into. “Me?”

“Yeah, you.” Spike’s tone was hard, but when I put my hand atop his forearm, he amended, “We’ve noticed something. The two of us.”

Illyria frowned, her human brow furrowing as she observed everyone’s body language. “What is this about?”

Spike softened. “The grandsire and I have some unfinished business. Nothing to do with you, Blue.” It was the second time I’d seen him be so gentle with Illyria, and I realized that like with Willow, there was a connection there that had shifted and changed in the months they were dealing with life-and-death scenarios across dimensions.

“Oh. Okay. Would you like me to step away?” Illyria seemed to be getting cues more easily. I didn’t know if that was a change from before or how she always was when she was acting as Fred.

I found myself reaching out to her. “No. Stay. It’s okay for you to hear it, too.”

Angel sighed. “Is this about Dawn? Because I told you I didn’t know.”

Illyria nodded. “He didn’t know. I hid it from him. He thinks I’m not so tech savvy, but I am more than he realizes. I have Fred’s memories. And now, Fred is a part of me.” She closed her eyes and inhaled from her diaphragm. “If I concentrate, I can feel the part of her she gave me. . . . She steadies me.”

“I’m glad,” I told her when she opened her eyes and smiled at me. Then, I addressed Angel again. “It’s not about Dawn.” I thought about it for a moment, rolling my eyes to the ceiling. “Well, it sort
of is but sort of isn’t.”

Spike spoke next. “You bloody well know this is about Buffy.”

I glanced over at him, relieved at the redirection. “Right. It’s about me. And about how you keep trying to split Spike and me up.”

Angel’s jaw dropped open. “But I . . . that’s not what I – ”

I felt Spike tense, and the only thing holding him back from leaping across the table was my touch. “It is what you meant. Just sodding admit it. You became human in hopes of coming into our lives and stealing Buffy away from me. Just like you take everything from me. Always have.”

Angel got defensive. “Oh boohoo, Spike. You know that’s what vampires do. It’s how vampire dynamics have worked since the dawn of time.”

“I’ve been around long enough to know that that’s not true. That’s just some tale you conjured to keep us under your thumb. That’s what it’s always about to you. Spinning the truth and manipulating situations to keep people in line.”

Angel glared. “I don’t do that. And keep your voice down. There are other customers here.”

Spike clenched his teeth, his jaw working. I stepped in again, trying to ease the tension without losing the point we were trying to make. “Look. We both noticed it. You became human, and you waltz back into my life, knowing that I’m pregnant. And you were thinking, what? I’d drop Spike and the baby to run away with you? When Illyria took Dawn, you convinced Spike to go after her and Dawn, so you could play hero with me, but you know what? I saw through all that. Plus, it made sense that Spike would go after my sister. He trusted me to take care of myself. I’m sure that if there hadn’t been a choice to make, he would have been right there with everyone, trying to find me.”

“It was a bloody awful choice,” Spike said with pain etched into his tone. I felt stupid tears coming up, but I pushed them aside and slipped my arm around his arm, hugging him close.

“How did you find the portal spot anyway?” I asked. “I sent you away, and you were just there
when we arrived from New Orleans.”

“Of course, he was,” Spike muttered.

“I know you said old-fashioned detective work, but really?”

Angel sighed. “It was. I just followed Illyria’s Instagram photos. And her phone was on again.”

I couldn’t believe it. “You didn’t think that information could have helped us?”

“You said to go away until I knew Spike, Dawn, and Willow were okay.” I could tell that even he knew that was a lame excuse.

Spike snorted. “Fine time to take things literally.”

I made sure that Angel made eye contact with me. “We both care about you, but this has to stop. When you put our lives on the line, we have to put our foot down, especially because we’re about to have a baby.”

“Just why did you decide to have a baby with Spike? It makes no sense.” Angel sat back and waved a hand at Spike without really looking at him. “He’s still a vampire.”

Spike returned the gesture. “Just like you were a vampire when you and Darla had a son.”

Angel lunged forward, his arms folded in the middle of the table. “That wasn’t on purpose. That was a prophecy. You decided to have a kid on purpose. To bring a kid into this life on purpose.” He poked the table with his finger. “That’s irresponsible, Spike. You didn’t think things through. As usual.”

I felt the heat rising to my face but fought to force my voice to stay even. “He thought about it. He thought a long time about it before he decided he wanted to have a baby with me. I had to convince him. It’s been a . . . long journey to get pregnant with our son.”
“Not that that’s any of your business,” Spike tagged on with an edge of irritation in his voice.

The waitress arrived then, somehow oblivious to our conversation. Maybe it was because she was carrying a huge tray of food and drinks. She gingerly lowered the tray and began passing out waffles and bacon. “Watch out. The plates are hot.” The tension was thick, but no one said a word as the food and mugs of coffee were distributed. She passed out silverware, a little caddy with sugar and creamer, and three small dispensers of different syrups. Then, she smiled. “Can I get you anything else?”

“No,” I said, borrowing her kindness to calm down. “Thank you.”

“Enjoy! I’ll be back to check on you in a little while.” With a little nod of her head, she tucked the tray under her arm and left us.

Everyone was silent for what felt like forever until Illyria brandished her phone with the screen facing us.

Illyria commanded in her god-voice, “Lean in like you like each other. And smile for the selfie.” Though her voice was deep and low, her words sounded like the woman she was pretending to be. Or was? I wasn’t sure.

We did what she ordered us to do. She took five or six shots and began scrolling through them while holding her phone in the middle of the table, so we could all see.

“That’s the one!” Spike pointed to one in which Angel’s right eye was a little squinty, making him seem half-drunk. “I like that one.”

“You would,” Angel said, kicking him under the table.

“Hey! Watch it!” Spike protested.

Angel ignored him. “How about the last one?”
I pouted. “My face is angled funny because Spike tickled me.”

Illyria sighed, back to being totally Fred-like. “The second one is the best of everyone. I’ll post that one.” She sank back. “But later, after we eat and resolve this. . . whatever is going on here.” Unraveling her knife and fork, she spread a paper napkin in her lap.

“I don’t know if it can be,” I admitted. “Resolved.”

Illyria began pouring a huge stream of syrup all over her waffle. When she spoke again, I was still confused about her identity. “It seems to me that you’re family. And family is important. A family is there for each other and doesn’t give up on those individuals who are struggling within the family even if they make mistakes or do foolish things.” She gave Angel a serious look. “You and everyone else taught Fred that after you rescued her from Pylea. And did you both already forget what happened in L.A.? How we almost died fighting for the same cause? It was admittedly a blip in my lifeline, but it was a significant blip.” She cut into her waffle and stuffed a big piece in her mouth, emitting a little sound of satisfaction that was almost orgasmic.

I couldn’t help myself and dug into my waffle after smothering it in syrup.

Spike sighed, dumping some sugar into his coffee as he addressed Angel. “She’s right. You’re family. But that doesn’t mean we want you trying to break us apart. If all of this has taught me anything, it’s reinforced what’s most important in my life. Didn’t you tell me that on your supposed last day on earth, you visited your progeny? Shouldn’t you be with him now?”

“Connor’s in college. He’s in med school at Florida State.” Angel plucked a piece of bacon from his plate. “We text often.”

“You should go visit him,” I suggested, watching Spike doctor my coffee with cream and sugar, no doubt to keep his hands busy.

Illyria swallowed a mouthful of food. “It’s in Tallahassee, right? That’s funny because that’s where my parents moved when they retired a few years ago. They keep inviting me to visit, but I haven’t taken them up on it. I-I think that I might want to go now that. . . everything has happened.”

Angel hesitated and then hugged Illyria’s shoulders. “Maybe we should go for an extended stay.”
“Good idea, mate.” Spike took a sip of coffee. “Look. We want you to be a part of our lives, but on
our terms.”

I shared what Spike and I had discussed earlier. “No sending messengers to tell us important life-and-
death info, and no skulking in the shadows trying to talk with us separately. If that happens again,
we’ll want to meet with you but together.”

Angel stared at us both for a long moment. “All right. I’ll respect that.” He seemed to consider
something and asked, “How was it?”

“How was what?” Spike returned the question, still firm in his resolve.

“Seeing Fred again.”

A mixture of sadness and wonder flickered over Spike’s face. “It was a bloody miracle. She was. . .
so peaceful. Happy to see me but. . . not exactly resigned.”

“Content,” I said softly. “It’s hard to describe but even that isn’t exactly right.”

“Yeah,” Spike almost whispered. He knew I knew. My fingers found his. He had to know that I was
also more than content to be here with him now. We exchanged a smile.

“I’m glad you got to see her, too,” Angel said. “And that she was willing to help Illyria.”

Spike said solemnly, “It’s who she is.”

“I’m glad to have a piece of her inside me,” Illyria repeated as if still adjusting to her new state of
being and trying to reassure herself. “It’s. . . comforting.” She frowned.
“What is it, Blue?” Spike asked, blinking away tears.

She tilted her head in a very Illyria way. “Do they have Waffle Houses in Tallahassee? I might want to take my...her parents.”

Chapter End Notes

Also, my husband and I totally counted the number of Waffle Houses between Houston and New Orleans. There are at least 14-15 along I-10.
Our second night home

I was lounging on the sofa curled up with my favorite pillow and watching one of the latest episodes of Game of Thrones when Spike came into the room. For the first time in a long time, Dawn wasn’t with us. Now that the danger had passed, she was gleefully hanging out at George’s place and trying to get caught up on school-related stuff. Though she’d been gone a month or so in this dimension, six months had passed for her, and she’d grumped that all the stuff she’d been learning she was going to have to re-learn. I, on the other hand, just had to catch up on the DVR.

Spike picked up the remote and flicked the TV off.

“Hey!” I half-heartedly protested, my eyes landing on what was in his hands. “Ooo. My lotion.”

Spike glanced down at the tube. “Like what it’s called. ‘Naked body butter.’” He lifted an eyebrow suggestively at me and gave me a grin.

I pushed up from the sofa and said with indignation, “It’s the only thing that helps.”

“With what, love?” He slid onto the sofa so that he was sitting behind me with his left leg next to mine.

I settled back against him with a sigh. “My belly. The skin is so stretched and so dry and sensitive lately. That,” I tapped the bottle with a finger, “relieves it a little.” That and I’d been moisturizing a lot to prevent stretch marks. Though from what I read, they were genetic and nothing could really be done for prevention. So far, I only had a tiny one on my right hip from early in the pregnancy. Lucky me.

His left hand swept under the curve of my abdomen, sweeping up the soft cotton so that it gathered between my breasts. He skimmed the skin with light fingertips, and I shivered and snuggled closer to him.

“I see. You have a rash.” His breath was gentle over my ear.

“Yeah.” The rash was faint and insistent in its itchiness. At least the itch wasn’t on my palms or soles of my feet. That could indicate something far worse. “I need to call the OB. I’m due to go in anyway. I’m in the third trimester, but I missed the last appointment ‘cause well, I was a little
Spike flipped open the cap on the lotion and squirted some of the white cream onto his fingers. “Let me know. I’ll come with you.”

“Okay.”

I watched as he tucked the lotion container next to his hip and then rubbed the lotion together before pressing it into my skin. Goosebumps flew over my body, but as he rubbed in gentle circular motions, my body warmed his hands and I relaxed into his touch with a small moan.

“Do you think he can hear me now, pet?” Spike whispered in awe, his lips blowing the wispy hairs near my temple, as he continued to apply the lotion.

“He can, but you have to speak louder than that,” I teased softly. “And I thought you knew this stuff.”

“Wasn’t sure. It’s been a while since I read that part.” Then, with much greater volume, he said, Hello, little nipper.” The baby responded with a shift, a small body pushing against the walls of his living space and against Spike’s hand. “Oh. I felt you. Strong lad.” He placed his palm over the spot of the movement. “I love you.”

I smiled. “You can tell him stories or read to him, I think. Not sure it really does anything like make him smarter or anything, but at least, he’ll learn to recognize you. I mean, his senses are all filled with me, but he should know his Daddy, too.”

“I’ll do that. Maybe before bed. Tell him a bedtime story.” Spike sounded pleased with this idea.

“Nothing too scary. Like with Dawn,” I teased.

“Nothing too scary,” he agreed.

My eyebrows drew together as I thought of something I’d been wanting to ask but hadn’t had time with all the last parts of our journey. “I’ve been thinking.”
His muscles tensed a fraction. “Oh?”

“Hey.” I squeezed his thigh. “Nothing bad.”

Spike breathed in relief.

“It’s just all the stuff that’s happened. Miney. She lost everything. She lost the love of her life. She lost the future she thought she’d have. A career. A family. And then, Angel. He became human. He lost the ability to do all the things a vampire can do.”

“Yeah.” Spike was being patient, his voice low and deep. “What of it?”

I moved slightly sideways as best I could with my new body, so I could see his face and the kindness in his blue eyes. “I worry that you’ve lost a piece of yourself by being with me. In my world.”

He made a face like I was crazy. “You think I’ve lost. I haven’t. I’ve gained more than you can even imagine.”

“But you don’t do any things with more demon-y types.” As I said it, I realized this was true. He’d come so far into my world and the world of my family and friends that he’d lost touch with his own. I turned more fully so that my legs hung over his right one. “You don’t have demon friends. A-and you haven’t been in touch with Angel in years. And after you guys sorta repaired things. You know. . . in L.A.”

“Why is this even a topic of discussion? I have everything I need right here. You. The little one.” He touched my cheek and my belly in succession and with deliberation. “I don’t need anything else.”

“You think so. Now. But I don’t want you to lose that part of you that’s . . . vampire.” I frowned. That didn’t come out the way that I wanted. “I don’t want you to lose that part of you and suddenly wake up one day and wish that you could . . . I don’t know. Go out and play kitten poker and . . . enjoy your winnings.” I made a “yuck” face at the thought.

He laughed. “Kitten blood was never high on my list of delicacies. And I’m a sodding terrible poker player.” He kissed my nose. “You, on the other hand, are all the delicacy I need. After you have our
son, of course.”

I bopped his arm at an awkward angle. “You know what I mean. I’m being serious here. It’s okay if you want some demon-y friends, and it’s okay for our son to know his roots. Maybe not taking him for a round of kitten poker right away. . .”

“And I say you’re overthinking it. Didn’t I just get back from a six-month romp across dimensions, fighting baddies to protect Dawn and save Blue from herself? I think that’s more than enough adventure for a while. Though, I’m sure I’ll want to patrol with Em and George soon.”

“Then, maybe we’re too much in it.”

He shook his head at me, good humor making his eyes crinkle at the corners. “What? Are we going the opposite direction now? This isn’t ‘cause of what Angelus said about us thinking it through?”

“No.” I paused. “Maybe a little?”

“Don’t let him get to you, pet. I know he’s good at it; he’s done it to me plenty of times.”

I sighed. “You’re right. But we should talk about it.” I twisted my mouth to the side. “Are we doing the right thing bringing a baby into this life? I know that we’ve sorta thought about this before. But, are we? He’s going to be in danger. I mean, Willow and I talked about how good things have been going and how we were waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

Spike looked confused. “When was this conversation?”

“A long time ago. Months ago.” Then, I realized that didn’t really tell him anything. “When she came to visit before we did the transfer.”

“Ah.”

“It doesn’t matter when.” I huffed. “What matters is that the other shoe dropped. Like from the fifty-second floor.”
“Things happen, love. That’s life. We learn from those things. They’d happen whether we were a Slayer and vampire or human parents. We just have different shoes than most people, but we have special abilities to help us deal with them. We’ll have to teach little Samuel here that he’s resilient, and he can make it through. We’ll protect him.” He patted my abdomen. “Your Watcher is human. Xander is human. They’ve survived.”

“Good points.” Then, my “yuck” face made another appearance. “Um, no way in hell is our kid going to be named Samuel.”

“So, that’s a ‘no’ for Sammy then. How about Richard or Bartholomew?”

“Let’s see.” I pretended to consider these names by rolling my eyes to the ceiling and tapping on my chin. “Too much bad nickname potential. So, no and no. To both.”

He stuck out his bottom lip just enough to make me want to kiss him until he said, “Well, I nix Randy.”

“Oh, man. That was at the top of my list.” I smiled fondly at the memory of Spike thinking Giles was his father and had named him Randy.

“Let’s argue names later. More importantly, what’s going on with your ankle?” Spike nodded toward my left ankle.

I lifted my bare foot in the air. “Huh. It’s a little swollen. I’ll ask the OB. My guess? Welcome to third-trimester swelling.”

“Swelling means you should be off your feet. Ergo, no patrolling or work of any sort where you have to be on your feet for long periods.” Bossy, protective Spike was back. Oh, how I missed him.

I leaned onto his chest. “I’m going to go batty doing nothing. You don’t know what it was like waiting every day in the forest and not being able to do a thing while everyone else did research or tai chi with Angel. Oh, wait. Maybe you do. Almost forgot about our period of house arrest. And the time you stole my boots. And the chip... and being a ghost.”

Spike didn’t take the bait with my mention of Angel or my still missing shoes, etc. “You can nest. Isn’t that what pregnant birds do?”
I eyed him incredulously. “Do you even know what that means?”

“Of course, I bloody well do. I’m almost up to date on my reading. Had to catch up, but I’m getting there.” He sounded a tad indignant, which was kinda cute. I’d seen the copy of “What to Expect” on his nightstand.

“Well, it’s supposed to be a feeling, right?” I scanned my body and mind. “I don’t feel a thing. Except maybe tired.”

“I could carry you to bed. It’s past your bedtime.” He made a move to hoist me into his arms in preparation to put his words into action.

“Oh, I have a bedtime now, too?”

“Yep.”

I sighed. “You know insomnia comes in the third trimester sometimes. How are you going to enforce it then?”

“I’ll figure out a way,” he said with certainty. If anyone could figure out how to conquer a bodily process, he could.

I put my arms around his neck, and he picked me up without a complaint. “Fine.” I kissed him gently on the lips. “I love you.”

“Love you, too, pet.”

Seconds later, I was tucked into our bed, and he brought me a glass of water, my prenatal, and Zantac. I was also using an over the counter nasal spray to help with my stuffed-up pregnancy nose. As I washed down the vitamin and pill and squirted medicine into my nose, he climbed into bed next to me. After I switched off the lamp and cuddled up next to him on my side, he was quiet for several seconds.
Then, he said, “What am I gonna do about work?”

We’d been so busy wrapping things up with the Illyria situation and the foiled prophecy that we hadn’t talked much about practicalities – like work. Giles had already informed us both that we’d be getting bonus pay for the mess we’d dealt with – a new Slayer perk. So, we weren’t worried about the bills per se. “Oh! I forgot to mention that on our way out of town, I called the bar. Alex answered and handed off the phone to your boss. They both think you’ve been taking care of me due to . . . complications.”

“By that, I assume you mean complications with the pregnancy,” Spike said in relief.

“Yes. Your boss didn’t question it. But I am surprised he didn’t ask to talk with you.” I laced my fingers with his, which were hanging over my belly.

“He and I have an understanding,” Spike said. “I think it’s New Orleans. There are a lot of occurrences that are overlooked as part of the culture here.”

“Like Sunnydale.”

“Not exactly, love. More like, they know, but they don’t need to know all the details. Alex figured it out right away. We work with a lot of bottles and glasses with reflective surfaces, and I didn’t show up in any of them. She wasn’t upset. She and I like to one-up each other with tales. I wouldn’t be surprised if Crystal knows something, too.”

I considered this. “No way. She wouldn’t let Leah stay with us so much.”

“Maybe.” I could tell he had his doubts.

“Speaking of Leah, she’s coming over next Friday. You okay with that? I thought we could tell her about the baby.”

“Think she’ll be jealous?” Spike would, of course, worry about that.

“You don’t want her to feel like we’re going to replace her?”
He drew me closer, his legs going up behind mine. “Yeah.”

I reassured him, “Including her will really help, and remember, she has a sibling, so she’s done this before.”

“Right.” A few heartbeats passed. “I’ve thought about moving.”

“Into a bigger house?” We so needed more space, maybe a nursery. Was that nesting? Somehow, I didn’t think so. Plus, how would we afford it?

“Well, yeah. That for sure, but no, away from New Orleans.”

“What? Why?” I couldn’t fathom this. Our jobs were here. Our friends were here. We had a life built in the Crescent City with its movable mini-Hellmouth, delicious food, and pack of Slayers and Watchers.

“Before you got getting your panties in a bunch, I was thinking about it, not actually planning anything without you. And I thought it’d be nice for you to live closer to your friends.”

“We are close to friends,” I insisted, trying to relax but failing. “Mutual friends.”

He sighed, and I let him spell it out for me. “No, love. The witch, the boy, and the wolf. They’ve been there for you.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t picture myself settling in Norfolk or Falls Church. There was something gritty and old and exciting about New Orleans.

“You wouldn’t want to?” He sounded uncertain.

“Spike.” I wanted to turn over to face him, but the baby bump made it awkward.
“What?” Now, he just sounded a little scared.

“You are my person, remember? You’ve been there for me. I don’t want it any other way.”

“Oh.” Why did he still worry? Would he always?

I didn’t mind reassuring him. “And we’ve built our life here. For a long time now. Barring a second hurricane washing us away, I don’t want to leave. Maybe when Alex is old enough to go to school, and we can’t afford private school.” The schools in parts of New Orleans weren’t known to be the best.

“No.”

“No, what?” I giggled.

“No to Alex.”

“Why ‘no’?”

“Because it’s a short version of Alexander, which is Harris’s given name. No.”

I carried my name choice a bit further. “But it means ‘helper of mankind.’ Nice strong meaning.”

“Not gonna name my son after Xander, and since when have you been researching baby names? We’re supposed to do that together.”

Google was the gateway to a virtual rabbit hole of information about pregnancy and baby names and what products babies needed, especially when I had nothing to do for two months and felt helpless. “Same way we’re reading the ‘What to Expect’ book together?”

“Hey. That’s your choice. You could read it anytime. It’s right here.” He reached back for the book and tucked it by my pillow.
“That’s okay. That’s what I have you for. Read and report.”

He snorted. Then, he changed the direction of the conversation. “What am I gonna tell Shane?”

“About what?”

Spike had been regularly texting Shane since Norfolk, and now, there was a gap in their communication.

“About where we’ve been, what’s been happening.”

I stroked the back of his forearm with my free hand. “I think we should tell him the truth. We told him everything before when we were asking for his sperm. Why should we stop now? We’re not going to be like Angel because secrecy and half-information aren’t going to keep Shane and Charlotte safe. Besides, if we leave out stuff, we’d have to tell Xander and Carrie to leave out stuff. It could get way complicated way fast.”

“I agree. Okay then. Not in a text though. I think I’d get right pissed trying to type all that.”

“Definitely phone. Less confusing, too.” I moved my legs away from his, my skin rustling on the sheets. “Hot. I’m hot.”

“Of course, you are, love,” he goaded, drawing his legs closer to mine again.

I pushed his arm off me. Even his vampire room-temperature-ness wasn’t cool enough for me. “No offense, but George is making me sweat.”

Spike rolled over to give me space. “George? No.”

I threw off the covers, welcoming the cool blast of air conditioning. “Why not?”
“No. For one, the Watcher’s name is George.”

“Are you going to say ‘no’ to every name I say?”

“Pot. Kettle.” He chuckled. “And maybe.”
After a week or so had passed since our return to New Orleans, I finally dragged Dawn away from her studies for some sisterly bonding time. She needed a proper haircut, and her attempts to trim the jagged strands into something reasonably straight had been a massive fail. It reminded me a bit of the time I’d chopped all my hair off in response to Spike calling me “Goldilocks.” Dawn and I were apparently not destined to be cosmetologists.

Her hair was cut into a cute bob now with some blue highlights in honor of her adventures with Illyria (and partly with Katie’s pre-appointment encouragement).

We were sitting in giant salon chairs getting pedicures while the latest action movie played on mute on a giant TV screen in front of us. With some sadness, I realized that I couldn’t use the massage feature on the chair due to being pregnant. Dawn, of course, set hers to deep tissue massage right away, and the motor asserted itself softly in the background.

In an effort to start a conversation since our pedicurists were either chattering away to each other or silent, I asked, “So, are you ever going to tell me what happened to your hair? And your face?”

Dawn’s cut was healing well but was still a dark slash on her cheek. I wished the monks had thought to give my sister some of my Slayer healing powers. That would only have made sense with Glory on her tail, but I guess super strength and healing abilities would have also made my sister stick out like a sore thumb.

Finding a button that tilted the seat back, she smiled with glee and pushed it, closing her eyes. “No. You don’t want to know.”

“But I do.” I was curious. What trouble had my sister been in that she had chopped off the long hair she took such pride in and with such obvious haste?

“If asking me at your house doesn’t get you anywhere, how is asking me here in public going to help?” She’d told me more about being confident in her new abilities and how she wanted to work with Willow to continue honing them, but she’d left out the little details of how she got injured even in the rendition she told Giles. She lifted her head, widened her eyes, and bobbed her head ever so slightly to the right. “Audience.”
“It was something dangerous, wasn’t it?” I pressed. Big sis could also play the annoying-sister game.

“Yep.” Dawn closed her eyes and leaned back again as the woman doing her pedicure began massaging her right foot.

“Life threatening?” I added.

The man doing my pedicure ran his fingers down my calf, and I hoped he didn’t notice just how swollen my left ankle was. My son had positioned himself curled up with his head down, his bottom on the left, knees on the right, and feet in my ribcage. The pressure from his body in the small space of my womb was doing something to make me swell or so said my OB. I was supposed to keep my feet up, but that wasn’t always possible.

“Uh huh.” A heartbeat passed, and Dawn turned her head to look at me through one open eye. “But please don’t worry. We protected each other.”

“Spike?” I knew he did, but I was curious and feeling a little bit like my mom when she used to casually ask me questions that she wanted to know the answer to but also kind of didn’t. I, of course, hadn’t answered my mom’s queries most of the time.

“All of us. Illyria, Willow, Spike, and me. We had each other’s backs. That particular time, I got myself free. Thank god for sharp objects. Then, Spike broke. . .” She stopped herself. “He got rid of the creature hurting me. I didn’t even cry about my hair, and I got us out of there. It wasn’t a nice. . . place.” She was referring to one of the dimensions.

“The crossroads?” My pedicurist didn’t even look up but spoke animatedly to his partner in Vietnamese. He was clearly not interested in us.

“No. I think it was probably our fourth dimension. We didn’t stay long. The. . . people there weren’t very amenable to conversation. They were pretty much all, ‘You invaders. We kill you.’” She whispered the last part though I don’t think it would matter all that much.

“Fine. I’ll just read Giles’s notes.” He, Willow, Oz, Xander, and Carrie were still in town, and after he documented the witch-vampire situation, he planned to gather all the relevant parties one by one, including Illyria and Angel via phone to obtain a more detailed account of what happened in what I now knew was a quest to help Illyria.
Dawn’s eyebrows drew together. “Ugh. Don’t remind me.”

Something about her tone reminded me of all the times Giles insisted on recording all the small bits after an apocalypse. I remembered that desire to just set it in the past and keep moving forward despite the changes the events obviously made in me, but a Watcher’s job was to document. Giles was good at being steadfast in that part of his job. “I get it. More than you know.”

Her eyebrows furrowed more. “What?”

“The desire to put it behind you.”

Her forehead smoothed out, and she sighed. “Yeah.” She offered a close-lipped smile. “Can we just enjoy our sister day?”

I grinned. “Yeah.”

Making sure her pedicurist wasn’t doing anything yet that would mess up her nails, Dawn readjusted to a sitting position. “Let’s talk registration.”

Now, I was frown-y. “Do huh?”

She crossed her arms. “Registration. Registries. Making a list of all the baby stuff you want, so we can have a baby shower and actually buy you the things you and Spike want instead of random stuff.”

“Ohhh.” I honestly hadn’t let myself go there. IVF did funny things to a person. It made me realize how many pieces had to come together just so for a baby to be born with all the cells and organs and bodily systems working together. That, and with Spike, my sister, and my best friend lost in the universe, registering for baby things had been the last thing on my mind. Browsing the net, yes, but setting up a registry, no. I still hadn’t adjusted to everyone being safe, let alone thought about the baby’s upcoming birth. “Don’t tell me you were thinking about this while traipsing through,” I glanced at the pedicurists who’d moved on to scrubbing the bottoms of our feet, “all those towns and one dangerous situation after the next.”
She shrugged her shoulders. “We had moments of down time, and Illyria asked Spike about how babies were made through IVF and how one cared for human infants. She has Fred’s memories about Connor, but she was confused about why human babies are so helpless and seem to need so many things to survive.”

“Of course, she did.” After our conversation in the Waffle House, I was starting to think the god was even more human-like since she now contained a piece of the original owner of her body.

“We all got closer. Kind of had to.” She set her jaw in her very sisterly way. “So, you didn’t answer my question.”

“You didn’t ask one,” I dodged, my tone playful.

“Registration. I’m taking you and Spike to make it happen tonight. It’ll be fun!”

“Where, pray tell, are we going?” I had no idea where to start.

“Babies ‘R’ Us, of course! No Amazon lists for you. The little scanner gun things will be fun!” She sounded giddy at the idea.

Now, I crossed my arms. “I thought Spike and I were choosing things for the baby.”

“You are. I’m just helping.” She grinned and added under her breath, “And maybe, kind of registering for a swing set. Or a trampoline. Or maybe lawn darts? Do they even make those anymore?”

I made a face at her just as my cell rang. “Now, where would we put a swing set or a trampoline? And the baby won’t be swinging or jumping anytime soon.”

“They grow faster than you think,” Dawn’s pedicurist said without looking up at us. Uh oh. How much had they heard?

“And I’m already picturing myself on the swing with little Tommy,” added Dawn.
My phone continued to ring, and I leaned over to the little stand next to the massage chair and snagged the insistent device. “It’s Willow.” I slid my thumb across the screen. “Hello?”

Willow’s voice was more excited than I’d ever heard her. At least, she didn’t sound terrified. I was still with the trauma reaction though. “You’ll never guess what just happened!”

“What?” I sat up straighter without jerking my legs too hard, my heart pounding. The baby kicked me at the sudden movement.

“Oz proposed!” Her voice contained an edge of hysteria, and I wasn’t sure if she was happy or . . .

“Oh, my god! And?” My voice was bright. I so wanted her to be happy.

Dawn was watching me with intention. “What?” she mouthed.

“Of course, I said, ‘Yes!’” There was something about her tone, and I couldn’t tell what it was, not with my sister breathing down my neck.

I covered the microphone with my hand. “Oz proposed.”

Dawn squealed and bounced in her seat, taking care not to jostle her feet. “Oh, my god!”

Speaking to Willow again, I said, “That’s Dawn in the background. I think she’s happy for you.” Then, I asked the question one always asked in these situations (not that they happened very often in our little universe), “How did he do it?”

“We were at the Columns Hotel for the jazz brunch. You know? The one on St. Charles?” She sounded a bit breathless, and I was leaning toward interpreting her predominant emotion as being happy.

“Yeah! Spike likes their bar.” We went there often for happy hour during the winter when the sun set early. The historic hotel was small but gorgeous and had a beautiful porch with thick, tall columns.
that allowed for a generous breeze to blow through. It was perfect for relaxing and sipping cocktails among the oak trees.

“He proposed over dessert. I got the bread pudding, and the ring was tucked in the top. He even got down on one knee.” She hesitated and then whispered, “You don’t think he did it because we almost, you know, lost each other?”

This was a fear I could alleviate. “No. He’s been thinking about it even before this happened.”

“How do you know?” She sounded so worried.

“He told me.”

“He did?”

“Uh huh. On the drive to Kilgore. I asked if he wanted to have kids with you, and he said he was kinda old-fashioned and wanted to marry you first.” And then, he asked me if Spike and I were going to get married. My cheeks grew hot, and Dawn was studying me with confusion in her expression. Oh no. My sister knew me too well.

Willow sighed, and it was definitively a happy sigh. “I thought... that he might... that it might be like when Xander proposed to Anya right before the fight with Glory. Look how well that turned out.” I knew my friend didn’t mean it flippantly. She was still sad about Anya’s death the way we all were and probably always would be.

“You want to marry him, right?” It would mean a choice to have no more female partners, and I didn’t know how Willow felt about that.

“Of course. I love him. I never stopped. I mean, I love Tara, too, but she’s gone.” Willow sounded momentarily sad but also resolute. “Is it possible to have two soulmates? ‘Cause I feel like I hit the jackpot twice. I’m really lucky.”

I laughed. “I don’t know about soulmates, but I do know that we can love more than one person in our life and deeply.”
“What does the ring look like?” Dawn, who seemed like she might jump out of her chair any second, asked. Her blue eyes were bright, and she couldn’t stop smiling.

“What does the ring look like?” I repeated Dawn’s inquiry into the phone.

“Oh! I love it! It’s a vintage emerald ring that Oz found at this place in New York City when he met up with Devon. It’s beautiful and has these little diamonds on the side. And he had it sized to fit me. I have no idea how he figured that part out because we hadn’t talked about it.” Willow’s voice faded a little. “Hold on. I’ll take a picture and text it to you.”

“Okay!”

There were some rustling sounds, and several seconds later, a text came through. I put Willow on speaker and then enlarged the photo to show Dawn.

“Whoa!” my sister breathed.

“It’s gorgeous, Willow,” I said, staring at the brilliant green color, sparkling diamonds, and platinum band. I also found myself feeling a little green with envy, but I shoved the emotion aside. What right did I have to be anything but overjoyed for my friend?

“Thanks.” Her voice was tiny on the speaker. “I have to go. I need to call Xander next. I didn’t get him earlier, and I don’t want to leave this on a voicemail, you know?”

“I know.” I bit my lower lip and then added, “And Willow?” I took her off speakerphone and held the phone to my ear.

“Yeah?”

“I’m so happy for you. You deserve it. All the happiness.” I meant every word. Love for my friend made my heart warm.

“Thanks, Buffy. I’ll see you soon?”
“Of course!”

Dawn regarded me when I hung up. “Are you upset?”

I looked at her innocently. “About what?”

“That you and Spike aren’t married.”

I shrugged. “We haven’t talked about it.” My heart skipped a beat.

She narrowed her eyes. “Maybe you should. I mean, now that everyone is safe and all.”

“Maybe.” And that would be a yes. I raised both eyebrows at my sister to let her know I was serious. “And no to Tommy. What is it with you and Spike and the names?”

She laughed. “We sorta had a conversation about that, too.”

“In the other planes of existence.”

Her laugh faded to a small smile. “Yeah.”

Chapter End Notes

The ring Oz picked out for Willow is probably now purchased but was from Erica Weiner, a jewelry store in NYC. https://ericaweiner.com It's not sold yet: https://ericaweiner.com/collections/engagement/products/vintage-1-2ct-emerald-and-diamond-baguette-engagement-ring

The Columns Hotel is gorgeous! I had cocktails there during happy hour on internship: https://thecolumns.com

I'm still four chapters ahead; I keep thinking it's almost done and then I think of another thing to write. Also, I'm writing a bit slower on this one as I'm working on a new fic that
should be shorter. But this one will be finished...thanks so much for reading!
The night of registration at Babies "R" Us

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Babies “R” Us was empty except for us. It seemed to be a perk of keeping witching hours. Even the workers were distracted by tidying up parts of the store that were not the baby section.

Anna at the registration desk finished helping Spike and I set up a registry account. She explained the reward perks, gave us a bag of goodies (including a bottle of water and coupons), and printed us a huge list of all the things to register for. Then, she smiled and proudly presented us with our own registration scanners. She even gave one to Dawn, who broke into a wide grin.

“Yes!” my sister said and then barely glanced at me and Spike. “See ya.” Then, she darted off toward the Toys “R” Us side of the store.

“Uh oh,” I said, watching her go. “We’re in big trouble.”

Slipping his arm around my almost non-existent waist, Spike joined me in observing her leave us in the dust. “If she registers for an electric car, we can take it off later, pet.”

“No electric car for Eric?” I asked with wide, innocent eyes.

Spike glanced down at me with one lifted eyebrow. “Nope and nope.”

“Dang. No Eric, huh?” I was feeling nervous despite my outward calm. I kept thinking about Willow and Oz and their engagement and Oz and Dawn’s queries about marriage for Spike and me. I had no idea how to bring it up with Spike, and because we hadn’t talked about it, I was afraid he’d read me like a book and figure out my feelings before I did. Most of all, I didn’t want to hurt him.

“What’s wrong?” Spike asked, already picking up on something I wasn’t hiding well.

I shook my head. “Nothing. Why are you asking? I’m ready to register.” I held up the thick stack of papers. “Though why one baby would need all of this, I have no idea.”
He studied me for a moment with narrowed eyes and then moved his arm from around my hips to snatch the handouts from me. “What’s a pack n’play?” He squinted at the tiny picture example. “Wonder if that’s like a travel cot. And why does the baby need so many contraptions? Baby bouncer, swing, baby carrier? And what’s a breast pump do?”

I peered at the papers. “Uh, well, I don’t know? Maybe we don’t need to register for every ‘contraption.’ We don’t have enough space. And I think that the insurance will provide a pump. It’s to help with breastfeeding, and you can pump and store breast milk, too.”

“Do you want to breastfeed?” Spike asked me in earnest. “’Cause I read that it’s best for the baby. But nowadays, there’s also formula?”

“Yeah.” I shrugged. “I know I want to try to breastfeed.” Crystal had told me she struggled with her son and ended up supplementing with formula. “But if I can’t, Crystal said fed is best.”

“Makes sense.” He inclined his head toward the aisles. “Should we? I mean. . . these bits of paper don’t help much. I figured we’d get down and dirty. Get this done.”

I giggled. “You make it sound like we’re going patrolling.”

He smirked. “What? We sort of are. Weeding through the junk to scan what we need.” He folded the papers and tucked them into the goodie bag hanging off my arm. “Shall we?”

My smile was genuine. “Sounds good.”

We made it through the diaper and wipes aisles without much discussion. We registered for diapers of different sizes, a diaper pail (the one with Arm and Hammer baking soda for Spike’s sensitive nose), and a few giant boxes of wipes. We skipped the baby food aisles and registered for a set of Dr. Brown’s bottles and nipples of different sizes. Crystal said the Dr. Brown’s bottles were best for preventing gas. We ignored the pumps until I had a chance to call the insurance company, and then, we got to the aisle with bibs and bath toys. I didn’t understand the logic of why these were displayed together, but they were.

I didn’t have time to wonder long because Spike’s whole body relaxed, and he got the funniest look on his face. It was sort of a mix of awe and love, an expression that made me want to kiss him silly.
“What is it that’s got you so... schmoopy-faced?” I asked, keeping my eyes on him, the self-proclaimed Big Bad all tender-hearted-looking.

He smiled and fingered a bib with a little brown monkey face on it. “He’ll be so tiny.” He drew a breath in, a breath that skipped a bit with emotion. “This means he’s almost here.” Tears sheened his eyes. “And I already love him so much.”

I ran my fingers over his forearm, twisted the bib on the rack, and scanned the barcode. “If this is making you get like this, we’re registering for it.”

He blinked and glanced at me, the tears gone. “Now, I get it.”

A small smile playing on my lips, I watched in amusement as he began scanning anything and everything on the aisle: squirt-y bath toys, a giant convertible bathtub, floating balls with colorful creatures inside, a set of small boats, buckets with holes in the bottom for water play, washcloths that indicated water temperature, bath towels of various sizes, scent free all-in-one shampoo-body wash, scent-free lotion, Boudreaux’s Butt Paste (because it was fun to say), bibs for a variety of uses (plastic ones for when he was older and eating food, smaller cloth ones with the plastic backs for catching teething drool), sippy cups, and plastic dishes. I followed behind him and scanned a few things I wanted our son to have, but I was most enthralled by the love of my life being so excited to be a father.

He paused at the end of the aisle and looked at me with his blue eyes shining in delight. “I never thought I’d ever get to do this.”

I grinned. “Me either.”

“How come you’re not scanning much?” he asked as if he just noticed, a hint of a frown on his lips.

I shrugged one shoulder. “You’re having so much fun. I didn’t want to take over.”

“Okay. You take lead on the next aisle.” He picked up my hand and walked backward, urging me forward. “I’ll go slower. We can decide together.”

Spike was true to his word, and he let me browse through the baby toys and pacifiers. I held up a giraffe with a pacifier on the end. “This is so cute.”
“Wubbanub,” Spike pronounced carefully. “What kind of name is that?”

“A cute one. He needs this, right?” I scanned the barcode, and it made the familiar beep to acknowledge that the item was added to our list.

“Of course, love.” Spike studied the array of pacifiers. “We should get some for when he’s younger, too. A variety of shapes and kinds in case he doesn’t like one dummy or another?”

“Good idea.”

Spike scanned a few different types of pacifiers. Next came to the teethers. We registered for Sophie the Giraffe and a couple of others shaped like circles, keys, fruit, and a waffle. Then, my eyes landed on a teether shaped like an engagement ring. It was garish gold and had an orange-red “stone.” My eyes widened without my permission, and of course, Spike saw my reaction.

He touched the package as his eyebrows drew together. “What is it? An odd teether of some sort?”

Trying to shake away the fingers of anxiety tightening around my ribcage, I somehow kept my voice from quavering when I said, “Oz proposed to Willow today at the Columns Hotel. At jazz brunch. She said, ‘Yes.’”

“Good for them.” Spike frowned and then held up my hand which was clutching the scanner so hard that my knuckles were white and the plastic was a little cracked and straining. “But you obviously aren’t happy. What’s going on, love?”

How was I supposed to explain something that I didn’t have the words for? I opted for the truth while staring at the bright blue of a starfish-shaped teether. “I don’t know.” Irritation flickered through me and across my face. Couldn’t he just drop it? We were registering for our son, and damn it, I didn’t want to ruin the evening.

“Hey. At least look at me.” He said it lightly, but I knew I was worrying him.

“Just drop it,” I snapped. My immediate reaction was intense guilt, and tears filled my eyes. Why did he have to keep staring at me? Turning my head, I said, “I’m gonna go look at swaddles.” Then, I
left him there, standing in the aisle with the teethers.

My tears ran in hot streams down my cheeks, and I chastised myself, my thoughts not altogether coherent. What was I doing? Not what I planned. This was not going the way I wanted.

I hurried past rows of items and ducked down one without really noticing where I was. Wiping my tears away, I felt the ache in my heart push forth sharply into my awareness, and the baby kicked me hard in the ribs. Breathless, I stroked the swell of my belly and whispered, “Hey. Sorry to upset you, little one.” I closed my eyes then and purposefully took one deep breath after another, going slow on the exhale and fumbling a bit because baby was encroaching on my lungs.

When I finally opened my eyes, I saw that I was on the aisle with sheets and blankets. A navy-blue blanket with a cute grey elephant was right in my line of sight. Reaching out, I stroked the soft fabric. The color reminded me of Spike’s eyes when the lights were down low, and I wondered what color eyes the baby would have. Part of me really wanted them to be blue.

I felt Spike hovering on the edge of my senses, and when I opened my eyes, I felt him closing in, moving with a slow wariness. I hated that I made him so worried. My breath hesitated when he slipped his cooler palm against mine and twined our fingers together.

“I’m here,” he whispered, his tone edged with vulnerability. “Tell me. What is it about the witch and wolf getting engaged that bothers you so much?”

“I love you,” I said, starting with the two things I knew for sure. My mouth was dry, and the words came out funny. “I’m sorry.”

His voice was low and deep. “No need for apologies. Love you, too. Talk to me. Please.” He squeezed my hand with such gentleness that my heart almost broke.

I was silent for a long moment during which I clasped his hand back and tried to sort through my thoughts. “I hadn’t really thought about it before, you know? I mean, we have each other, and it’s all I could ever ask for.” I glanced into his blue eyes for a moment, and he was so earnest that the words came tumbling out with greater speed and surety as I refocused on the merchandise on the rack in front of me. “I-I never thought I’d have what we have. I didn’t think I’d be alive long enough to have a relationship that lasted long enough for me to even think about having a family. My dream of being married and having a family pretty much died the night I became a Slayer. You know? How you said yours died the night you were turned?”
“I remember that conversation, yes,” he acknowledged.

“A-and now I have you and our son, and I wouldn’t want to ever jinx it by wanting more.”

“Jinx it how, love? I’m not going anywhere. You’d have to stake me first.”

I chewed my lower lip to try to figure out how to explain. “Do you remember when Willow be-spelled us, and you proposed?”

“Not something I’ll ever forget. I loved you then. I just didn’t want to admit it.” He’d told me this before.

“I was so happy. Really genuinely happy,” I said with sincerity. “And when the spell was over, I felt it.”

“Felt what?”

“The loss of it. Of you. Of the hope of getting married. The loss of hope for a future where I was secure and happy.” Spike didn’t say anything in reply. He just gathered me into his arms from behind, and I felt safe, so I continued. “When I found you in L.A., I felt like I found that happiness again. Before that? It never exactly felt like... I dunno. It didn’t feel like we were really in it together. One of us was always a little off.”

“Except for those two nights in Sunnydale,” he said, his breath over my ear.

“Except those. And when I found you again –”

“After you punched me in the nose.” He sounded sure.

I didn’t remember that at all. I just remembered the later parts. “Hey! I didn’t do that.”

He harrumphed. “You did, too! My nose remembers. And I have witnesses. Blue and Angelus and that L.A. Slayer. What was her name?”
“Thia. Her name is Thia.” I rolled my eyes. “Okay. Maybe there was nose-punch-age. I may have been a little bit angry and a lot hurt. But the point is, I had hope for the future... a future with a man I love.”

“That’s me?”

I elbowed him so that he grunted. “Yes, that’s you!”

“Good. But?”

“I’m still a Slayer and was the Slayer for so long that my brain’s had trouble shifting gears. Like really believing that it’s safe to let my guard down to have a life with so many Slayers out there in the world. That maybe I can have... that I could have it all.”

“Does marriage mean that much to you?” Spike was no dummy.

I sighed. “I don’t know. It didn’t treat my mom very well, did it? My dad was... he didn’t handle stress well. My mom. She made mistakes, but she was there. She would have stuck with the marriage if my dad hadn’t... I dunno.”

“Been a right ass and had an affair?” To say that Spike was not impressed with my father was an understatement.

“Yeah. So, I don’t know if I’d want to get married.” And I didn’t.

“So, why the reaction?”

“Oz asked me about us. Whether you and I had talked about it. We were on the drive to Kilgore. It sorta caught me off guard.”

“What’d you say?”

The corner of my mouth lifted. “I dodged the question.”
He hugged me closer and kissed my temple. “Sounds familiar.”

I emitted a small laugh. “Haha. Funny vampire thinks he’s funny. I dodged it because I was afraid addressing it when you were lost in another dimension would jinx you and Dawn and Willow.”

“There’s an awful lot of jinxing going on in that head of yours. We weren’t lost. We were on a mission.” He was firm in this account, kind of like my sister.

“I didn’t know that then. I was terrified I was going to lose you, my sister, my best friend.”

“Good point.” He ran the back of his fingers over my upper arm in a reassuring gesture. “So, jinxing? What else? There’s more to it.” He was right, of course.

“Emily said she wanted two kids.”

He shifted behind me, rolling with my change of direction. “When was this?”

“Doesn’t matter. A long time ago while we were on patrol, and I realized that I lived in a world where Slayers could think about having a life in addition to slaying. That they could go to college and have back up. That they could consider getting married and raising a family. I never had that. Every time I almost did or tried having that kind of life – ”

“The rug got pulled out from under you, so imagining a future where you could have some stability was – ”

“Impossible. I’m jealous of Emily. Of Oz and Willow. Even of Hana with her low-key slayage towns. I’m jealous of women who get pregnant with the person they love by making love and not having a kid via science. I’m jealous that they don’t have to deal with the feelings I’ve had to feel.” I hugged the arm he had resting just above the top of my abdomen. Then, I remembered what Hana said about shit happening to everyone. “Not that they don’t have their own stuff. I know they do.”

Spike, of course, chose to focus on the emotion piece and not the Buffy-talks-herself-out-of-her-feelings piece. “Makes sense to me that you’d feel envious. And I understand the jealousy bit more than you know.” He nuzzled my hair.
“Plus,” I said the next part in a rush because it scared me to put it out there in the universe, “would a vampire even want to get married? Vampires are immortal. Do those things even matter to . . . vampires?” I was too scared to ask if it mattered to him. I didn’t want to pressure him either because of what I’d told him not long ago about being worried he was losing his vampire-ness. “And I’m not the kind of girl who needs a ring just because she’s pregnant.”

Spike moved in front of me with more speed than I expected, and I wobbled, baby making me naturally off balance, but he caught me before I could fall into the display of sheets behind me. He cupped my cheek and kissed me, his lips sliding over mine until I moaned. Then, he abruptly broke away to stare with fierceness into my eyes. “Love, I would pretty much do anything to make you happy. Vampire or no. Pregnancy or no. I thought you knew this?”

I blinked at him and nudged my nose against his. “I know this. But I don’t want to make you do anything. That’s not how I want our relationship to be.”

“It’s not how it is. We’ve worked too hard. I feel like we’re on equal footing. Our relationship is solid. But it doesn’t mean I don’t want to fulfill the desires that you have in your heart.” I knew he’d do anything, but maybe what he didn’t know was that I’d do anything for him.

“I want to do that for you, too.”

“You do, love. Every single day. Do I need to go over the list again?” Was he referring to the time in Jacques-Imo’s? That felt like a hundred years ago. My hand touched the heart pendant he’d given me – the heart I hadn’t taken off since he’d been gone.

I answered his question by kissing him, and I drew it out, enjoying the lingering leisurely affection.

Several seconds later, Spike and I were caught up in each other, completely unaware of our surroundings when someone cleared her throat. We abruptly broke apart to see Dawn holding up her scanner with glee. “I registered baby Tad for a bunch of things. Have you heard of a Nerf Vortex Nitron Blaster?”

Spike and I both groaned at the same time.
So, I wanted to put in the Toys R Us/Babies R Us piece because they're closing forever soon (are closed forever by the time I posted this on AO3).

Also, the Nerf Vortex Nitron Blaster...it was one of the toys to have that year. lol (Thank you, Google.)

Thanks everyone for reading!
The morning I hung out with Crystal, Leah, and Willow

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What’s the baby’s name?”

I smiled at Leah who was watching me with wide eyes as she perched on the chair next to me. She was eating a cookie and having hot chocolate. I was going through the registry on my laptop, weeding out items, most of which Dawn and Spike had over- or inappropriately registered for. “The baby doesn’t have a name,” I told the little girl. “Not yet.”

“I keep thinking that you do and just don’t want to tell anyone,” Willow said across from me, a small smirk on her lips over the rim of her cup. She’d totally gotten Leah to ask me because I’d been less than forthcoming.

“Hey, Crystal!” I called across the coffee shop. Willow and I were spending the morning dead time with Crystal and Leah. “Did you already have names picked out for your kids at this point?”

Crystal poked her head around the doorframe to the back room. She looked a little winded from moving boxes of supplies around. “Do you have your feet up, missy?”

“What?” I nodded at my feet propped in the chair next to Willow. “Oh. Uh huh! But that’s not what I asked.” My left ankle had been swelling with much greater frequency as the heat in New Orleans increased and as the pregnancy progressed. My OB didn’t seem too worried. My blood pressure and labs were good.

She pulled her long dreads back into a loose ponytail. “What’d you ask?”

Leah bounced in her seat. “She asked how you picked my name.” That wasn’t exactly it but close enough.

Crystal softened. “As soon as I saw your sweet face, I knew you were my Leah.”

I sat up straighter and pointed my finger at her. “Ah ha! So, you didn’t have a name picked before she was born?”
Willow rolled her eyes but was still smiling, and Crystal laughed. Leah was watching her mother with expectation on her little face.

Crystal addressed her daughter again. “I didn’t have your name picked until I met you. You had to show me who you were first.”

“Oh!” Leah said in awe, her lips quirking up in a smile and her cheeks tingling pink as she ducked her head. I could tell she’d heard this story before and that what her mother said made her feel special.

“See!” I gave Willow a pointed look.

“Fine. I’ll leave you alone.” She finished her mocha and stood. “I need a refill anyway.”

Crystal accepted the empty mug and began making Willow a new coffee. “So, when and where are you getting married?” We’d already all oohed over Willow’s sparkly ring, and she’d let us all try it on, casting a little spell, so it briefly fit each one of us. I’d been happy to find that my jealous feelings had abated since my talk with Spike.

“Well.” Willow looked at me with expectation on her face. “Oz and I have been doing a lot of talking since he proposed, and we decided to get married here. In New Orleans!”

“What?!” I jumped up, the baby making the motion awkward. “Oh, my god!”

Willow stood and gave me a big hug. Then, she pulled back with a grin. “We knew you were about to have the baby, and well, we want to get married sooner rather than later. And you can’t travel with a newborn, so . . .”

I honestly hadn’t considered the inability to travel for Willow’s wedding. “Thank you.”

“I couldn’t get married without both of my best friends present.” She let go of me and gestured for me to sit back down. As I followed her instructions, she added, “And there’s more.”
I arranged my feet in the chair, and Leah leaned over and gave my arm a little hug. “What?”

“You and Xander have to be our witnesses. And Oz and I talked about something else.”

“You guys are all with the talking.”

“You know it!” Willow grinned and plopped back down in her chair, her hands grasping the edges of the wood in her joy. “We’re going to move here for at least the foreseeable future. Oz wants to play music in New Orleans since he’s never been part of the music scene here. He actually has a couple of connections, and you know my work can be done from home anywhere.”

My mouth dropped open in surprise. “You’re moving here? To New Orleans? Why? I thought you were loving Falls Church.”

She shrugged. “We do. But how often does your bestie have a baby? Falls Church is too far away to help, and I want all the baby snuggles. I mean, when you and Spike need a break and are ready to pull your hair out.”

“I want snuggles with the baby, too!” Leah announced, sticking her chin in the air. “I’m good with babies. Mommy said so. I help with my brother a lot.”

I laughed. “Snuggles all around, and I’m sure we’ll need a break every now and again. Oh, my god, Wil! I’m so happy that you’ll be here!”

“You don’t have your mom here, and I know she’d want to be with you if she could,” Willow added softly. “That’s what moms do or so I read in books.”

My eyes misted over, and I realized that I’d purposefully avoiding thinking about Mom. She’d have wanted to do all the grandma things with her grandchild, and I liked to think she’d have been amused to no end that Spike was the father. I made a mental note to talk with Spike about that later before a mix of emotions covered the thought up. “Yeah.” I caught the falling tear before it was too noticeable. “She would have loved it.”

“Where’s your mom?” Leah asked, her eyes round as saucers as she glanced from me to Willow and back again.
Uh oh. Leah’s goldfish had died last week, and she’d just stopped having nightmares about it. I didn’t want to add to her trauma by talking about my mom’s death.

Crystal swept up then, delivering a new mocha for Willow. Then, she gathered empty cups and plates, trying to deflect the direction of the conversation. I’d told her long ago that my mother had died because of complications related to a brain tumor. “Buffy’s mom can’t be with her. That’s all.” Her tone was firm, and Leah got quiet, her head dropping a little.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered to me, taking my hand in her little one. “I wish your mom could be here with you. I know I’d miss Mommy if she couldn’t be with me.”

I rearranged our hands so that mine safely cradled hers. Then, I kissed her forehead. “It’s okay. I have all of you here with me.”

“And now Willow!” Leah said with renewed brightness.

“Right!” Willow echoed with cheer in her voice, her green eyes searching mine with concern.

I shook my head to let her know I was okay and changed the subject while toggling my asleep computer back to life. “So, Crystal, what are your baby must haves?”

Crystal deposited the dishes in the sink with a clink. “That’s easy. Swaddles, pacifiers, breastfeeding pillow, white noise machine, those bottles I told you about, and a partner who will take turns with you, so you can sleep.”

“Mommy called it Operation: Keep Baby Alive when Ryan was born,” Leah said, forgetting her questions about my mom.

Willow giggled. “Sounds like boot camp.”

“It is like boot camp. Baby boot camp,” Crystal confirmed as she flipped on the faucet. She peered over her shoulder to make sure I wasn’t panicking. I wasn’t – not yet. “But it gets easier. I promise. And you can always text me. You know that, right?”
“Don’t worry. I’m going to take you up on that!” I picked up my phone and waved it at her. “You better be ready. Middle of the night when the baby won’t stop crying.”

“It’s all worth it. I promise,” Crystal teased.

“It is!” Leah agreed, leaning her head on my upper arm. “Ryan stopped crying as much, and now, he plays with me. Except . . .”

I gave her a curious look. “Except?”

She put her hand on one side of her mouth and whispered, “Sometimes he trims my horse’s mane and tail, and he tears my books.”

“Ohhh. That must be upsetting.” I knew how important her toy horses still were to her.

“Yeah. He doesn’t mean to though.” She took a bite of her cookie. “And I still love him anyway.”

I smiled at Leah. “That’s good. Forgiveness is important for you and him.” I glanced at the registry. “So, we don’t need fifteen teether?”

Crystal set the dishes on the front counter to dry them. “Um, no. And you won’t need those for a while anyway.”

“Got it.” I started deleting most of them, but I kept the waffle-shaped one. That one amused me to no end.

For the next half an hour, I went through the entire registry, and Crystal, Willow, and even little Leah gave me input on what to keep and what to delete. Leah made me save the bib with the cute grey horse on it. Soon, the baby registry was streamlined with needs, must-haves, and a few fun extras. I was sure that Dawn would go back through and add some of her picks back; I just had to talk to her about some of them. Leah left us to go home with her dad, Crystal returned to straightening up the inventory in the back, which left me and Willow to catch up.
“So,” Willow clapped her hands and drew her own laptop out of her messenger bag, “theme. The baby shower needs a theme.”

“What? A theme? Really?” I hadn’t even really thought about baby shower stuff.

Willow pushed some buttons, obviously pulling up a program to take notes. “That and I need to know if you want there to be games.” Her mouth was set. She was serious as only she could be.

I considered the possibilities, and all I could think of were baby bottles, rattles, onesies, and excessively sweet cake. Stereotypical movie baby shower material. “Oh, god. Nothing too cutesy.”

Willow frowned. “Define ‘cutesy.’”

I pushed my mouth sideways as I thought. “Not all blue? With the snips and snails and puppy dog tails.”

“Do huh?” said as she typed.

I fingered the edge of my laptop keyboard. “That’s the only poem I know about boys. Spike recited it the other night when he was talking to my belly. I don’t even know where it comes from.”

Willow snickered. “Spike is talking to your belly?”

I smiled at the image of him speaking with such love and earnestness to our son. “Yeah. It’s really sweet actually. He wants the baby to know his voice. He started doing it every night before we go to sleep. And the baby started responding to him. He kicks or elbows me. It’s all very comfy.”

“As in not?” Willow teased.

I sighed. “Right? But Spike loves it. He gets so excited, and I’m the one who encouraged him to do it. I can’t tell him that every night – ”

“Is a bit excessive?”
“Exactly.”

“Well, I guess it won’t be for much longer. I couldn’t tell Oz ‘no’ either.” Then, Willow cleared her throat. “The shower? We need to focus.”

“You sound like Anya with the wedding planning. Cracking the whip. Poor Xander.” I could still hear them arguing about seating arrangements.

Now Willow was tearful. “I miss Anya.”

“Me, too.” I reached over with my foot and nudged her thigh in camaraderie.

Willow shook off the emotion and her resolve-face showed its head. “Shower. Now.”

I rolled my eyes and repositioned myself to sit up straighter. Maybe it would help my brain wake up and think of shower-y things. “Fine.” I chewed my lower lip for a moment. “Can we do a co-ed shower? I want the guys all there.”

“Yay! You decided something.” Willow typed in her document.

“Don’t sound so shocked.”

“I’m not. So, do you have a theme for the nursery?” She said it so casually that my brain almost skipped over it.

Then, it didn’t. “What nursery? Have you seen our house?”

“Oh yeah.” The way she avoided eye contact with me told me that she knew something I didn’t.

I leaned forward. “What?”
“How do you feel about books instead of cards?” she asked, trying to sound innocent as she focused on her computer screen.

“How?”

Willow hurried to explain, “Guests brings books in lieu of cards that you won’t ever look at again. And baby has a built-in library post-shower.”

“I like that.” Spike would like that. Still. I narrowed my eyes at my friend. “What are you hiding?”

“Nothing. Buffy.” Willow gestured at the computer as she probably typed something about books instead of cards. “We’re all with the planning.”

I glared, my best I’m-a-pregnant-lady-so-you-better-tell-me glare. “You know something related to the nursery.”

Willow sighed. “It’s supposed to be a surprise.”

“What is?”

Willow squirmed. “Spike – he swore Oz and me to secrecy.”

A customer entered the coffee shop, and I lowered my voice but kept the demand simple, so she knew I meant business. “Spill. Now.”

Her eyes shifted to the customer and Crystal, who’d emerged to take the coffee order. With some reluctance, Willow admitted, “He’s been looking for bigger houses for the three of you. He wanted you to have a nursery for the baby.”

“He what?” Oops. That was a little too loud. Crystal widened her eyes at me, and I sat back in my chair. I couldn’t believe it. We’d just gotten back, and Spike was already thinking that many steps ahead?
Willow held up both hands, palms in my direction. “Before you get all mad and huffy at him. He’s looking at more than one. He wanted to let you pick.”

Worry twisted in my stomach. “We can’t afford a house.”

Willow smiled. “Actually. You can now.”

“What do you mean? You didn’t – ?” Did Willow also give us money for a down payment on a house?

Willow shook her head. “Nope. Not me. I’m not rolling in that much dough. Guess again.”

The only other person I knew with money was. . . “Giles.”

“You figured it out. I didn’t tell you. He wanted it to be a gift for you, the baby. . . and Spike.”

“Really?” For me? Tears welled up in my eyes.

Willow gushed on, “He has this big estate in England, Buffy, with fields and horses. He said he wanted you to have a place of your own with a yard for your son to run around in and enough space inside, so you aren’t on top of each other all the time. More than one bathroom.”

I’d never in my life had more than one bathroom. “Oh, my god. Another bathroom!” I thought for a minute. “Wait a minute. So, Giles and Spike have been planning this? Together?” I couldn’t fathom this. Not in a million years. Like, were they on the phone together? Texting? When were these conversations happening?

“Uh huh.”

“Whoa.”
“Shocking, right?” Willow grinned like the Cheshire cat.

“Mind completely blown.” Love swelled in my heart for Spike and Giles.

“Plus, he said that when he comes to visit, he’d like to stay in a ‘proper’ guest room.”

“Aww. Giles wants to stay with us?” He hadn’t mentioned that before. When he was in town, he always stayed with George.

“Sounds like it to me. He’s taking his Pop Pop job very seriously.”

I laughed. “He is.” Then, I sobered, inspiration striking. “I have an idea.”

“An idea for what?” Willow asked, her eyes full of mirth.

“The shower. I’d like it to be stars and the moon.” That was perfect.

Willow started typing. “Why stars and the moon?”

“Because that’s where I fell in love with his Daddy. At night, under the moon and stars.”

Willow pressed her lips together half in amusement and half with the serious. “I don’t remember it being quite that romantic.”

I ran a hand gently over the curve of the baby bump. “He doesn’t need to know that. All that matters is that it ended up that way.”

Chapter End Notes

Including some Spiles for OYB, and I also wanted a bit of a return to the beginning with Leah and Crystal.
Like Crystal said, my brother and his wife called the initial period: Operation Keep Baby Alive, so I put it here. It was a little mantra that I used at the beginning.

Next up, another Spuffy chapter... Thanks so much for reading!
The evening of breaking and entering

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In typical Spike fashion (or was it Spike-and-Buffy fashion?), we broke into the empty houses he’d been investigating for us. He wanted to show them to me his own way and without the real estate agent breathing down our necks. He made sure he didn’t damage any of the houses in case we picked that one, and the nighttime exploration was kind of exciting. Buffy-of-old would have totally balked at doing it this way, but I wasn’t Buffy-of-old anymore. I’d learned to pick my battles, and honestly, sometimes doing things Spike’s way was more fun than doing them mine.

At the second house, we almost got caught by a teenaged boy walking his dog through the neighborhood for a middle-of-the-night bathroom break. Luckily, Spike heard him coming. Though I tripped over the garden hose, which was draped across the lawn like a hidden booby trap for pregnant women, he managed to somehow cover my mouth and help me regain my balance. Then, he snuck us into the backyard without the boy or dog spotting us and without me breaking any body parts or the baby. Spike had motioned me to silence until he could no longer hear the pair. Once he gave the all-clear signal, which was a shrug and grin, the giggle lodged in my throat made its way out of my mouth. At that point, Spike growled and pushed the back door open, so I could laugh as loud as I wanted in the echoing, empty house. (He may have even laughed a little with me before he nuzzled my neck, pushed me up against the wall, and dotted a string of kisses over my jaw before kissing me thoroughly on the mouth.)

Now, Spike and I were standing in the middle of a living room in the third house, having explored all the other empty rooms. In the dim moonlight, he was leaning against the window pane and watching my face with expectation.

“This is the one, isn’t it?” I smiled at him. The house was a brick one-story with a large master bedroom and bath, large open-concept living room and kitchen, two other bedrooms, and a spacious man-cave of sorts, which unlike the other rooms had no windows. The best part was that there were two-and-a-half bathrooms! Two-and-a-half! The garden tub in the master bath that could easily fit Spike and I was already tempting me. If only the water was turned on.

“Was thinking you’d like this one best. So, I saved it for last.” He sounded pleased with himself.

“Are you sure there won’t be too much light? There are a lot of windows.” I lifted my hands up to indicate all the dangerous portals for sunlight around us.

“But the French blinds are nice and thick. They’ll shutter down so that the light’ll be indirect.” To demonstrate, he shut half of the window behind him, darkening the room that much more.
I crossed my arms and twisted my lips in contemplation. “What if the baby opens one of the blinds during the day on accident?”

He ran his fingers over the wood. “I’m sure I can finagle something, so the blinds don’t fly open. Though I don’t believe this sprog of ours is going to be opening windows for a while.”

I snagged his hand and pulled him into a sideways hug, which was all we could manage at this stage. “I don’t want you going poof.”

“There are trees all around in case you didn’t notice. That’ll help prevent the direct sunlight, too.”

“Unless there’s a hurricane. Or a light summer breeze. Remember that you’re flammable?”

Spike snorted. “If there’s a hurricane barreling down on the Big Easy, we’ll be long gone.” We’d discussed evacuating in Xander’s direction if needed.

I paced away from him, still studying the details of the living room. “Did this house flood?”

“In Katrina? No.”

“Good.” My wanderings led me to a spot near the open space for hanging our TV, and I stopped there, spreading my arms. “This would be the perfect place for my recliner.”

He crossed his arms. “Your recliner? I don’t think so. If I remember right, we picked it out for me, and it’s going in the . . . what’d you call that windowless room?”

“The man-cave?” I asked with all the innocence.

“Sodding stupid name. But yes, in there!”

“But it’s one of the only places I can get comfortable,” I protested with a pout in my voice and
refraining from suggesting that we rechristen the man-cave as the “vampire-cave.” “And it’ll be perfect for nursing the baby.”

“We’ll make my room... cozy. Toys for the little one, a sofa or recliner for you. You’ll both want to be in there with me.” He sounded so hopeful that I crossed the room and kissed his cheek.

“We’ll want to be wherever you are. I promise you that.” I pulled his arm free and slid my hand into his. “So, how long have you and Giles been planning this? And color my mind blown about that by the way.”

He squeezed my hand. “Mixing metaphors, pet.”

I laughed. “I know.”

“To answer your question: since Christmastime.”

“Really?”

“I don’t think you noticed. Rupert and I took our whisky on the back porch.” He was referring to the present from Giles.

“Then?” I’d been busy visiting with Willow and Xander, and I’d completely overlooked Spike and Giles’s sneaky getaway because I’d been pumping Xander for information on his new girl, who’d been chatting with Oz about his music.

Spike kissed the back of my hand. “Yeah. He told me that he regretted all the times you struggled with finances in the past. While he can’t afford to pay for all the upkeep of a house, he wants to purchase one outright and buy out the lease where we live now. All we’ll have to do is pay the taxes and bills, which we’ll be able to do with what we make now. If we buy this house. The other two are a bit more expensive. All three are ready for inspection and eager to close soon, so the timing is right for us to move before our son is born.”

“We don’t need a swimming pool.” The first house had a pool in the backyard. Then, the magnitude of what Spike just said hit me. “Oh, my god! Is this real?” I maneuvered and pressed our hands on my belly, and the baby shifted. “Is this our life?”
Spike stroked my cheek with the back of his free fingers, and I leaned into his comforting touch. “I sometimes can’t believe it either.”

Taking his hand again, I led him back toward the master bedroom which was connected to the dark man cave. Turning on the flashlight on my phone, we stood in the middle of the room. “Tell me where everything would be.”

He pointed at space with his free hand and explained in his deep rumble. I listened to the cadence of his words and marveled that we got to do this together... that we got to be parents and a family. Love made my heart beat strong and hard.

When he finished, he asked, “So?”

“So, what?”

“What do you think?” He offered me a shy smile. “I want you to have a say, too.”

“I love all your ideas.” And I did. “It’s not all going to be idyllic though.”

His eyebrows drew together ever so slightly – my romantic vampire. “How so, pet?”

“The baby’s going to be up. All night sometimes. He’ll cry, and sometimes we won’t know why he’s crying. We’re going to be so tired we can’t see straight. We might fight. I might not shower for a few days. I might threaten to stake you... and mean it.” I was painting the worst picture I could imagine at this point. I tried to emphasize the ominous with my next words. “Crystal calls the first part Operation: Keep Baby Alive.”

To my annoyance, Spike laughed, loud and a little too long for my taste.


“People have been doing this for thousands of years, love. I think we’ll be able to manage without it...
being so dire. Plus, I’ve handled more than a few threats of dusting from you. I think I can handle a few more.” He kissed the tip of my nose, and darn him, I melted a little. “We’ll be fine. Even if you don’t shower, and our boy throws up on my recliner or cries incessantly. And you’re looking at a creature of the night here. Up all night is my area of expertise.”

“Hmph. You don’t stay up all night now. I seem to remember that you’ve been sleeping with me through the night for a while now.”

“So, my sleep routine is topsy-turvy. Just means I’ll be ready for our son.”

He was not getting my anxiety. “I’m a little scared.”

“Of what, love?” He was so patient with me.

I shrugged. “Of screwing up. Of not being a good enough mother.”

His response was immediate. “That is the key right there.”

“What is?” I made my confused face at him.

“You said, ‘Good enough.’”

“So?”

“That’s all you need to be.”

“Explain-y. Please.” I moved from one foot to the next, tired of standing. I needed to prop my feet up. My ankles were going to be ginormous.

“All parents bugger things up. We’re going to be sodding messes sometimes. We’re going to annoy the bleeding hell out of the tike. And you know what?”

“He’s going to know a whole dictionary full of curse words before he’s two?”
“Ha bloody ha, pet.”

“You’re saying that he’s going to be annoyed with us, but he’s still going to love us.”

“He’s going to be right pissed at us. All part of growing up.”

I laughed, and then, tears blurred my vision. “I miss my mom.” As soon as I said the words, my heart sank. Saying them aloud to Willow was one thing; it was another thing to say them aloud with Spike. I wasn’t sure why.

He slipped his arm around my shoulders and held me. He didn’t say anything for a long moment.

“Your mum would have loved all of this.”

Fat warm tears slid over my cheeks, and I reached a hand up to wipe them away. “She would have. I haven’t really thought a lot about her all this time, and now that the baby’s almost here. I miss her. I really wish she were here. She’s supposed to be here.” More tears came. “I wish she could be a part of this.”

“It’s sodding unfair.” He kissed the top of my head. “Because she’s gone, you’ll miss her at all the milestones. Having a baby is a big one. Joyce would’ve been so happy for you, pet.”

“She would have, huh? She would like that the baby’s yours, I think.”

“I dunno about that. We didn’t exactly part on the best of terms with me kidnapping her daughter and chaining her up.”

“True. But I think she’d approve now. Wanna know why?” I glanced up at him, but the shadows made it hard for me to read his face.

“Why’s that?” I could hear the hint of anxiety. He wasn’t happy the way he’d left things with my mom.
I ducked out from under his arm and faced him, holding the little light up between us. “Because you make me so incredibly happy, and you’re going to be the best... good enough father.” Then, I bounced the subject in a different direction before I forgot what I wanted to ask. “Do you miss your mom?”

He turned his head before I could read the emotion in his eyes. “I do.” Spike never talked about his mom; all I knew was that she’d been loving and supportive but also ill at the end of her life.

I never pushed him for more because I could tell it was a sensitive topic, but now, I couldn’t help myself. Maybe the dim lighting made it easier. And the pre-parent jitters couldn’t all be me, right? “You never say much about her. Or your dad.”

“It was a long time ago, pet. I don’t remember much.” I could tell by the way he said it that he was only partially telling the truth.

So, I started with my assumptions. “Your dad wasn’t around much, right? Was he like my dad?”

He was silent for such a long time that I wasn’t sure he was going to respond, and then, he took me by the hand and led me to the wall closest to the door of the master bedroom so there was a little more light from the moon. He slid down to a seating position with his knees angled up before helping me down next to him. I turned off my phone flashlight and waited, one hand open on his thigh. I was too afraid that if I joked about how I wasn’t sure I could get off the floor, we’d get distracted by another topic.

Finally, he spoke, his voice soft. “What I do remember about my father was how much he loved my mother. He was very kind to her and to me. He worked hard at his job. I don’t rightly remember exactly what he did for a living though I could probably do some digging and find out. All I know is that we always had plenty of everything we needed and that he was always home for dinner in the evenings. He taught me that the simple things were important. Like spending time together, and for most of my early childhood, we were happy.”

“What happened to him?” I asked, sweeping my thumb back and forth in one spot on his leg, the fabric of his jeans rough on my skin.

“He died quite suddenly when I was seven or eight. Something happened in town. An accident. My mum never told me all the details and never much talked about him after that though I knew it saddened her. She tended to protect me from the harsher things in life. It was just the two of us from then on.”
“I’m so sorry about your dad.”

“Nothing to be sorry for, pet. It was a long time ago.”

“But still, little you must have been so confused and heartbroken, especially not really knowing or understanding what happened.” I pictured a sandy-haired, blue-eyed boy with tears in his eyes, all alone with his enormous feelings at the loss of his father. My heart ached for that little boy; my heart ached for the man beside me now.

“My mum was a strong lady before she got sick, pet. She made sure I was taken care of. My father left us some money, and when that ran out and her health started failing, her family stepped in with finances. I never wanted for anything. I had a good education and food on the table, but more than that, I had love in my home. It’s more than a lot of people had.”

“She sounds kind of like my mom.” Huh. I never knew about that parallel with our mothers.

“Hadn’t thought about it that way. Makes sense. I always liked Joyce. She was nurturing, kind to me when she had no reason to be.”

I directed him away from the topic of my mom because I wanted to hear more about his childhood. “It must have been hard to lose your dad and then later your mom.”

His deep inhalation of air had the snag of emotion tinging it. “Yeah.” He was quiet again, but he pulled my hand into his, lacing his fingers with mine. I could tell he was about to tell me something else. “I turned my mum after Dru turned me. Made her into a sodding vampire.”

My heart beat harder in surprise. I tried to force it to slow down by sheer force of will. Failing that, I kept my voice gentle. “You did?”

“Stupidest thing I’ve ever done. Was trying to cure her sickness. Make her strong again. Give her the gift of immortality.” He sounded angry and regretful at the same time.

My mind was working double time, trying to put the pieces together. I spoke before I realized what I’d figured out. “Let me guess. It didn’t work out the way you hoped.”
“Let’s just say that she was not the woman I knew anymore. She came back physically healthy but somehow. . . wrong.” He shuddered almost imperceptibly. “We partied company not long after that.”

“What happened to her?” I felt like I was holding my breath.

His volume was so low that I almost didn’t hear him whisper, “I dusted her.”

And I thought my heart ached for him before. “Oh god, Spike. That must’ve been awful.” I gathered his arm close and leaned my head on his shoulder.

“It’s why I was so angry when your pals brought you back. There’s so much risk involved in a resurrection. I couldn’t have borne having to dispose of what was brought back. Not again. Not with someone else I loved.” He laid his head on mine. “But I’m very glad that you’re here now.”

“Me, too. I love you. I love that you loved your mom so much that you went above and beyond to help her.” It was the way he was with everyone he loved. That made me love him more.

“Love you, too, pet.”

“So, question for you.” Spike waited, so I asked, “If bringing back your mom was so awful, why did you make minions? And why did you help Dawn try to bring Mom back? I guess that’s two questions.”

There was no hesitation. “I didn’t bloody well relish making the minions. Dru and I didn’t turn many of them ourselves; we recruited them as needed and disposed of them when we were done. It’s not like I went around turning people left and right, excepting that time under the control of the First. And regarding the Nibblet? I helped because she needed to work through that part of her grief, and in all honesty, I didn’t think the spell would work unless someone like Willow was involved in the casting, or I wouldn’t have helped her.”

Oh. Well, that put those pieces of the puzzle together. “So, what does all this mean about us? How we’ll be as parents?”

“We’ve had some bloody good role models.” He paused only a second. “And some not so great
ones. I’m betting that means we’ll know what we want to do and what we don’t want to do with our son.”

“Speaking of role models. Do you think we should get out of the house we don’t technically own yet? The house that we broke into tonight? Plus, I’m really hot and could use a giant glass of ice water. Maybe poured over my head.”

He snorted and pulled himself off the ground. “Got to have a bit of fun, eh? Teach him early.”

I gazed up at him in the darkness from my floor view and rolled my eyes. “Noted. Baby’s first breaking and entering. Check.” Then, I accepted his offered hand up. “Seriously though. We should do this kind of thing less even if we don’t have nefarious intentions.”

“This is on par with the kitten poker, eh?”

“Uh huh.”

“Okay then. I’ll wait at least until he’s of age.”

I whacked him good-naturedly on the arm.

“Hey,” he protested, amusement in his voice. “Let’s go cool you off. Play your cards right, and there might even be a foot rub in it for you.”

I smiled. “Okay.”

Chapter End Notes

I thought that the baby would bring up thoughts of their own parents, so I wanted to explore that here...and explain some inconsistencies with Spike's actions post turning his mom and having to dust her.

Next up...newborn care class...haha.

Thanks so much for reading and for all your support!
The evening of the newborn care class

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“No epidural for you,” Spike whispered, poking me in the ribs with his elbow.

We were sitting in a half-rectangle of tables with all the other parents-to-be. Earlier, we’d introduced ourselves and announced how far along we were, if we were having a boy or girl or twins, and when we were due. This had been awkward because many of the parents had given Spike side eye at his bleached hair and black leather. He hadn’t exactly donned a welcoming facial expression in response to their wariness despite our talk about how he had to play nice to learn about baby care.

We had been listening to the ins and outs of labor, which honestly was a bit boring with all the talk of minutes between contractions and centimeters dilated. Now, our instructor was going over the gory details of the epidural’s potential negative impact on child and mother, which of course, made my vampire very anxious.

I frowned at him and elbowed him back so that he grunted. “Says you. And ow.”

“But look at this list of side effects!” He thrust the list up at me as if I couldn’t read my own copy right in front of me. “Longer labor, vaginal tears, fever, compromised fetal heart rate, difficulty breastfeeding, nerve damage, spinal headache – ”

“Mr. Pratt? Everything okay?” The middle-aged teacher glared at Spike as she removed her bifocals with one hand and adjusted her floral top with the other. She looked like a disgruntled librarian but in a different and grumpier league than Giles.

All the other parents stared at him, which I knew didn’t bother him, but then, I emitted a small huff. Admonished, he slouched and tried to appear reasonably embarrassed, which was not an easy thing for him. “All good.” I tried hard not to laugh at the century-old vampire being sort of put in his place by the teacher.

Giving him a run for his money with her eyebrow arch, she asked, “Do you have questions about the other forms of pain management for mothers?”
She re-donned her glasses and firmly straightened the papers in front of her. “All right then. Let’s take a break. How about we come back in ten minutes, and we’ll change gears to newborn care.”

Chairs scraped over scuffed linoleum and pregnant ladies waddled back toward the snack table or out the door to the bathroom in the hallway. Their husbands wandered around looking a little lost or staring at the posters of labor positions on the walls of the hospital classroom. The nurse who was teaching the class started pulling fake babies out of big plastic tubs.

Setting my jaw, I turned to Spike and crossed my arms on top of my baby bump. The baby kicked me in the ribs, which made me groan before I said with less firmness than I intended, “I want an epidural.”

Spike studied me. “Fine.” The worry was still in his eyes though, and I hated that.

Shifting to try to catch my breath, I took his hand in both of mine. “It seems like a lot of things can happen during labor.”

Spike glanced over at the papers in front of him. “There are a lot of bloody variables.” He peeked at me. “Truth be told, I’ve been avoiding that part of the book.”

Fiddling with his thumb, I asked, “Could we maybe play it by ear? Go with the flow? See what happens first? Let the doctor tell us what and when?”

“Sure, pet. Just scares me is all. I don’t want to lose you. Same as the surgery for your eggs.”

“You’re looking at a Slayer. I got this. . . we’ve got this.” I forced his blue eyes to meet mine.

“We do.” Then, he hedged, “Slayers can handle a lot of pain, so –”

“Still on board the epidural train.”
He grinned at me. “Playing it by ear seems wise.”

“For our physical health. Yours and mine.” The corner of my lips quirked up. “You’ll walk me through all these exercises first,” I said, shuffling through the pages until I found the list of labor tips, positions, and techniques.

He leaned forward and kissed me on the lips. “Of course. I’ll be with you every step of the way.”

“Good.” My smile broadened. “Now, this momma needs to use the bathroom. Again.”

“Need anything from the vending machine?” He stood with me and then gestured at my left foot. “Looks like you need to prop up your feet again.”


“I’ll get you some water and a chair.”

“Thank you.”

With reverence, the instructor placed a rubber baby down in front of us along with a disposable diaper and a thin blanket. The faux baby’s eyes were the kind that opened and closed and were somehow stuck open and staring creepily up at the ceiling. It reminded me a bit of Sid, the puppet. She smiled at me and gave Spike a stern once-over, no doubt judging his hair and all-black ensemble.

I widened my eyes at Spike as she moved on, and he heaved an irritated sigh. “Dunce cap for me, pet. Thank god there’s only one class.”

I giggled as he headed for the snack table. Then, I hurried to the bathroom. After my bladder was relieved, I followed the other couples who were meandering back to class.

I discovered that Spike had procured a pillow for my back, a chair for my feet which was arranged on the other side of the table, and a large, cold bottle of water from the vending machine instead of the mini ones from the provided stash. Running my fingers over his shoulders, I kissed his cheek and
settled down. “You’re the best.”

He folded the pillow in half as I leaned forward, tucking it at my sore lower back. Since the instructor was taking her own bathroom break, I decided to broach something else that had been on my mind. “We should talk about names because seriously? Baby is due in six weeks or so. Movers are coming this weekend.”

With Giles on the task, the house closing had been quick. Lucky for us, we had lots of helpers, aka Slayers, to carry and move the heavy stuff. No expensive movers were needed. Willow, Carrie, Dawn, and Crystal planned the shower for the next weekend at the new house. Everything was moving super-fast, and it freaked me out a little. I was worried that I'd forget something that had to be done before the birth.

Spike had been battling it out every night with the names, and I swear that every name I thought of, he nixed. And vice versa.

“Yeah. We should. The tyke needs a name. I’ve been thinking a lot about it.” He bit his lower lip, and I was momentarily distracted by the cute indentation his tooth made.

“We both have.”

Spike fidgeted with the corner of the handout on breastfeeding, different colors of poop, and the importance of not using a pacifier. Avoiding my gaze, he waggled the flexible paper until he finally bent the corner. He was more nervous than I’d seen him when we discussed names. “And I know I’ve been a right pain about it.”

“Um, yeah. But so have I.”

He took a deep breath and looked me uncertainly in the eye. “How do you feel about the name Asher?” Before I could say anything in response, he said in a rush, “I like what it means: ‘happy.’ You make me so happy, pet. I keep coming back to that. And it sounds... I dunno, like a bit of tosh, but I like that we were both ash at some point and yet, here we are about to have a baby together.”

My eyes filled with tears, and I retrieved his wayward, anxious hand. “We’re like phoenixes.”

“It’s a bloody miracle that we’re even here.”
“And I love the name.” I blinked rapidly to no avail. The tears escaped the defenses of my lower lashes, and I smiled. I’m sure I looked ridiculous, but I didn’t care.

“You sure?” Spike sounded uncertain.

“Surer than sure,” I assured him. A thought came to me, and I knew then that I wanted the answer to be “yes” to my question. “Can his middle name be William? He can be a happy ‘resolute protector’ like his Daddy.”

The tears shone in his eyes, and he squeezed my hand. “Asher William?”

I nodded. “Uh huh.”

“It has a nice ring to it.” He cocked his head. “Are you sure you’d want William in there?”

“Of course. I love your given name.” And I did.

“Okay then.” He leaned over and kissed my belly. “He has a name.”

I laughed, a watery, emotion-drenched giggle. “Can you believe we just named our kid at a birthing class under all these fluorescent lights?”

He chuckled. “Mood lighting not up to your standards?”

“Um, no. Not exactly.”

Spike tilted his head at the other couples, who somehow had no idea that an emotional, very important discussion had just happened. “No one even noticed.”

It was true; they were all either staring at their phones or eating snacks. One mother-to-be was even napping.
“You’d be surprised how many people do that,” the nurse-instructor said with greater kindness than I’d witnessed so far. She paused behind us, wiping her damp hands on a paper towel from the bathroom. “It’s a . . . nice name.” Then, she hustled to the front of the classroom, tossing the napkin in the garbage and bringing her reading glasses from her chest to her nose. “Now, we’re going to all practice diapering your babies,” she proclaimed to the group.

I glanced at Spike, who was back to seething in annoyance. “Ignore her. It’s more than nice. Asher William is a perfect name.” Trying to distract him, I passed him our naked fake baby, dangling the creepy plastic thing from the toe while wiping my cheeks with my free hand. “You go first.”

Spike raised both eyebrows. “I’m thinking that’s not how you hold the baby.”

“We will cover newborn holds after diapering and swaddling. Please focus on diapering your baby,” the instructor said pointedly.

Spike grumbled under his breath and plunked the baby hard on the table. Then, he unfurled the tiny newborn diaper, lifted the baby’s bum, and delicately slid the diaper underneath.

Trying hard not to laugh, my eyes flicked back and forth between my vampire and the nurse, who was glaring at him in disapproval.

Spike shimmied the diaper up through the narrow opening between the baby’s legs. “Sodding legs are unbendable.” Then, he attempted to attach the diaper. He growled, “What the bloody. . . how am I supposed to attach it?” He gestured at the mess in front of him. “We got a defective nappy,” he said a little too loudly.

I reached over with some hesitance and noted, “The, um, diaper’s on upside down.”

Spike clenched his jaw, started to rip the diaper away from the plastic baby, and then, smirked.

Uh oh.

He found the Velcro on the front side, peeled it away, and wrapped the front around the back of the baby. “There,” he said in satisfaction and sat back with his arms crossed and legs spread, his body
language daring the nurse to say something about his diaper being on backward.

Studiously ignoring all the other couples, who were probably staring at us, I patted his knee. “Good job.”

The nurse announced, “Once one of you is done putting the diaper on the baby, the other partner should take a turn. Make sure that in real life, you put the diaper on properly, or you will have a mess on your hands. One tip is to make sure the edges of the diaper fan out. This will prevent leaks.”

Spike unceremoniously stripped the diaper and shoved the little baby in front of me. “Your turn, pet. Hopefully, our son will be more flexible than this chap.”

“This creepy chap.” I sighed, focused on the baby’s navel so I didn’t have to see the frozen eyes, and quickly diapered the baby.

“Now, for the swaddle,” the instructor said with renewed, forced-sounding encouragement.

“I’ll do this one first,” I offered, snagging the blanket. “How hard could it be?” Biting my lip in concentration, I watched as the nurse folded the blanket into some sort of fashion that looked like advanced origami.

“Now, you try.” She listed the instructions again, and I didn’t follow any of it. She might as well have spoken to me in a language I didn’t understand.

I gawked at the blanket, feeling bewildered.

“You know, pet, you have to actually start folding.” Spike sounded very amused, and I was tempted to kick him.

“I know. I’m just thinking about where…”

“Just take the plunge,” he urged.
“There are a lot of steps.” I pushed my lips to one side. Then, I did what Spike suggested, folding one side and then the other in small triangles or was it supposed to be a rectangular flap? Argh. I kept folding and wrapping, and somehow the baby ended up wrapped up in the sloppiest swaddle known to man. It looked way worse than Spike’s Christmas present wrapping.

“Looking good, love. The little nipper is now snug as a bug.”

“As long as he doesn’t move at all,” I said with dejection.

The nurse was inspecting each swaddle. All the other couples got it right, but when she lifted up our faux baby, the covering fell right off. Oops. The instructor didn’t say a word but just shook her head. My cheeks flushed as she moved on. We were so going to suck at this newborn parenting thing.

Spike whispered, “Don’t worry, love. We’ll use the swaddles Crystal suggested. The ones with Velcro.”

“As long as we don’t put them on backward.”

Chapter End Notes

My husband told me no on the epidural, swaddling really is that hard, and the teacher was really that grumpy. My husband said the most helpful class was the newborn care class...ours were divided into four different classes.

Thank you so much for reading and for all the kind support! It means a lot! Small Boat is wrapping up and will probably have 70 parts.
Chapter Notes

Soooo...with the break up of season 12, I'm totally happy to be immersed in my happy domestic Spuffy fic. What better way to be completely immersed but in a Spuffy baby shower?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I slid the burgundy-colored dress over my head and shimmied it down over my wider hips and swell of my bump. I’d tended toward loose fitting, flowy tops and dresses throughout the pregnancy. This particular dress hugged every curve. Biting my lip, I surveyed myself in the mirror from the front, side, and back. My body really wasn’t my own anymore. I was simultaneously proud and a little disconcerted.

“You look beautiful,” Spike said from where he was now lounging against the doorframe of our new bathroom. He looked delectable in his own wine-colored dress shirt, his blue eyes shining and bright. Too bad I felt huge and constipated and uncomfortable.

I was so hot. Why did the New Orleans summer have to be so hot and humid?

“I want everyone to see how beautiful you are carrying our son. Don’t know why you’re worried, pet. You’re glowing.”

“I think that’s sweat.”

Whatever it is, you look wonderful.” He kissed my forehead and then my lips.

“I’m also nervous.”

“Thought that was already a given.” He shifted, and I saw that he wasn’t exactly completely relaxed either. Somehow, that was comforting. “About what?”
“All the people coming. Here.” The baby shower was set up in our new house, the living room decorated, a snack bar set up, and games planned. All the people in our life who meant anything to us were going to be in one place.

He stroked my hair, hair which hadn’t really fallen out all pregnancy. Spike had brushed it more than once and marveled at this miracle. I didn’t need him to brush it, but he liked to, and I loved the feeling of his fingertips grazing over the back of my neck. “To celebrate you and the nugget, pet.”

“And you.”

“Let’s be honest. This is all about you and our son.” One corner of his mouth lifted. “And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“You’re sweet.” I leaned forward for another kiss, which he gladly supplied.

Then, he took my hand, and we headed toward the living room where Dawn, Willow, Crystal, and Carrie were putting the finishing touches on the decorations. In the kitchen, Crystal and Leah were setting up the plates and plastic utensils while Leah’s proud grey horse looked on from his perch on the kitchen island next to the moon-shaped cake. She gave me a little wave as we passed by. Spike tousled her hair, and she grinned up at him.

In the living room, silver and gold stars the size of my palm hung from the ceiling on glittery streamers, and the fan globe was covered in a moon-shaped light fixture so that it looked like it was reflecting light from the sun. There was a station on one of Crystal’s card tables for writing messages for the baby on slips of paper edged with designs from space. Silver and gold markers were stuffed into a black cup covered in moon and star stickers, and a pile of plain white paper plates and other papers were stacked nearby.

At the table by the front door was a giant grey basket with a sign that said, “Please place books here.” Carrie was tucking a lap copy of “Goodnight Moon” and a version of “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” into the basket. Meanwhile, Willow and Dawn were supervising Oz and Xander attempt to hang a banner over the fireplace that said, “Happy Baby Shower” with silver stars separating each word. Willow had her hands on her hips, and Dawn’s arms were crossed as Oz stepped up onto a chair while Xander strained to get his end high enough.

“Hey, Buffy,” Willow said, briefly glancing at me. “We’re almost done.”
“Hey, Buff,” Xander said, adding, “I think I need a chair, too.”

“On it.” Dawn scrambled to grab another chair from the kitchen table. She bumped shoulders with me on the way by. “You look pretty. Love the dress. Sexy momma.”

Rolling my eyes, I smiled with affection at her. “Thanks.”

Carrie approached me with her hands in the back pockets of her jeans, her blonde hair in two long pigtails. “May I show you something?”

“Of course!”

I followed her over to the second card table on the other side of the living room. There were more markers, and on a small canvas, there was a large navy sky with a full white moon that had a smiling face, little craters pockmarking his cheeks. Small yellow stars were scattered all around the canvas. I reached out and touched a star, my hand shaking almost imperceptibly.

“What is it?” I asked. “The moon is adorable.”

“I made it. People write their name on each little star.” She held up one of the stars, showing me the back. “They’re adhesive, so each person can put their star in the night sky. In lieu of a sign-in book. You can hang it in the nursery after the shower.”

“Oh wow. That’s beautiful. I love it. Thank you, Carrie.” I gave her a side hug because with the belly and all.

“You’re very welcome.” She nudged a star across the table in my direction. “You and Spike should put your names on there. Well, maybe not Buffy and Spike. Mum and Dad?”

I laughed. “I like that.” Uncapping a marker and trying to write neatly, I printed, “Mommy.” After fumbling with the back a bit, I pressed the star next to the moon.

Spike had turned up as I finished, and he immediately got it and was soon fixing his own star near mine. “It’s a creative bit of art.” He nodded at the other Slayer.
She beamed and headed toward Xander to offer him an unneeded hand down from the chair.

Willow hurried over, a little skip in her step. Oz was on her tail, hair a dark brown color instead of his natural red. “Hey, my friend. You look all glow-y, and you were worried about the dress. It looks perfect!” Apparently, I’d told everyone about my dress fears.

“I feel a little like a sausage in it,” I admitted, fidgeting with the hem and then the fabric around my hips. “But thank you. And Wil, this is perfect. I’m so excited to see everyone.”

“And nervous,” Wil observed.

I pushed my lips to one side and then gnawed on my cheek. “Am I that obvious?”

Spike placed his hand on the small of my back. “Um, yeah, love. Heart rate’s faster, sweat, cheek biting. No need to be worried, pet. You’ve dealt with much tougher crowds than the one that’s coming.”

“All those annoying Potential girls in Sunnydale,” Dawn said, appearing at my elbow.

“Hey,” said Carrie.

“You weren’t there. And besides, you’re not hogging the shower and all the hot water,” Dawn clarified.

Xander slipped his arm over Carrie’s shoulders. “Don’t forget the Watcher’s Council.”

Squishing up her face in deep concentration for a few seconds, Willow then brightened when she thought of her own example. “Ooo! Those pesky Slayers in Australia a couple of years ago. You know, the ten or so who rebelled – ”

Leah ducked into their circle, her eyes round. “The roaches!”
Crystal joined the group, wiping her hands on a paper towel. “What’re we talking about?” Uh oh.

Leah tilted her head way back, so she could see her mother’s face. “Buffy squished a whole bunch of roaches for me at her old house a long time ago.”

“Ah,” Crystal said with a smile. “She hates roaches.”

“So do I, Lil Bit,” Spike said. I felt him shudder just a little.

The doorbell rang, and Dawn ran to answer it. She peered through the peephole, and then, she swung the door open. To my surprise, everyone seemed to have arrived at once, and all were bearing wrapped gifts. Giles entered followed by George and Emily. Shane and Charlotte were close behind along with Liz, Katie, Kishan, and Michael. Hana and her tweed-loving Watcher even came, and I was amused to see that he wore cowboy boots and a cowboy hat with the tweed coat and Wrangler blue jeans. Behind them, Alex from the Spotted Cat was chatting with an animated Fred-Ilyria, and Angel slouched in last, his hands in his pockets. He gave me a small smile, which I returned.

Carrie directed them to deposit their books in the basket, which was quickly overflowing. Faith had been invited, too. At the last minute, she wasn’t able to come, but she’d sent a gift: a stuffed puppy with the softest brown plush and a Clifford the Big Red Dog book.

Then, people greeted me. I was relieved that Spike stayed by my side, helping me receive our guests. Hugs flowed freely, and everyone wanted to touch my belly, which I didn’t mind. The baby even kicked at Illyria, which made her brown eyes light up. I found myself smiling at and chatting with everyone, my nerves falling away.

Angel continued to bring up the rear, his brown eyes unreadable, and he bent to give me a light hug before holding a hand out to Spike, who hesitated a moment before grasping it. “Congratulations, William. I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks, mate. I appreciate you saying so.” Spike was earnest, the white flag accepted.

“And Buffy, you look,” I could see some unidentifiable emotions warring in Angel’s eyes as he tried to choose the right word. He settled on, “You look lovely.”

“She looks effulgent,” Spike teased, kissing my temple.
I laughed. “Thank you. It’s the sweat,” I joked, a little corner in the back of my heart tugging for Angel, but this time, I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that the feeling was compassion and a faded unrenewable first love. “How’s Connor?”

Angel ran a hand through his hair, his fingers lingering on the back of his neck. “He’s good. A little annoyed that his dear old dad is trying to hang out with him and look after him after all this time. I cook for him, do his laundry. He’s got long hours.”

“That’s good of you. Never too late,” Spike said, kindness in his tone.

“I heard from the Slayer near you that you’re helping her out some.” It was weird to think he was working with another Slayer, but it helped a little to know that she was easily annoyed by him, liked him despite that, and kept him in his place. Alison was kinda like Cordelia that way.

Now, Angel’s smile was unhesitating. “Illyria and I are, yes. It’s been interesting.”

“Being a real boy and all,” Spike supplied.

“Yeah.” Angel inclined his head in the direction of Shane and Charlotte. “Your cousin looks a lot like you.”

Spike crossed his arms thoughtfully. “It’s rather uncanny, huh?”

My sister was standing with one hip jutted out and one hand running through her short tresses as she chattered on to Shane with a big grin on her face. Spike, to his credit, didn’t bat an eye. They’d had a talk prior to the shower, but I wasn’t privy to the content of said conversation.

From over by the fireplace, Willow cleared her throat. “Everyone grab snacks and a drink. Then, we’re going to play games. And everyone is going to participate.” She looked pointedly over at the Watchers, who were clustered together, no doubt chatting about Watcher-related things.

Michael was trying on the cowboy hat, and Kishan was leaning on the breakfast bar, watching the other Slayers, who were giggling about something that young women find amusing. (God, did that mean I was old?) George was staring at my sister talking with Shane with an expression on his face
that I could only describe as jealous but in a very British Watcher-ly way. It would remind me a bit of Wesley crushing on Cordelia, but there was something else in his eyes beyond a crush – something I saw in Spike’s eyes even now.

Giles lifted his plate of snacks in good humor. “Must we participate?”

“We must,” Willow said firmly. “In here. And Buffy, make sure to get food.”

“I’m on Buffy food and drink duty,” my sister announced, leaving Shane and Charlotte and making a beeline for the snacks.

I glanced at Spike and lifted my eyebrows. “You planned this. Was that what you talked about?”

Spike smirked. “Partly.”

“Argh.”

He took my elbow. “The guest of honor should sit.”

Sitting sounded fantastic. “Fine.”

Soon, everyone was gathered in the sparse living room with food and drink; we only had a sofa and the TV. Luckily, we were borrowing chairs from Emily, George, and Crystal, so almost everyone had a seat. Carrie and Xander wove around everyone, passing out a plain white paper plate and a single marker.

“What’s this for?” Sitting cross-legged on the floor by Liz, Hana held up the plate and looked at the top and bottom as if the blank paper product held all the answers.

“A game. You’ll see,” Carrie said. She stepped back from the group. “Everyone have a plate and marker?”

“Erm, I don’t have one,” I said, feeling a bit left out.
“That’s because you don’t need one. You’re the judge,” Xander said with exuberance. Who knew he’d get into baby shower games?

“Oh! Okay. What am I judging?” I held my baby bump with one hand and a piece of pregnancy-safe cheese in the other.

Xander nodded. “Everyone is going to put the plate on top of their head.” He carefully placed the plate on his head as if he were going to walk around the room, trying to balance it in place. “And you’re going to take your marker and draw a picture of something when we say go.”

“What on Earth are we doing?” Giles piped up with an incredulous expression on his face.

“Just do it, Giles,” Willow commanded.

“Fine, fine.” He obediently put the plate on top of his head, and I tried and failed to suppress a giggle as the line-up of Watchers balanced their own plates in a kind of Watcher-wave-of-paper-plates.

Katie and Liz joined in with the laughter, then, plopped their own plates up top. Everyone else followed suit.

“Now, uncap your markers!” Xander said as if he were trying to arouse enthusiasm in a less than animated crowd whose sports team was losing.

“It would have been wise to ready the writing instruments prior to placement of the plates,” Illyria said from across the room next to Angel, both their left hands holding down the bit of paper in comical synchrony.

“Good point,” Oz said.

Xander rolled his eyes. “Everybody lower your plate and uncap your marker. Then, reposition your plates for the race!”
“Can you give us a hint about what we’re drawing?” Dawn asked from next to Charlotte. My sister had not been part of the game planning.

“When I say, ‘go,’ you’ll have 30 seconds to draw a baby on your plate. You have to keep the plate on top of your head. No peeking,” Xander explained with a little too much glee.


“Charlotte, language.” Shane playfully poked his daughter.

With an impish expression, she nudged him back so hard he almost fell over, but he was smiling.

“Ready?” Xander said, holding up his phone to time the game and his opposite arm like he was signaling a car race to start. “Go!” He theatrically lowered his arm.

Trying hard not to laugh, I studied the faces of everyone in the room as they concentrated on the task. My heart was full. These were the people I loved and cared about more than anyone in this world, and they were all here to celebrate the baby. My eyes welled up even as I was smiling, and Spike pushed his leg against mine on the sofa even as he drew his picture.

“And time!” Xander shouted. “Carrie will pick up your plates. Remember what yours looks like.”

Willow popped up next to him and gave them her you-better-listen-to-me face. “We’re on an honor system here, people.”

Spike snorted in good humor, and I leaned over and kissed his arm.

Everyone peered down at their drawing and compared with one another, all talking at once so that I couldn’t really pick out who was saying what. Soon, the plates were all deposited in what was left of my lap.

“Mine has the big ears,” Kishan called. “He’s really cute.”
“No cheating,” Liz protested, mock-glaring at him. She turned to me. “Mine has a bowtie. Sorta.”

“Hey!” Michael echoed her objection.

Katie stuck her tongue out at her Watcher.

Michael turned to George. “How do you keep your Slayer in line so well?”

George regarded him evenly. “Emily keeps me in line. She works harder than I do.”

Emily and Dawn exchanged a look and laughed, but I had no idea why.

“What are y’all talking about?” Crystal asked. Oops again. A much bigger oops.

Oz perked up and glanced at me and then Willow. We both shrugged. Then, he addressed Crystal. “Vampires and demons are real. Slayers – these lovely ladies – stop them from doing various nefarious things.”

“Like destroying the world,” Willow added.

“And their Watchers. . . watch,” Oz finished.

“I’d say we do a bit more than that,” Giles corrected.

My stomach sank, but not very far because it was all squished from my ever-expanding uterus.

“That explains a lot,” Crystal said with an unreadable expression on her face.

Oz grinned. “That’s exactly what I said when I found out.”
Then, Crystal glanced at me with knowing and tolerant eyes. She turned to Leah, who wasn’t looking the least bit frightened. “You know that you’re safe, right?”

“Yeah. Spike and Buffy keep me safe. You and Daddy keep me safe. I’m not worried.” Leah patted her mother on the arm.

I caught Alex winking at Spike. She did know.

Crisis averted, my attention turned to the plates in my lap. I felt all eyes on me. Such pressure! Slowly flipping through the funny drawings with body parts of various sizes and shapes. One baby didn’t even have a body but did have an attempt at a bow near-ish to the head. Maybe that was Liz’s? “Most of these do not look like babies.”

“Yes! But which one is the best baby?” Hana asked.

I started setting aside the ones obviously not in the running and settled on three finalists, one of which I knew was Leah’s because she’d brightened up and bounced out of her seat when I was evaluating hers. “Okay. Three finalists!” I held them up for everyone to see. “Don’t tell me if it’s yours.” No one paid attention. I could totally tell my finalists by their body language: Leah, Illyria, and George. I couldn’t pick Leah’s because hers was just a scribble, but George and Illyria both had babies that looked. . . well, that looked like babies. If I squinted.

Everyone was watching me expectantly, and I gave the drawings another once-over. “This is really subjective, but I’m going to have to go with. . .” Oh god, this was hard. “This one!” I held up the winning drawing.

Fred-Illyria bounced with joy on her very human face. “That one’s mine!”

Carrie swooped in with a prize tucked in a navy paper bag with moon and star stickers all over it. “Here you go! Congrats!”

Leah looked disappointed, but Willow handed her a smaller bag. “Here you go for the runner-up.”

Leah pulled out a stuffed pig, beamed, and clutched it to her chest. “Thank you!”
Illyria opened hers. “Oh, a candle. How lovely. It will go well in my new place.”

“Your new place?” Spike asked.

She nodded. “I moved into a condo near my parents, using the money Fred had left from the law firm.” I was not explaining that one to Crystal and Alex.

Angel shifted forward in his seat. “I told her she should use it. That Fred would be okay with it.”

Illyria clutched the jar candle, gazing down at it. “I think she would be.”

“Especially since you’ve been keeping her parents company,” Spike added. I trailed my hand over his back. He’d gained a lot of his weight back in the last month or so, and I was still relieved he was solid and here with me.

Willow led the group in one more game. We had to name the baby animal that corresponded with each mother. (Who knew that a giraffe baby was a calf and a badger baby was a kit or cub?) Then, everyone wanted me to open the presents, and I, of course, asked Spike to help because I knew he’d want to touch everything and see it up close. It was like my birthday, only with way more packages than I ever conceived of having. Luckily, ribbons, string, and tape were no match for a Slayer... or her vampire.

We ended up taking turns unwrapping presents. Oz sat next to me and typed up names with the corresponding gifts. Willow took photos, and Dawn helped gather up the wrappings and organize everything out of the way. By the end, we were a well-oiled machine.

There was the horse bib along with bottles, a formula pitcher, and a bottle drying stand from Crystal and Leah. The Watchers had pooled their money and given us a huge gift card plus the infant car seat. Katie and Liz had gone shopping together and bought many outfits in various sizes and colors, many with green alligators and other cute creatures on them. There was even a tiny soft alligator rattle. Hana and her Watcher gave us tiny cowboy boots and a grey cowboy hat, which everyone “ooohed” over. Emily and George brought a gift card and vibrating bouncy chair. Alex gave us swaddles of various kinds from the registry along with pacifiers, including the tiny giraffe Wubbanub.

Willow and Oz presented us a cute convertible baby bathtub with loads of bath accessories: washcloths, a towel with a hood that had elephant ears and a trunk, bath toys, a temperature gauge...
shaped like an alligator, and a bunch of the creams and cleansers we’d registered for.

Dawn gave the baby a onesie that said, “My Aunt is the Cool One” and the Nerf Vortex Nitron Blaster. Of course.

Spike grinned, and I rolled my eyes as I held it up the giant toy. “I thought I took it off the registry.”

“He totally needs it,” Dawn replied. “And oh, there’s a gift card tucked in the blaster box.”

Angel handed me only a card, and I shot him a questioning look because there was obviously something stuffed in the envelope besides the card. “From Illyria and me.”

“Thank you.” I opened the card and out fell a gift card and the waffle teether.

Illyria-Fred was beaming. “I had to.”

Spike fingered the tiny waffle through the plastic wrap. “I know. It’s perfect.”

Charlotte ran over with the present from her and Shane. “Here you go.” She deposited the package in Spike’s lap before throwing her arms around his neck and then mine. “I’m glad we’re family.”

Spike squeezed her shoulder. “We are, too.” He tore open the present to find a tiny T-shirt that said, “My Cousin Loves Me” with a tiny blue anchor under the words. There were matching shorts, socks, and shoes along with another gift card. Shane, Spike, Charlotte, and I had agreed they’d call each other cousin rather than sister and brother.

“We got it a little big, so he could wear it longer,” Charlotte explained. “I can’t wait to meet him!”

“Us, too,” I said. Shane and Charlotte were planning to visit after the baby was born, and Willow was toying with the idea of inviting them to the wedding, which was tentatively set for October around Halloween time.

Xander then dragged out a beautifully carved wooden trunk, kind of like the one he’d made me in
Sunnydale for weapons. After he’d positioned it in front of me, he said, “I know what you’re thinking. This is not that. I’m working on another weapons chest for you, but it’ll be childproof. That one’s going to take a while. This one,” he flipped open the lid, “is a toy chest for the baby.” He pushed the lid down, and it sank slowly. “There’s no way little hands are going to get caught in here.”

“Oh, Xander,” I breathed, “it’s beautiful.” My fingers found and traced the carvings on the top. It was a scene from Beauty and the Beast with an intricate castle and a beast in the window of one of the towers, and Belle was dancing in the castle gardens, flowers blooming all around her. On the front and all four sides, there were images from other tales: Robin Hood aiming at something with a bow and arrow, King Arthur pulling at a sword in a giant stone boulder, and the Little Mermaid perching on a rock with ocean waves crashing all around her.

“You like it?”

“I love it,” I said, meeting his eyes so he knew I meant it.

Carrie made sure I was sitting back and reopened the lid. “And there are already toys inside.”

“I see.” And there were toys for different stages of the baby’s development during the first year. “Thank you, guys. It’s very generous.”

Giles brought a book of fairy tales, which he handed to me unwrapped. I opened the cover to find an inscription to the baby. He also had another bottle of whisky, which he slapped against Spike’s open palm. “Save that for when I come to stay with you after the baby is born.”

Spike cast an eye over the bottle and then nodded at Giles. “Will do.”

“W-what?” I couldn’t believe what I just heard.

Giles stripped the glasses off his face and regarded me with gentle eyes. “Didn’t Spike tell you that the reason I bought you this place is so I have a decent place to stay when I visit?”

“He’s coming to stay with us right after the baby is born if you’re okay with that, pet,” Spike explained.
Tears filled my eyes. He really was my only parent. I jumped up, if a tad awkwardly, and hugged my Watcher – also awkwardly. I didn’t care. At all. “I love you.”

He embraced me back and then kissed the top of my head. When he drew away, he was blinking far too rapidly for him to hide all emotion. I knew he loved me, too.

Now that I was standing, I knew I had to make a speech, hopefully, one less grim than the ones I’d made in Sunnydale. Surveying all their faces watching me, I felt a tug in my heart for each person in our house. I took a deep breath and began, “Thank you all for coming tonight. It means the world to me that you are all here to celebrate our son’s upcoming birth. There are new faces and old faces, but each of you is special to us.” I bit my lip to stave off the tears, and when I was sure I was safe, I continued. “When Spike and I started this journey, I thought we were alone; sometimes I thought I was alone. It was like I was on a little boat in the ocean, being tossed by the waves.” At this point, I wasn’t sure what I was talking about – the journey to being a mother or the journey of being a Slayer. “But then, one by one, each of you joined me.” Spike moved next to me, taking my hand, keeping his eyes on me. I saw Xander and Willow’s eyes soften with tears, Giles was smiling, and my sister joined me, tucking her hand in the crook of my elbow. “Thank you. You don’t know how much you mean to me…” I threaded my fingers between Spike’s. “To us.” I inhaled again. “And now? There’s cake.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed! Thank you for all the support!

ETA: I just realized that they all drew really crappy babies...haha. That was not intentional. Promise. I wrote this before the comic came out.
Another night of no sleep

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

“Pet, what are you doing?”

I about jumped out of my skin and almost knocked over the stack of tiny baby clothes, blankets, sheets, and swaddles I was folding. “N-nothing.”

Spike was lounging in the doorway to the vampire-cave, his long black lounging pants low on his hips, his torso bare. “Doesn’t look like nothing what with the telly on mute. Are you watching an infomercial? What’s a Bacon Cup?”

I gestured at the TV from where I sat on the sofa. “It’s the only thing on at three in the morning. And I didn’t want to wake you. So, mute.”

“Doesn’t matter about the sound. You not sleeping again?”

“No.” I shook my head, my eyes welling with tears. I was so exhausted. Between the heartburn, the constant congestion that didn’t seem to want to drain from my sinuses, and fun new daily diarrhea, I couldn’t sleep. I hadn’t slept well in days, and I thought the sleeplessness from the steroid prior to the IVF egg retrieval was bad. Plus, I was so hot, and I thought I was hot in Texas springtime. It was nothing compared with the New Orleans summer heat, which had somehow gotten even hotter in the weeks since the shower.

He crossed the room to sit next to me, putting his arm gently around my shoulders. He picked up a bright red onesie with a smiling crab on the front of it. “What’s this?”


He lifted both eyebrows and regarded me. “Are you nesting, pet?”

“No!” I gave him a playful shove. “I don’t even think it’s a thing. I have no feelings about building a nest of any sort. I just can’t sleep for all the reasons you can probably tell with your;” I wiggled my
fingers in his face, “enhanced vampire senses.” My hand molded into a pointer finger close to his nose. “And don’t even tell me that the lack of sleep is good practice for when the baby is born.”

He raised both hands with his palms facing me, a hint of amusement pulling up the corner of his mouth. “I’m not saying a word.”

“Good.” I picked up the crab onesie and refolded it. I wasn’t about to tell him how I’d set up the nursery, putting up the mobile and arranging toys and books on a wooden bookcase next to the toy chest Xander made. “I love the little clothes.”

Spike wandered over to the other side of the pile of unfolded laundry. He resituated himself and began helping me fold. “Me, too.” He held up the bib he’d picked out at Babies “R” Us. “I still like this.”

I softened at the amazed expression on his face. “I know.” No one had bought it from the registry, so I’d made a special trip to the store to pick it up for him. I’d even bought a backup in case something happened to that one.

“You know, love, I’m going to help. It’s not like you’re going to be up all night alone. And well, I’m happy to take a shift with the little guy, so you can rest.”

I reached over and squeezed his knee. “I’m sorry. I’m just so... this is going to sound really bad. But I’m tired of being pregnant.”

He chuckled. “Over it, eh?”

“So over it. Ready for the little guy to come out already.” I finished folding a swaddle and added it to the blankets pile. “Did I tell you that I’m wiping my bum with baby wipes? Baby wipes!” My nurse had suggested the wipes. “Tmi, but I’m so uncomfortable.”

“What’d the doc say about that?” Spike had worked that evening, so I hadn’t had a chance to fill him in.

I lifted one shoulder. “Apparently, it’s normal. The body’s way of preparing for the birth. Cleaning everything out. I dunno. That’s what Dr. Google said.”
“What’d the actual doc say about the swelling? Blood pressure okay?” He sounded casual, but he asked every time he couldn’t go, and he was concerned.

“Blood pressure’s still good. I’m dilated four centimeters, and she made me do another NST. It was just as uncomfortable as the last one, but baby’s moving well, his vitals are good, and I had the occasional contraction.” At Spike’s alarmed expression, I rushed to add, “But they were rare, and I’m definitely not in labor. She suggested rest because of the swelling. Not that I feel like doing any of the things they suggested for starting labor. Not lots of walking, not spicy foods with this nuclear level heartburn, and definitely a ‘no’ on the sex.” Now, I was worried. The third trimester had not been conducive to intimate relations.

He ran the back of his fingers gently over my upper arm. “Do you remember what I said about that?”

I met his gaze briefly. “That you love me for more than just sex?”

“God, yes, pet. I love you for all of you.” He was gazing at me with such love in his eyes that I couldn’t deny it, and I never wanted to look away from him the way I used to.

“I love you for more than just that, too.” He really was my everything.

“Even when you’re a cranky nesting pregnant lady.” He was highly focused on the onesie he was folding with precision.

I threw a burp cloth at his head, which he grabbed out of the air with ease. Stupid vampire reflexes. Then, he leaned over and nipped at the lower lip I didn’t realize was sticking out before replacing blunt teeth with soft lips.

“I’ll stay up with you, but there has to be something on besides this sodding Bacon Cup thing. Don’t even know if I want to unmute it.” He hunted around for the remote until I located it under the pile of sheets and mattress covers. I slapped the plastic into his upturned palm.

“Knock yourself out.”

I continued to fold as he surfed leisurely through the channels. A few minutes later, he flicked off the
television in defeat. “You’re right. There’s not a sodding thing on that’s worth watching.”

“Told you.” I arranged the folded laundry from biggest to smallest, and I blinked bleary eyes at him. “Should we put on a movie?”

“Sure.” He ambled over to the stack of movies, which had grown and now included a Sesame Street compilation, a Baby Einstein DVD, and the Happiest Baby on the Block, which Spike had already watched and scoffed at. Crystal said the tips were lifesavers. We’d see once the baby was born. Squatting, Spike ran a finger over the titles of our collection. “How ‘bout ‘The Avengers’? Didn’t know we had it.”

“Dawn brought it over from George’s.”

She’d been spending a lot more time with George since the shower. He’d apparently not taken well to her flirtation with Shane, and he’d made a more formal move to ask her out. Dawn had happily taken him up on it. Spike hadn’t said a word about it, which I supposed was better than how he’d reacted to her dating Thomas and her teasingly asking about his cousin.

“All right then. ‘Avengers’ it is.” He removed the disc from the case and slipped it in the Blu Ray player. As the movie booted up, he faced me with his hands on his hips. “Snacks?”

I shook my head. My stomach rolled at the thought of me putting anything into it. “No. Not for me. Maybe some water?”

He passed me on the way to the kitchen and bent to kiss my forehead. “Gonna heat up some blood. I’ll grab you a water. Iced, right?”

“Please.” If I was lucky, he’d even rub a cube on my neck. It really did wonders for the heat. . . for pregnant ladies and Slayers.

As soon as he was rattling around in the kitchen, I heaved myself off the sofa and immediately felt a gush of liquid down my legs. Uh oh.

“Spike!”
Hearing the panic in my voice, he was back in a flash. “Yeah, pet? Oh.” He must have smelled it before I could say anything. “Your water broke.”

I gave him a sheepish grin. “Looks like. Good thing we didn’t buy that rug yet.” The floors were a beautiful wood. Did amniotic fluid damage hardwood? I had no idea.

Spike went into panic mode. “Where’s the bag?”

At the recommendation of the nurse on our hospital tour, I’d packed two bags, one for labor and one for after. “Bags. They’re on top of the washing machine.” The laundry room was right next to the garage.


I shook my head. “I’m fine. Find the keys. And your phone.”

“I’ll hurry.” He dashed off again.

“I’m just gonna go change,” I said more to myself than Spike.

Snagging a dress out of the closet, I hurried into the bathroom and calmly changed clothes, leaving the wet leggings in the bathtub. I brushed my hair and tugged it into a low bun. Pulling flip-flops – the only shoes that fit – over my swollen feet, I scooped up my phone, charger, and wallet as well as some over-the-counter meds and toiletries I used daily. I threw them into an empty cross-body bag. I could hear Spike rushing around and met him in the kitchen where he was trying to stuff his phone into the nonexistent pocket of his lounging pants – the ones that were always in a heap on the floor when he climbed into bed.

“Um.”

He glanced up to see me standing there in fresh clothes with my cross-body bag halfway over my head.
I gave his pants a pointed look.

He glanced down. “Oh. Yeah.” Then, he hurried to the bedroom to change.

While he was gone, I remembered Dawn, who was spending the night at Emily’s place. Fumbling with my bag, I pulled out the phone and zinged off a text. “Baby on the way. Meet us at the hospital after you get sleep. Love you.”

In less than a minute, he was back in the kitchen with me, keys in hand. “You ready, love?”

It was really happening. We were having a baby. Anxiety shot through my chest, mingling with the heartburn. “I think so.”

He picked up my shaking hand. “You got this, pet. I’ll be with you every step of the way.” Then, he held up said hand and slapped a bag of almonds and a fruity granola bar on my palm. “And you’re going to eat a snack in the car.”

I kissed his cheek. “Thanks. I forgot about the no-eating-during-labor thing.”

Chapter End Notes

Next up...the birth chapter! It’s a long one...and is already written. I just need to finish a new chapter before I post it.
The day of labor and the night you were born

Chapter Notes

Just a short little warning that this includes some medical stuff...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

So, all the labor exercises flew right out the window in the waves of painful contractions and the even more painful examinations of my cervix in which my OB pushed her whole hand inside to see how far I was dilated.

A few hours later when there was little movement with the dilation, the OB ordered an IV of Pitocin, which apparently made the contractions worse. The weird thing for me was that I couldn’t really differentiate bad pain from other bad pain. All I knew was that it felt like extremely painful period cramps.

Though Spike was originally pacing the room, his limbs rigid with anxiety, he relaxed with something to do for me, which was to let me cling to him through each wave of pain. The pattern of contractions became familiar, and when I felt them coming, I’d tell him, and he was by my side, following my lead – just the way we did on the battlefield.

Sometime in the morning, my sister arrived, and Spike hurried to the waiting room to retrieve her. She burst into the room with wide eyes and hugs and apologies for sleeping in and missing my text. Spike and I filled her in on all that happened, including the wait, and we sent her home for things we forgot like the nursing pillow and spare cover, the camera, blood for Spike, and a few other odds and ends. She also offered to call everyone else and let them know what was happening and planned to pack her own bag. She wanted to stay with us at the hospital if possible. She gave us a little salute and went on her way.

About six hours after the Pitocin was started, my blood pressure started jumping up high with each contraction. No one really explained, but my nurse came in with more frequency to check on me and check my vitals as well as the baby’s more closely. The baby wasn’t in distress, which was a relief. Then, my OB came in and said she thought it might be good for me to have an epidural for the pain.

“W-what pain?” I asked as another wave overcame me. I clutched Spike’s hand with both of mine and dug my heel into his foot, not holding back with the Slayer strength. To his credit, he didn’t make a peep.
My OB put her hands on her hips and said in a gentle voice, “I think you need it. It’s okay to have a break.”

I felt Spike’s fingers on my forearm. “It’s okay, love. Get it epidural if you want it.”

Blinking at him, I asked, “You s-sure?”

His blue eyes were earnest. “Don’t listen to what I rattled off in that sodding labor class. They have something to ease your pain and help with the blood pressure. Take it.”

With that confirmation, I addressed my OB by nodding. “Okay.”

My OB gently grasped my upper arm. “I’ll let them know. The anesthesiologist should be by soon. Hang in there. You got this.”

I gave her a small smile. “Thanks.”

True to her word, the anesthesiologist, a young Asian man, arrived within the hour. “I’m going to have to ask you to leave, sir. It’s a delicate procedure, and she’ll need to hold very still.”

Spike almost pushed back but seemed to weigh the situation. He cupped my cheek and kissed my forehead. “Be right back, love. I’ll be close by if you need me. Say the word.”

He meant literally say the word, he’d hear me, and he’d come running. I leaned into his touch. “Got it.”

When he was gone but close enough for me to still sense his presence, my nurse helped me sit up at the edge of the bed and spread my hospital gown so that my back was exposed. She held me in place so I wouldn’t jerk or move, and I almost teared up because she was so nurturing and gave me the warmest smile. We waited out the next wave of a contraction, and then, the anesthesiologist started the procedure. Within moments, he was done and the epidural was in place. He taped everything down with tape galore, so it wouldn’t move. Then, the nurse helped me ease back into a lying position. No more standing or walking around for me.
Spike hurried back in and before I knew it, the pain was gone. I could watch the monitor to see the wave of the contraction, but there was no pain – none at all. My blood pressure stabilized, too. Spike and I settled into a wait. We watched at the TV, joked with the nurse, and searched for games for our phones. With some sadness, Spike discovered that Plants vs. Zombies, Part 2 had a delayed release in the United States.

Dawn came back mid-wait with her arms full of the requested supplies and some extras, and I sent Spike out to take a break and drink some blood.

“You sure, pet?” he asked, his eyes concerned but also exhausted.

“Go,” I commanded, pointing at the door with one finger and holding up my cell with the other hand. “My dilation is apparently going very slowly.” I’d stayed at seven centimeters for hours. “You need a break, and I can’t watch you eat. I’m so hungry.” My only option was ice chips, and I was incredibly grateful that Spike had forced me to down the nuts and granola before we got to the hospital.

He nodded at my uplifted phone. “Text me.”

“I will. I promise.”

He gripped his thermos of heated blood. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

After he left, Dawn pulled up one of the heavy chairs and set up the laptop on the edge of the hospital bed between us. Then, she fanned out an array of movies, all rom-coms. “Choose one.” She cocked her head and said lightly, “No snacks but laughs?”

I laughed. “Why not?”

She shook the boxes a little, her blue eyes bright. “Which one? Woman-in-labor’s pick.”

My mouth twisted to one side. “Is that my new nickname?”
“Uh huh. Pick.”

I pondered my five choices. “13 Going on 30.”

“But we just watched that last week,” she complained.

“Why’d you bring it then?”

“I dunno. I was being nice.” She sighed. “13 Going on 30.” She pushed the laptop CD-rom open and pressed the disc in with a click.

Soon, we were watching the movie. Right at the part when the girl enters the closet and time travels to the future, Dawn leaned forward in her chair to stare at me with a mix of fear and curiosity in her eyes. “So, um, what’s it like?”

My eyes still on the screen, I asked, “What?”

“Having contractions.”

I picked up my forgotten pain button. “Like really bad period cramps. With this? Like nothing. My legs are all numb and everything.” I glanced at her confused face. “The epidural.”

She sank back into the chair and began watching the laptop screen again. “Spike let you get one, huh?” She knew all about his initial concerns about side effects.

“He did. Well, it was kinda a suggestion from my OB.” I turned my cheek on the pillow.

“Really? Why?”

Apparently, my blood pressure doesn’t respond well to the pain with the contractions. It goes up a lot, which makes no sense because I’m a Slayer, and while I haven’t been training much, I’m not exactly in poor condition.”
“Oh. Are you okay?” She sounded worried – like worried-about-Mom-dying worried. “Is the baby okay?”

I touched her arm. “I’m okay. The baby is, too. They’re monitoring both of us pretty closely.”

“Want me to find out what they think it is?”

To show her just how un-worried I was, I said, “No. Let’s just enjoy the movie.”

Spike joined us soon after, his face looking less peaked. His anxiety was still there though I could tell he was trying to hide it. “Thanks, Nibblet.”

“You’re very welcome.”

Spike smoothed a cool hand over my forehead, brushing back my hair. “How’re you doing, pet?”

I beamed up at him. “Fine. Join us in re-watching the wonder of ‘13 Going on 30’ that we just watched last week while you were at work?”

“You picked it.” Dawn sounded like the indignant little sister.

I thought Spike would say something sarcastic, but instead, he said, “How can I resist the underdog getting the girl? Took a bit of time traveling into the future, but she wises up faster than some people I know, who are sodding stubborn and shall remain nameless on account of her current state.”

“Hey,” I objected but with a smile.

“Calling it like I see it.” He dragged over a chair so that we were a trio crowded around the movie.

The OB found us with our three heads staring at a tiny laptop screen with the volume on high and 80’s music blaring. Dawn scrambled to pause the movie and shut the computer.
My OB smiled at me, her eyes weary, too, and I wondered how busy her day had been. “How are you doing?”


“Let’s check you out.”


Moving the laptop into her lap, my sister looked at me and then at the OB and then back to me again.

“She has to check to see how dilated I am in a not so fun way,” I explained.

Dawn paled. Then, she stood to her feet and headed for the door to give me privacy. “I’ll just be... out here. Actually, are you okay if George comes to hang out with me? I want to be here, but I also feel weirdly like a third wheel.”

“Totally invite him, but you are in no way bothering me. I want you here.”

She smiled. “Okay.” Then, she slipped out.

“I know it’s no fun. But you shouldn’t feel much this time,” my OB said with an apology in her voice. I really wondered where she found the patience to be so gentle with all of us pregnant women. It was probably her calling... like heckling and staking vampires was mine.

Bracing myself as she did the exam, I realized that she was right. It just felt odd and uncomfortable. After several seconds with her rooting around, I asked, “Any difference?”

She removed her hand and stripped off the glove, stepping back from the bed. “Well, we’ve pushed the Pitocin as far as we can. You’re 9 cm or so, but the baby isn’t dropping. We’re going to try to some positions with your legs to see if we can get him to budge and for you to dilate more. What the nurse will do is try a few different things. You’ll be in one pose, and then, she’ll come in and change
“I think so.”

A few minutes later, a quiet nurse came in, not making eye contact, and she brought a funky metal contraption. All business and not as warm as my earlier nurse, she had me turn on my right side and prop my left leg high in the air. When I asked how long I’d be in that position, she said that she wasn’t sure.

After the nurse exited, Spike heard that Dawn was on the phone outside, so we left her to her conversation. I studied Spike, who was checking texts; I was letting him because I couldn’t focus on my own phone. “Weird position they got you in, eh, love?”

“Yes. Super weird. I couldn’t even feel when she set me up. Is the blood bothering you?” I knew he could smell it.

“Not at all,” he said with sincerity and nodded toward the empty thermos. “My appetite’s sated.”

“Did you hear from anyone?” I tried to peer over at his phone but found that I couldn’t do much of anything. Bending my right arm under my head, I tried to relax.

“Everyone is sending well wishes and good luck. Crystal sent a video of Lil Bit jumping up and down. Want to see?” He already knew the answer was “yes,” so he was adjusting the volume and size. Leah’s happy shrieks filled the room and made us both grin.

Crystal said, “What do you say to Buffy and Spike?”

Leah stopped mid-jump and focused on the camera in Crystal’s hand, “Good luuuuck!” Then, she twirled in a happy circle, her white-blonde hair fanning out around her.

“Aww! She’s adorable. Tell her ‘thank you’ for me.”

“Will do, pet.” He fired off a brief text. “Rupert and Red are in the air, headed our way.”
I lifted my head. “What? Isn’t Willow busy packing?” Instead of buying out our lease, Willow and Oz had taken it over and were scheduled to move in next week.

He lifted an eyebrow at me. “Oz texted. He didn’t mention anything about packing. Assuming she’s just fine with coming and that she wants to be here for you.”

“Oh.” I plunked my head back down on the pillow. “Is work okay with you being here?”

Now he lifted both eyebrows. “They’d better be.”

I smiled at him, tried and failed to shift my leg. “This is way uncomfortable.”

“Worse than . . . you know?” He licked his lips, smirked, and gave me one of those bedroom-eyes looks that drove me crazy – usually when I wasn’t in labor or heavily pregnant.

I rolled my eyes playfully at him. “Yes. Way. At least there was pleasure in the other position.”

He leaned over and kissed the tip of my nose and then dipped close for a gentle kiss. “No pressure for a while, pet. You know that, right?” He was reassuring me about the sex thing again. He needed to stop that.

“I’m banking on my Slayer healing powers stepping up their game.” I thought of something. “Though, there’s no way I’m having sex with Giles in the next room because that would be majorly weird. We have a bigger house, but it’s not that big.”

Spike pressed both lips together. “Is he going to be here that long?”

“You know? I have no idea, but we’re going to have lots of helpers. Lots. Between Dawn and Giles and Willow, we’re going to be good to go.”

“Not a bad problem to have.” Now even Spike was wearing his concerned expression, his eyes round as saucers, no doubt thinking about the house in Sunnydale at the end. There was no way it
was that bad but still. “We’re going to have to kick them out sometimes.”

I giggled. “We’ll send Giles to chaperone George and Dawn on their dates and Willow to go relax at one of Oz’s gigs. At the same time. Coordinated family alone time.”

He glanced up at the ceiling in thought. “Operation: Have Some Bloody Time to Ourselves?”

“Operation: HSBTO…not exactly a good acronym, but it’ll do – ahh, ohhhh.” The pain rolled in again. The epidural was wearing off, and I hadn’t even realized it because we were so busy chatting. An alarm went off, indicating my blood pressure was shooting up again.

Spike was on his feet. “Pet, you okay? Contractions?”

I held out my hand, and he let me grasp it. “Contractions again,” I admitted. “I’m fine.”

The nurse barreled into the room and checked some readings on me and the baby. “Looks like you need an update on your epidural.”

“Yes,” I managed.

“After that, we’ll get you into a new position.” She was still not overly nurturing.

A few minutes later, the anesthesiologist was back with the nurse, and Spike left the room to fill Dawn in. The update was quicker and easier, and the nurse then swung my legs around without really holding onto them properly. It was weird to see my legs bending in ways that usually had some pushback. Another contraction reared its head, and there was no pain.

Spike and Dawn re-joined me, and we commenced with watching the movie. It was a nice distraction. As the credits were rolling, Spike brought out the cards and dealt us a hand of poker. After several rounds in which Dawn kept beating both of us, she received a text from George that said he was in the hospital. She kissed my cheek and practically ran out the door. I couldn’t help but grin at her happiness.

She dashed back into the room a moment later, saying, “I almost forgot!” She rummaged around in
the extra bag of supplies from home, which was on the chair across the room. Pulling out the framed photo of Mom, her, and me that she must have saved from Sunnydale, she plunked it on the rolling tray table and pushed it my way. She made purposeful eye contact with me and said with utmost sincerity, “I thought Mom should be here.” My eyes filled with tears, and then, hers did, too. She wrapped her arms around my neck. “I love you. Don’t die on me having this baby, okay?”

I emitted a half-tearful laugh. “Promise.” I glanced over at Spike, who was watching with a smile on his face. I addressed him. “And I thought you were the only worry wart.”

“You know I’m not,” he said with all seriousness.

“He’s not,” Dawn confirmed. “I’ll be right back, okay?”

“Okay. I’ll be right here, not having a baby,” I gestured at my legs, “and in an extremely awkward position that I’d rather George not see.”

She laughed and darted out the door again.

The OB dodged my sister and smiled as she came in. “Need to check you again.”

I groaned.

“I know it sucks. You’re doing great. I’ll try to make it quick,” she said and motioned to the nurse, who had followed her into the room. They helped rearrange my legs, and then, my OB performed the exam. I watched with expectation, my chest tight with anxiety, and Spike looked just as eager. My OB was serious. “No change.” She pulled back, straightened my hospital gown and the sheets, and left a hand on my knee. Her tone was kind. “This isn’t an easy decision, but you’re not dilating past 9 cm despite the Pitocin, and the baby’s still not dropping. Your blood pressure is not doing well with the contractions, so I’m recommending a C-section.”

Spike reached for my hand, pushing his fingers between mine and squeezing at the tears filled my eyes. So, that was it. No natural birth for me.

As a tear spilled over my cheek, she asked, “What’s going on in your head?”
One shoulder went up. I honestly couldn’t make sense of the jumble of emotions that were washing over me, so I picked something out of the wave and said it aloud. “I’m scared.”

“It makes sense that you’re scared. I want you to know that I’ve done this many times, and we’re going to take good care of you and that baby of yours.” Then, when she saw that I was sort of listening, she explained the details of what would happen next. All I could remember was that they would be giving me an antibiotic and that she had to find another doctor to help her.

She was waiting, and it took me a moment to realize she was waiting for my response. “Okay. Sounds good.”

My OB addressed Spike. “Dad. You’re going to come with me, so we can get you ready. You can come back in after that.”

Spike’s jaw clenched momentarily, and his hand became tighter in mine. I could tell he was thinking about protesting again, but his eyes flicked my direction, and he softened. “All right.” He pressed a firm kiss on my temple. “I’ll be right back.”

“Says you and Dawn.” I was nervous for him to be gone even for a moment.

“I’ll fill your sis in, too,” he assured me.

“Thank you.”

“It’ll be just the two of you in the operating room,” the OB warned.

I nodded. “Got it.” I was now very glad George would be with my sister.

Once Spike and my OB left, the nurse said she would be back with an antibiotic in a few minutes. The next series of events were a blur. Spike came back in with my sister, who gave me another fierce hug for good luck, and we both teased him about the blue scrubs bringing out the blue in his eyes. The nurse unhooked me from most of the machines, and the anesthesiologist came by with the antibiotic, which he injected into my IV after asking if I had allergies to medications. Spike overheard some bustling in the hallway, and he moved toward the door to listen, reporting that he heard them arguing about a missing doctor and having to call another person in to help my OB. The anesthesiologist was the angriest, saying something about how they only had an hour to start surgery
after the antibiotic was administered.

“I’m not too keen on this, pet,” he whispered after he explained what he overheard.

“We said we’d go with the flow, remember?” I said, trying to encourage myself, too.

“When we discussed the flow, it didn’t involve your team getting into a throw down before delivering our son.” Seeing Spike frown with a scrub cap on his head made me giggle. He scowled and crossed his arms. “It’s not funny.”

“That’s not funny, but you are with your blue scrubs over your black... everything.” He even had blue booties on over his Doc Martens.

He smirked at me. “I’d wear anything for my family.”

“Anything, huh?” I tapped my lip with my index finger.

“Don’t get any bloody ideas.”

“Filing that little tidbit away for future use, and I’ll probably tell Dawn. That should make it even more – ”

“No,” he said so firmly that I giggled, the sound a mix of humor and anxiety. He was way too easy.

I opened my mouth to tell him so when the nurse arrived again with a helper. “Time to go,” she said with the same simple blandness she’d shown me all evening.

Then, they whisked me out of the room and down the hall so quickly that I was surprised that I didn’t fall out of the bed. Spike kept up, his jaw set. As we reached the operating room, I heard the fighting. This time, my OB sounded pissed, and she was yelling at someone about getting there and now. I didn’t get more than that before I was suddenly in the room where my son would be born.

Spike had to wait outside while several people in the room set me and everything up. There was a
blue curtain, so I didn’t have to see myself getting cut open and a blanket covering my upper body to keep me warm.

The anesthesiologist was a familiar face, and he explained what he was doing in a very caring tone before shouting, “We have five minutes to cut her!” He meant according to some standards I’d never heard of.

I didn’t even have time to feel anxious because my OB and another doctor, as well as Spike, joined us. Spike’s hand immediately found mine, and I felt relief. There was continued bustle and some things done to me on the other side of the blue shield.

“Thirty seconds, people!” the anesthesiologist bellowed.

The whole room felt thick with tension, and I was holding my breath as my OB commented that she was making the incision. I felt nothing... no pressure, no pain, and then, all of a sudden...

A cry filled the room, and I thought, “That’s our son.” Spike squeezed my hand and then let go, and the anesthesiologist said I did good. All I could focus on were the sounds of my son’s cries. Now, I wished I could see everything.

Time spilled through my fingers like drops of water, and then, before I knew it, there was our son, wearing a pink-striped cap, his face confused and red and wrinkled... and perfect. The nurse placed him on my chest, and I felt his little body against me, alive and real and warm. He was here! I couldn’t say a thing, just closed my eyes and focused on his tiny weight. I felt a cool hand brush my shoulder, and I opened my eyes to find Spike’s bright blue eyes shiny with tears near mine.

“Oh, pet, you were brilliant. He’s beautiful.” With feather-light fingers, Spike touched the baby’s head, and then, he leaned over and kissed me on the mouth.

The anesthesiologist offered to take our picture, and Spike passed over his phone. I didn’t remember smiling, not really. All I knew was that even though I had no idea what happened next, our son was here, and our lives would never be the same.

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to show the tedium of labor...it's not always fast and not always what you hope
for.
The morning after you were born

Chapter Notes

July 25, 2018 was the 40th birthday of the first IVF baby, who was conceived in Great Britain. https://people.com/human-interest/first-ivf-baby-turns-40-people-magazine-louise-brown-birth-1978/


See the end of the chapter for more notes

My eyes opened an immeasurable amount of time later. Blinking, I took in the new hospital room, the monitors, the warmth on my legs, and the IV. Dawn was a sleeping lump on an uncomfortable looking cot to my right, her head denting the pillow.

When I turned my head to the left, I saw that the blinds were shut tight, the hint of the sunrise peeking through the cracks. But the potential danger wasn’t what made me hold my breath. Spike was lounging back in the chair next to me, his arms cradling the tiny bundle of our sleeping son. My vampire was gazing at the life in his arms with such gentle awe. I didn’t want to interrupt the beautiful image of them together by speaking, so I watched them.

Spike, of course, knew I was awake and spoke first, his voice a deep rumble, his usual vibrating energy subdued and calm, his preternatural angles softened. “He’s so perfect. So tiny.” He brushed a finger over the baby’s forehead. “So soft and new.”

I couldn’t help but smile at the sight of him. “He is.”

“How are you feeling, pet? They said you lost a lot of blood with the surgery.” His blue eyes met mine. I could tell he was tired and worried by the strain in his eyes, but beyond the exhaustion and anxiety was something akin to contentment.

Dropping my eyes, I scanned my body. “Tired. Warm. Good. These things wrapped around my legs are so cozy and warm. And the pain meds must be phenomenal.” I regarded Spike again. “I don’t remember much of anything. It’s all a blur.”

“You don’t remember feeding him,” the corner of his mouth went up just a fraction, “or yelling at the nurse to bring you food?”
My eyebrows drew together. “I was hungry. You try not eating for over 24 hours.”

The baby stirred in Spike’s arms. “I think he’s waking. Want to try to feed him?”

I couldn’t wait to feel the weight of our son in my arms again. I fumbled around the controls on the bed and pushed an up button so that I slowly rose. Shifting around, I got comfortable, and Spike held the baby while he passed me the breastfeeding pillow. I snuggled it awkwardly around my waist and then accepted the swaddled baby into my arms. Spike made sure I had hold of him before letting go, and the baby moved more but didn’t cry.

I took the moment to study baby Asher. The first thing I thought was that his name didn’t seem to fit him... not yet. The second thing I noticed, I said out loud. “He has so much hair. And it’s darker than I thought it would be.” I let my fingers touch the soft strands.

“I had darker hair on my father’s side of the family, and your sister has dark hair,” Spike whispered. “Not sure why he has so much though.”

“The heartburn thing is true?”

The baby let out a louder cry, and I adjusted the hospital gown, baring one breast and bringing the baby’s mouth close to my nipple. The nurse had shown me, but like all the other memories, it was a bit blurry. I struggled to adjust the baby’s head just right to get his mouth over the nipple and the feeling of the latch eluded me. I glanced at Spike in panic, and though he looked confused, too, he helped me adjust the pillow and the baby and my breast until at last, I felt a tug and the baby began suckling. Relieved, I awkwardly held the same position in case I knocked him off somehow.

Minutes passed and then anxiety got the best of me. “How do I know if he’s getting anything? And oh, my god, how am I going to do this with Giles in the house?”

Spike was sitting on the edge of the bed, watching us with the same soft expression. “You smell different; it’s the milk.”

“So, I smell like a cow?”
He chuckled. “No, pet. You smell different is all. It’s not a bad smell. Kind of sweet. Cows... don’t
smell good.” I wanted to know how he knew what cows smelled like because the way he said it
made it sound like there was a story behind it, but I’d ask later. Right now, I was focused on the
baby. “And he’s getting plenty. Hear that noise he’s making? And see his throat moving? He’s
swallowing, pet. Remember what we learned? He doesn’t need much. Not yet.”

“He has a tiny stomach. I remember.” I watched the baby for the signs that Spike had pointed out.
Satisfied that he was right, I relaxed back a little, and miracle of miracles, the baby stayed latched.
“What about Giles? I can’t be popping out a boob all over the place when he’s there. How come I
didn’t think about that before we agreed for him to come?”

Hair tousled, Dawn sat up abruptly, rubbing an eye as the blanket fell off her shoulder. “W-what’s
happening? What time is it? What about Giles?”

“Morning, pigeon. Buffy’s fretting about feeding the baby in front of Rupert.”

She shifted her body in our direction, taking care not to topple the cot. “Oh. That’ll be a little
awkward, but I’m sure Giles has seen breasts before. Jenny’s. Mom’s. That other lady that didn’t
stay long. What was her name?”

“Olivia. And I’m actually not one hundred percent sure he saw Mom’s.” I winced at the memory of
what I heard from Giles and my mom’s thoughts. “They did it in the middle of the street on a cop
car. Under the influence of the mystical candy stuff.”

“Didn’t make time to undress then, eh, pet?”

“Can we not talk about Mom and Giles having sex?” I looked around the room for a clock. “How
much time has it been?”

Spike pulled his phone out of his pocket. “No idea, but it’s been enough time to switch. And you
brought it up.”

“No, I didn’t! Dawn did!” I carefully moved the baby around and brought out my other breast. Spike
helped again, but he needed to do less, and the latch was achieved with greater grace.

“I did,” Dawn confirmed and yawned, running her fingers through her hair. “My whole point was
that Giles has seen breasts. He’s not going to freak and run out of the house if he accidentally sees yours.”

“How do you know? He’s Mr. Proper British Guy.”

Spike shook his head. “Never thought I’d say this, but your Watcher – ”

“Has grown on you and now you’re done trying to get a rise out of him?”

He suddenly stared at the sheet covering my legs. “Maybe. Maybe not. If the moment’s right, he’s still an easy mark.”

Dawn swung her legs over the edge of the cot, her eyes sparkling. “Spike is total besties with Giles.”

He looked down his nose at her. “Now, I wouldn’t go that far, Nibblet.” I swear if he could blush, he’d be bright red, and I decided to rescue him for now.

“I should have bought one of those breastfeeding cover thingies,” I lamented. “But I thought it would be too hot.”

“That’s the beauty of online shopping,” Dawn said, holding up her phone. She punched around on the phone before bringing it over to me. “You still have Babies ‘R’ Us gift cards, right?”

“Yeah!” I peered at the browser she was showing me; there were lots of breastfeeding covers. “I should order a couple. Pick me some?”

“Sure thing. I’ll see if there are any in-store, too, and get them for you.” She straightened her wrinkled peasant blouse. “I’m a bit wrinkly, but I guess there’s a benefit to sleeping in your clothes.”

Dawn washed her face and brushed her teeth in the bathroom. Right as she was leaving, Giles and Willow showed up at the same time. And of course, I was still breastfeeding. Dawn gave me a pointed look, and I could tell she was holding back a laugh. Damn it.
Luckily, Asher was finished with his meal and had popped off on his own. As I covered up, he yawned, making a small sound in the back of his throat right before his mouth closed, and I swear it was the cutest thing I’d ever seen or heard. I couldn’t wait for him to do it again.

Willow squealed, realized how loud she was, and lowered her volume to a small whispery “Ooo.” She peered over at him from the side rail of the hospital bed, her fingers curling around the smooth metal. “Oh, Buffy. He’s adorable.”

“Thanks,” I said with a small smile.

“How are you, Buffy?” Giles asked, hanging back a little with a pensive expression on his face.

“I’m good. Tired. I imagine you are, too.” He had to have hopped on the first flight and traveled like a madman to get to New Orleans.

“Yes, but well worth the lack of sleep.” His smile was gentle.

“Want to hold him?”

The pensive expression became one that hinted at fear. “I don’t know.” He paced toward the sink. “I should wash my hands.”

I tried to sit forward and winced. Pain meds would be needed soon. Spike reached over and scooped up the baby with tenderness. As Giles dried his hands off, Spike brought the now sleeping baby to him. Giles held out his arms, and Spike eased Asher in place, moving his hand from the baby’s head last. Asher was nestled safely against Giles’s body.


Giles couldn’t take his eyes from the baby. “Yes, yes. It would seem that I do.” There was reverence in his voice. He slowly searched around him. “I should probably sit.” Spike grabbed his chair and angled it around, and Giles sank slowly down as he continued to soak in the tiny baby’s appearance. “I assume he’s got all his fingers and toes.”
“Counted them myself.” There was pride in Spike’s voice.

“Ah, good then.”

Willow squatted next to Giles, so she could watch the baby sleep, too. “I can’t tell who he looks like.”

“Well, Buffy obviously,” Spike said right away.

Willow frowned stubbornly at him. “You know he’s yours, too. Pratt genes are in this little guy’s DNA.”

Spike softened. “I know.”

“Have you decided whether you’ll circumcise him?” Giles asked.

Spike and I made eye contact, and I shrugged, letting him take this one. We’d had a few heated debates about it after the birthing and newborn care class. “We’ve decided to.”

Spike had initially been against it; he had been circumcised as a young child, but no one ever told him why. He said that it was probably due to inaccurate beliefs about STDs and masturbation at the time. Being circumcised had made him different than his classmates in school, and it was my suspicion that he had probably been bullied, which at least partly explained how he described himself when he was alive and how he’d handled being made into a vampire. It was also my suspicion that Angel and Dru had made fun of him for his difference, too. This made my heart ache for him.

I’d done some research online and talked to my OB, but the rationale was still confusing for me. There were some horror stories online about men who had complications from not being circumcised, but there was uncertain evidence that circumcision helped anything. In the end, our fights/discussions had boiled down to a yes for circumcision, mostly so Asher could look like Spike and prevent anything awful from happening. We couldn’t prevent terrible things from happening in his life, but this was one small thing we could do.

“For a lot of reasons,” I added with a tone that said that was all there was to say.
Giles was unfazed. “You should do what makes sense to you.”

It hit me that this was not what I expected from Giles regarding Spike, regarding Spike and me and us raising a family. The memory of Giles wanting to stay blind to our love, and the memory of him wanting Spike dead were still so powerful in my mind. And yet, he’d championed us trying to have a child via a spell and bought us a house, and he was here now to help and support and love. It was strange, but I wanted so much to embrace it wholeheartedly and without the belief that maybe it would turn around again. Maybe someday I would, and maybe I should accept it for what it was now.

Deciding to change the subject, I asked, “Willow, how’s the moving going?”

“Great. Movers are scheduled, and Oz says he has it all under control, but he is way too laid back sometimes. You know what I mean? And oh. You don’t need to worry about any of this! You just had a baby.” She waved her arms at the room, “Your space of Zen.”

I snorted. “Well, when I get to go home, I’m hoping to find a space of Zen. Like in my own comfy bed. With the crying baby, of course.”

“With the sweetest, cutest, most adorable baby.” Willow squatted down again, gazing with adoration at the baby.

“A baby who needs a nappy change.” A wave of panic crossed over Spike’s face. Diapering and re-swaddling his own baby were apparently very intimidating.

Giles lowered his head and sniffed at the baby’s midsection. “Oh, yes. Good call, Spike.”

“I’ll just page the nurse.” I hunted around under the sheets for the button. “The swaddle they use is really confusing.” Well, it’d been confusing in the middle of the night after the birth anyway, and I didn’t want a repeat of our class. “We need to break out the Velcro ones.” I pushed the button, and a low dingding sound pinged in the distance.

The nurse came right in, her bright brown eyes and wide smile full of positive energy and warmth, a stark contrast to my second labor nurse. “Yes? What can I do for you?”

Giles held the sleeping baby up just slightly. “Nappy change needed.”
“We actually mostly were wondering if you could help us re-swaddle until we can locate the swaddles we brought,” I piped up.

The nurse gently picked up our son and brought him over to the hospital bassinet. “Of course, I can help with that, and I can help again later, too. Once we get your catheter out, I’ll help you stand so you can watch.”

“I’d like to help,” Spike said, watching the baby like a hawk.

The nurse smiled with patience; she must see this kind of protectiveness all the time. “Why don’t you hand me a diaper and some wipes?”

As my vampire nervously went to assist, I was struck by how lucky I was to have a father so willing to jump in. Come to think of it, that’s the way he’d always been – jumping into the fray with me even when I didn’t want him to. Giles was right; I relied on him and had for as long as I could remember. I wasn’t going to take that for granted.

Chapter End Notes

Special thank you to swifthorse on this chapter for her very helpful conversations and collaborative research about circumcision. I really went back and forth on this and read about the practices of William's time. I can see circumstances in which Spike was not circumcised and circumstances when he was - based on what I read about the historical practices. I also interviewed my current IVF mom group and got their opinions on it, including some moms whose husbands are not circumcised (including a woman married to an uncircumcised man who had a horrific experience with a foreskin that would not retract and had to be circumcised as an adult) and got their opinions/reasoning for circumcising or not circumcising their sons. It didn't have to be discussed in the story, but in the interest of making it realistic and also because they are having a boy, it needed addressing. Any mistakes with this are my own.

ETA: I think the only time I was grumpy with the nurses was when they were trying to get me to feed the baby and I was starving at like 3 or 4 AM.
Dawn, Giles, and I arrived at Melrose Mansion after the sun was fully set. Wrapped in his swaddle and a light muslin blanket, baby Asher slept in my arms. Giles was wheeling the stroller with the infant car seat attached, so I could lay the baby down if I got tired of holding him. I couldn’t imagine that. I’d gotten used to the little guy cuddled up against my chest when Spike wasn’t around. I guess you could say the bond was strong now.

“Wow,” Dawn breathed, looking all around the beautifully lit first floor of the mansion that Willow and Oz had rented on the edge of the French Quarter.

We were all staying the night there after the ceremony. The mansion had a California flavor in the midst of the French city, and Willow thought it was perfect because it reminded her of home. She’d shown me photos, and the pool in the backyard was picturesque and the perfect place for the ceremony and reception.

Somehow, the photos hadn’t done it justice. The inside of the mansion was spacious and immaculate with light colors and beautiful modern furnishings, and I could glimpse the twinkling strings of white lights through the windows overlooking the backyard.

I hadn’t seen Spike all day because he’d been working on making sure the bar at the mansion was fully stocked with the special liquor, beer, and wine Oz and Willow wanted, and once he was at the mansion, he’d sorta been stuck because of the sun.

Giles slung the overstuffed diaper bag into the car seat and straightened his suit jacket and tie. “It’s a lovely space.”

“It’s gorgeous. Thanks for your help, Giles.” Asher shifted in my arms but kept sleeping, so I said, “I’m going to go check on Willow. Want to come with, Dawnie?” Willow had asked me to be her maid of honor, and I really had fallen down on the job. She said it didn’t matter because I’d just had a baby, but I had a few tricks up my sleeve that I was excited about.
“Sure!” Dawn was excited to see Willow in her fitted wedding dress; she and Willow had gone dress shopping together, and they’d enthusiastically included me through FaceTime.

I went to try to search through the diaper bag, but the baby opened his mouth and then made a little smacking noise, so I stopped, waiting until he settled in again. Giles and Dawn both watched with me. Then, I asked my sister, “Mind grabbing the bag?”

“Not at all,” she whispered back, heaving the diaper bag over her shoulder.

“I’ll just find . . . Spike,” Giles said more to himself than us before parking the stroller out of the way and wandering off toward the back of the mansion. He had stayed with us for a month after the baby was born, and he and Spike’s bond had grown even stronger. I’d wake up in the middle of the night with my breasts full of milk to find them watching old British television shows together while taking turns snuggling the sleeping baby.

Dawn and I found Willow in the room designated for the bride to get ready. Carrie was with her, helping her arrange a short veil around her shoulders. My best friend studied herself in the mirror. Her white dress was simple and form-fitting with lace sleeves and a cinched, corset-like back that enhanced the appearance of her waist and hips. Her hair was in soft, loose curls, and I could tell she’d been growing it out because the length fell to just past her shoulders. Her cheeks were flushed, and her green eyes were glowing with joy and perhaps a tiny bit of nervousness . . . well, maybe a lot of nervousness. She smiled brightly when she saw us in the mirror and turned, immediately focusing on the baby.

Her finger stroking the edge of the blanket, she sighed in happiness. “I still can’t believe how perfect he is.”

I softened and studied my son. “Yeah. He’s really such a sweet, easy baby.” He’d just turned three months old and was now sleeping through the night. The first time he hadn’t woken up at two or three in the morning, Spike went into an absolute panic and raced to peer into his crib and check his vitals with all his enhanced senses.

“He doesn’t even really cry except when he’s hungry,” Dawn agreed.

“That’s because his daddy anticipates his every need. Benefit of being a vampire.” I wasn’t sure why, but my milk hadn’t come in well, maybe due to the C-section, and we’d had to supplement with formula after a week on the pediatrician’s recommendation. I was sad that I wasn’t producing enough and felt a bit like a failure when Asher lost too much weight, but Spike reassured me that he could smell the milk and that the baby was getting nutrition from me. This had alleviated a lot of my
fears, and Willow had come up with a recipe for lactation cookies with brewer’s yeast. The cookies were really helping increase my supply. Breastfeeding was hard work. No one told you that during the newborn care class, and no one tells you how hungry it makes you. I swear I was hungrier while breastfeeding than during the whole pregnancy.


“Thank you,” Willow said brightly. “I’ve been feeling kinda anxious, but not in I’m-worried-about-my-future-with-Oz kinda way. I set up wards around the mansion. George is overseeing those, so I don’t have to worry about them. And although it’s probably bad luck, I’ve been in touch with Oz all day. Neither of us is freaking out or ditching anyone. He keeps sending me funny texts – photos of Devon in silly poses while they get ready.” Devon was going to be Oz’s best man and was going to DJ the evening’s reception.

I could tell from her eyes and the wrinkle between her brows that she was more nervous than she was letting on, so I reassured her, “First of all, you don’t have to be anxious. We haven’t broadcast the wedding to a bunch of demons, and you haven’t been wreaking vengeance for over a thousand years. So, the odds of someone coming out of the woodwork to hurt you are slim. And second, you’re a lot older, sure of yourself, and know what you want. You’re not barely twenty or twenty-one and just starting out in life. Neither is Oz. Third of all, you guys have been through a lot together and based this relationship on friendship. You have the whole package . . . love and passion. And you’re best friends.”

She bit her lip, the tension in her eyes easing and her shoulders lifting a little. “You’re right.”

Dawn, of course, knew exactly where Willow’s fears lay, but Carrie had no idea the subtext of the conversation. Still, she had a thought. “I know there’s a lot I don’t know, but I do know a little about Xander and Anya. Buffy’s right. The way Oz looks at you and the way you are with one another . . . I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”

“See. You don’t,” Dawn added, pulling the diaper bag off her shoulder. She glanced at me. “Gifts?”

“Oh, yes!” I agreed. Presents would distract my friend.

Dawn pulled out the small bag I’d thrown the gifts into earlier and presented it to Willow. She blushed and accepted the package. Pulling out the tissue, she found the powder blue garter first.
She laughed. “What’s this?”

“That’s your something blue and new. You didn’t have one, and it’s a tradition or so I’ve heard,” I explained. I hadn’t been to many weddings.

Carrie helped Willow pull it on over her sparkly sandal. Then, Willow tugged it up under her dress. “It’s perfect.” She brought the small box out next. “What’s this?”

I grinned. “Your something old and borrowed.”

Willow tilted the box lid back. “Ohhh. They’re beautiful.” She touched one of the simple white freshwater pearl studs.

“They were my high school graduation present from Mom. Her mom gave them to her at her high school graduation.” The earrings were one of the only things we’d saved from Sunnydale beside photos.

“Much better than these cheap sparkly things.” She gestured at the rhinestone earrings she was wearing. “Thank you.” Her eyes suddenly welled with tears.

That was not the reaction I was expecting. “What’s wrong?”

“I—I’m so grateful for all of you.” She glanced at all three of us and even the baby. “You’re my family. But part of me wishes my mom was here.” Now that, I totally understood. Even though Willow’s mom was awful toward her, this was one of those milestones we’d talked about. She hadn’t heard from her parents since they’d ditched her in Sunnydale during the year of the First Evil.

Dawn swooped in and gave Willow a long hug, and I took her hand and squeezed. Asher really was a baby roadblock to hugs. I was still trying to figure out how to maneuver with him in my arms.

“Makes total sense to me,” Carrie said softly. “My mum hasn’t been in my life in a long time either.”

Asher made a snuffling sound in his sleep. “Don’t worry, baby. Mommy’s not going anywhere,” I whispered.
Willow laughed through her tears, which she was trying to blot up with a tissue before her mascara ran. Then, she touched the baby’s soft head. His initial dark hair was falling out, so he was half-bald. “We’re going to make sure he’s surrounded by love.”

“Um, guys, what time are we supposed to be out there?” Dawn asked.

We’d run a little late gathering up stuff for the baby. Really, it was so hard to leave the house now. I swear that I packed everything but the kitchen sink in case we needed it for the evening. The pack-and-play was in the car for our first overnight away from home, too.

“Oop.” Willow sniffed and glanced at the clock on the wall. “Now.” She pulled off her earrings and slipped on the pearls. “They really are perfect.”

Then, we hurried out toward the pool area where the ceremony was taking place. Xander was grinning by the door, waiting to walk Willow down the aisle. Dawn eased the baby out of my arms, and Carrie handed us bouquets of flowers. Then, my sister and Carrie headed to join the guests. I enveloped my friend in the big hug I’d wanted to give her earlier. Xander joined us, wrapping his arms around us both.

Drawing back, I smiled at my two closest friends from Sunnydale. “I love you both. And I’m so happy for you, Willow. Oz is a keeper. Let’s go get you married.”

“Love all around.” Xander kissed the redhead’s temple.

Willow returned my expression as Xander took her arm. “I love you both, too, and I know how lucky I am.”

Music began playing – not the bridal march or Pachelbel Canon, but some beautiful old song that one of the witches in the coven from Falls Church wrote and was performing. That was my cue, so I headed out the doors to the small set up by the pool. As I meandered toward the witch, Stacy, who would marry Willow and Oz, I smiled and took in the guests. I glimpsed Katie, Liz, Kishan, Michael, Carrie, Crystal, Leah, and Alex. Dawn was sitting between George and Giles, who had relieved my sister of the baby. There were also friends of Willow and Oz who had traveled in from out of town. I couldn’t wait to meet them all. I didn’t see Spike but didn’t let myself frown. I knew he was here somewhere. I felt his reassuring presence in the familiar tingle at the back of my neck.

Dressed in navy tuxes, Oz and Devon were already standing near Stacy. They all smiled at me, and I
nodded at Oz before taking my place on the left. The music shifted then to a lilting happy tune that heralded Willow’s entrance. I couldn’t help but glance between her and Oz and grinned at how they stared at one another with such love and adoration. When Willow reached the front, she embraced Xander, who moved to take a seat next to Carrie. Then, Willow took Oz’s hand in hers, and he kissed her cheek.

When the couple was situated, Stacy began the ceremony. There were the traditional vows and a devotion spell and a wrapping of hands, and to be honest, I didn’t pay attention to the details – just the beauty of my friends loving each other and making a lifelong commitment. I had no doubt that they were both going to be very happy.

The ceremony ended with an exchange of rings, and in the one bit of Jewish tradition, Oz stomped on a cloth-covered glass with his right foot, shattering it.

We all shouted, “Mazel tov!” as they both grinned at one another and kissed, her hand caressing his cheek.

As everyone applauded, I scanned the crowd, searching for Spike. I knew he was there, but I couldn’t find him.

Willow caught my pensive expression and held her hand up to silence the crowd, and Oz motioned everyone to sit back in their chairs. As everyone quieted, I glanced at my friend in confusion, but she merely said quite loudly and with faux irritation and a half-frown/half-smile, “Buffy’s looking for Spike!”

With a broad grin on his face, Xander popped up in the audience, “Right! She needs him.”

“Wait. What?” I was so confused. This was so not about me. This was about Willow and Oz. What was happening?

Willow beamed at me; she didn’t seem to be able to fake feelings anymore. “Well, fine! Why doesn’t she just go marry him?”

Spike appeared from the reception area, wearing his own navy tuxedo, something I’d never imagined him wearing, but he looked so handsome, I didn’t care. His blue eyes found and held mine, and he smiled at me with so much love that my heart thundered in my chest. When he knelt in front of me and took my hand, the tears spilled over my cheeks. He kissed the back of my hand and looked up at
“Don’t cry, pet. I love you.” His words were a nervous whisper, and I nodded my “okay.” Then, he said with a slightly greater volume, “Just say, ‘Yes,’ and make me the happiest man on earth.” I laughed through my tears; he’d said the same words so long ago that I’d almost forgotten them. I gently kissed him and then drew back to give him my response. “Yes. A thousand times, yes!”

The crowd cheered.

Spike stood and pulled me into a tight embrace, ignoring our onlookers as if we were the only two people in the universe. I inhaled his familiar scent and sighed with contentment when he laid his head atop mine and rubbed a small circle at the base of my spine. I was going to marry my person. Somehow, my mind couldn’t compute. Was this real?

He released me, and I opened my eyes to find Dawn standing next to me. “May I be your maid of honor?”

I was even more confused. “Huh? Of course!”

“Come on then!” She grabbed me by the hand and hurried me back down the aisle.

I peered back at Spike who smiled and nodded. “What is happening?” I whispered at my sister as we made it through the doors of the house.

“You can’t wear a navy swing dress to your own wedding,” she chirped.

But the navy swing dress covered my baby belly. I’d healed quickly from the C-section thanks to Slayer healing powers, but the belly with its stretchy skin and dark linea nigra, well that was something that didn’t just instantly go away. Swing dresses were my friend.

Willow and Oz joined us, holding hands, and Oz smiled. “She’s right.”

“That’s why. . .” Willow hurried to the hall closet and opened the door, producing a simple, strapless white wedding gown. In many ways, it was an echo of Willow’s with the cinched back and lace overlay.
“Oh, my god.” I didn’t know what to say.

Dawn fidgeted with anxiety. “Is it okay?”

“It’s just so fast!” I was having a hard time processing. “And it’s not my day.”

Willow held the dress back. “We want to share our day, . . . with you and Spike, and Buffy, he wants to marry you. He asked us how we thought he should propose, and we encouraged him.”

“H-how long?” The question came out of nowhere. I wasn’t making a lot of sense.

“Since we got back from Texas,” Oz said, his hands stuffed in his pockets. He looked so serene – so perfectly Oz.

“Since the day they got engaged and we registered for the baby,” Dawn added.

Giles burst through the door, appearing a bit flustered with his glasses in one hand. “I’m ready!”

“Ready for what?” I asked dumbly.

He donned his glasses and made direct eye contact, his expression tender. “To walk you down the aisle, Buffy. You asked me.” He shuffled his feet, and his eyes flicked away. “I mean, I know it was long ago, but you’re like a daughter to me. I-I would be honored.”

I flung my arms around him, which was decidedly less awkward without the baby in my belly or in my arms. “Oh, Giles.”

He grunted as I squeezed him a little too hard. He gasped, “I take it that’s a ‘yes.’”

I let him go. “Oops. Sorry. Yes! I mean, please walk me down the aisle.”
“Does that mean –?” Dawn let the question trail off.

My heart squeezed as I thought of the vampire waiting for me. “If you’re okay with it –?” I asked Oz and Willow.

“Yes! We wouldn’t have it any other way!” Willow strode forward and took my hand.

“Yay!” Dawn said with giddy excitement, her blue eyes bright.

“Wait. Where’s Asher?” I asked as I let Willow lead me toward her dressing room.

“Don’t worry about that. Someone special is taking care of him,” Willow said as we entered the room. “Dawn, fire up the curling iron and bring me my makeup bag.”

“Aye aye, captain.” Dawn saluted as she hurried toward the bathroom.

My mouth twisted to one side. “What’s wrong with my makeup?”

Thirty minutes later, I was wearing the beautiful dress, my hair was down and curling around my shoulders with a few strands up on each side and held in place with my new hand-beaded hair clip, and my makeup was completely redone. Dawn loaned me the pearl drop necklace that Mom had given her, and I wore sandals that matched Willow’s on my feet because heels hurt my feet since the baby was born (oh, the irony that my chunky boots were still in storage). Under the dress, I had a pair of Spanx thanks to Willow, and between that and the corset back to the dress, the remnants of my baby belly were well hidden. I tried not to cry as I stared in the mirror. My cheeks and eyes seemed lit from within, and I looked more alive than I’d looked in three months. Somehow, I didn’t think the light was from the makeup job.

Willow passed me a tissue and gave me a side hug. “Let’s go get you married.”

I shook my head at our reflection and felt the déjà vu of the scene. “Is this real?”

“Yes, it is!” Willow loaned me her bouquet and gave mine to Dawn.
“I love you guys,” I said softly.

“We love you.”

Before I knew it, music was playing, and Dawn glided down the aisle in front of me and Giles. My hand was tucked in the crook of Giles’s arm, his warm hand firmly atop mine, and as we stepped out together, Leah popped up from the left followed by a beaming Charlotte. Charlotte was here! Where had she come from? Willow and Oz didn’t know Charlotte and Shane and hadn’t invited them to the wedding – or so I thought. I glanced to the left and saw Shane with a smile on his face as he cradled a now awake baby Asher, who yawned and blinked at me. I returned Shane’s expression, and he nodded at me. There were a lot of knowing nods here tonight.

Leah suddenly hugged my legs to get my attention and then held up a basket of red rose petals. Looking to Charlotte for permission, the younger girl bounded up the aisle, tossing handfuls into the air as she went and slowing down only with Charlotte’s gentle restraint. I couldn’t help but grin.

Spike waited for me with a fierceness in his eyes – his only marker of nervousness, and I couldn’t wait to slip my hand into his to reassure him. Xander stood to his right with a blessing in his eyes. Giles kissed the top of my head and released me.

As I wrapped my fingers around Spike’s, I took in the strange man in judge’s robes standing in front of me. He was an older gentleman with sparkling brown eyes, who somehow looked a little familiar.

He smiled at me and said quietly so only Spike and I could hear, “I’m Judge Durbin, and I heard the two of you wanted to get married. I usually do this in the courthouse, but your soon-to-be husband was quite persuasive. We’ll sort out the paperwork after the ceremony; it’s a little backward in terms of the typical protocol, but I am in charge, so...” Alarm ran through me. What had Spike done?

“Don’t be concerned. I do weddings of this sort all the time. I used to reside in Sunnydale, after all.”

My mouth fell open in shock. “Oh?” What was he talking about? Demon marriage?

The judge offered no other explanation, instead spreading his hands toward everyone and announcing the start of the ceremony.

Again, the words were a blur, and Spike and I grounded each other through each step of the traditional exchange of vows. I couldn’t stop peering up at him and staring into his eyes. No one had
ever loved me the way he did, and I hoped that my eyes were shining with the same love back because I felt almost overwhelmed by the emotion.

Then, Dawn appropriated my bouquet, and Xander passed Spike two rings, platinum with a beautiful filigree design etched into each band. The metal felt cool and right as Spike slipped the smaller of the two over the knuckle on my left ring finger. My hands were shaking as I put his on for him. As soon as his ring was on, he twined our fingers together and held me steady.

When Judge Durbin pronounced us man and wife, Spike’s lips captured mine in a passionate kiss, and our friends and family clapped and hooted again in joy.

As with everything, Spike and I had done things a little bit opposite of the norm. I wouldn’t trade how we did it for the world. I was married to him, we had a beautiful son, and we were surrounded by friends and loved ones.

My heart had never been so full.

Chapter End Notes

Surprise!

Four lines of dialogue from "Something Blue" are used here.

And this is the second to last long chapter. I'm so sad, y'all.

I also fixed an error with Dawn's hair in the last chapter. She has a bob!!

The venue is an actual wedding venue in New Orleans, and Judge Durbin was also in Taking Chances. There’s a little nugget for Green in this chapter, too.
Epilogue 1: Two Years Later

Chapter Notes

One last big issue that I wanted to address was that the feelings regarding IVF and what a person goes through don’t end with the birth of a healthy child.

And what do you do with the healthy embryos you don’t or can’t use?


See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Two Years Later

Lounging on the floor, Spike was reading a book, or well, he was pretending to read a book because said book was a giant version of “Good Night, Moon,” which was open and upside down on his lap.

From across the room, a little voice was singing a nonsense song. “Ah, doot-do-do. Ah, doot-do-do. Ah, doot-do-do.”

From the doorway, I watched from the recliner with a bemused expression on my face as our chubby-cheeked toddler ambled around the very messy vampire/playroom, his hands on his thighs as he pretended to ignore his Dada.

“Gumbo smells delicious.” Even in another part of the house, the scent of one of my favorite dishes filled the air; Spike had been cooking while I was at work.

“The witch and wolf are coming over in a few with Sophie.” Sophie was their one-year-old daughter; Willow had been very grateful to not be pregnant with several at once. Spike lifted an eyebrow at me. “How was patrol last night? And work this morning?”

“Ah-doot-do-do.”

We hadn’t spoken because Spike worked last night, and I’d needed the sleep to open the coffee shop after the slayage last night. “Good. Emily and I did most of the heavy lifting while Katie and Liz were bait.” (They hated being the bait; they even drew up a petition against being the bait. This made
me and Willow laugh and laugh, especially because Kishan, Michael, and George were so annoyed.)

“Huh. Like for Dru?”

I twisted my mouth to one side. “Sorta. But not.” He was referring to the time his ex came to town when Asher was an infant.

He studied me. “There’s a story in there, eh?”

“Ah, doot-do-do.”

“Yeah. But for during naptime. Stupid slippery hellmouth. And Crystal says, ‘Hi.’ Leah sent her latest horse drawing for Asher.” In the past year, Leah had been back to spending Friday nights with us. She and Asher were quite close – almost closer than she and her brother, which Crystal was amused by. I nodded toward Spike’s lap. “Good book?”

Spike smirked as Asher, who had stealthily edged his father’s way, suddenly pounced on him with a loud, “Ha!” Spike threw the book aside and scooped our son up, holding him high and then lifting him up and down in rapid succession so that shrieks of childish laughter filled the room. Spike’s chuckle wove with the sounds of joy, and I couldn’t hold back then, rushing to join my family on the floor. Spike let Asher rest on his chest with his little arms and legs hanging over the side.

Asher’s green eyes lit with happiness as I tumbled to the rug, and he lifted his small head for a kiss, which I gladly deposited, inhaling the sweet scent of babyhood that still lingered though he seemed to grow bigger every day. He made a smacking noise into the air like the sound of a kiss in return.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hi!” Asher replied. “Mama,” he labeled me. This was only recent – his recognition that the words he’d been saying for months applied to me and his dad as separate entities from himself.

“I am your mama.” I nuzzled my nose against his tiny one. “I love you.”

“I youuuuu,” he crooned with a big smile. Then, he pushed himself up as I dragged a pillow off the
sofa to prop up against. Climbing off Spike, Asher retrieved the cast aside book, flipped it around so it was right side up, and opened the first page, studying the illustrations in quiet contemplation. He reminded me of Spike when he did that. It wasn’t me that was the lover of the written word, and Spike spent hours reading to him. Books were one of the only things that slowed his seemingly infinite toddler energy.

I stroked my son’s soft curls – the honey-blond curls he’d gotten from his father. “I can’t believe he’s two.”

Spike gazed at his son in adoration. “Two years went fast.” I figured a year must go incredibly fast for someone his age because the years were definitely going faster for me in my thirties.

There was the sound of the board book scrapping over Asher’s pants as he turned the page.

I glanced at Spike. “Are you glad we did it?”

His eyes were filled with curiosity. “Did what, love?”

“Had him? Did IVF? The whole thing? It was a lot, you know?” I sometimes wondered if having our son turned our lives upside down in a way that made him miss the way we were before – going on all-night patrols together, eating out at restaurants, having sex whenever and wherever, traveling the world on missions. We had our nights out, but they were often separate or with our son in tow. “And I sometimes wonder if – ”

Spike interrupted me, “No regrets. I can’t imagine us being without him.”

“Oh.” I smiled at him. “Me either.” I bit my lip as Spike watched me. My eyes moved to the baby’s small neck as his head bent over, absorbed in his task. Love filled my heart, but something else niggled there, too. Asher turned the page again to the images of the kittens and mittens.

“Penny for your thoughts.” There was something about the way Spike said those words that made my eyes mist over.

I shrugged one shoulder. “Our other embryo.”
Spike sat up and moved closer to me so that our hips were touching; my body came alive at his touch the way it always – still – did. “What about him?” He nudged my arm with his.

I placed my hand in his upturned, offered one. His cooler skin was my comfort. “Are we doing the right thing?” We’d talked about it before, but there was a place in my heart that ached when I thought of that potential little life still frozen in Colorado. To the outsider, they were just a bunch of cells, but to me, they were a human life – our other baby. Though our love might be endless, the realities were a bit different. For one thing, we couldn’t financially afford another child. We’d also talked about how we couldn’t bring another child into this crazy life we led; we were doing good to keep our one little guy out of the hands of never-do-wells who might harm him. The last two years had taught us that. Still, I was continuing to pay the embryo storage fees and would for the foreseeable future. Who knows what the future would bring? My sense was that our family was complete, but I certainly never really expected to be married to a vampire I adored and to have a precious son with said husband.

Spike’s thumb stroked the soft spot on my hand between the thumb and index finger, and I laid my head on his shoulder. “I think so? And if it makes you feel any better, you’re not alone.” His voice was soft and deep with emotion, and his response told me that he understood what I wasn’t saying, too.

Asher clapped the book shut and twisted around to face us both. His expression was priceless; I could tell he was trying to understand what he was seeing and sensing from us. With his hands braced on the ground, he stood up, bottom in the air first. Then, he walked slowly toward us until he couldn’t go further because we were so close together. With abruptness, he turned and plopped down on us both, leaned back to make sure we were both watching, and giggled with joy.

I laughed, and Spike lightly tickled our son’s tummy so that the giggles were half-real, half-fake.

The doorbell rang. Spike reluctantly moved away from our family snuggles. “That’d be the company. I heard the car, and now I hear Soph.”

“You hungry, my little bunny?” I asked as my stomach growled, and I emulated Spike’s movements.

His eyes brightened, and he popped up. “Eat?” He held his arms up. Eating was never a problem with Asher; Sophie, on the other hand, had acid reflux, and Willow was worn out. It’d been all over her face last night; still, she’d made the most of getting out of the house even if it was to help us with Slayer business.

I scooped up my son, his small body wedged against mine as he wrapped his legs around my hip.
“Let’s go see little Sophie!”

“So!!!” Asher cried out. That was the best way he knew to say her name.

“Remember to be quiet if Sophie’s sleeping.” I lifted my index finger to my lips. Spike had heard the baby, but babies, as we’d learned, were sometimes notoriously loud sleepers.

Asher looked at me with wide eyes and copied my finger movement. “Shhhh.”

I nodded sagely. “Shhhh is right.”

We headed into the living room where Spike was holding the front door open and standing in the shadows to avoid the late afternoon sun. A redhead Oz was carrying the newborn car seat with the shade up but no cover. A bag with the folded-up pack-and-play was slung over his shoulder. Summer in New Orleans was too hot to cover a baby with one of those car seat covers.

“Hey, Buff. Ash.” Oz gave my son a nod and half-smile, and Asher grinned.

“Hi,” he greeted Oz, the syllable starting loud and ending soft as he remembered. “Shhhh.” Asher loved the werewolf, especially when he intentionally sprung a few wolfie hairs and made faces at him. Oz’s control over his wolf these days was astounding. He thought his wife was powerful, but I thought he didn’t give himself enough credit.

A diaper backpack strapped on, Willow found her way inside, and Spike swiftly shut the door. “It’s okay, Asher. Sophie’s wide awake. She’s waiting for her bottle.” (Willow was exclusively pumping, which probably also contributed to her exhaustion, but also gave her some freedom as long as she scheduled pumping outside of the-need-for-magic-assistance time.) Oz continued, “Where’s Snowball?”

Our white, short-haired cat shied away from Oz; we weren’t sure why other than maybe his wolfyness. Spike shrugged. “She’s probably under the bed in our room or in Asher’s closet.”

“Good. Poor cat.” Oz easily moved his fingers around like he was twirling a baton and revealed the bright-eyed Sophie. She had Willow and Oz’s scarlet hair, fair skin, and Oz’s blue eyes. She gurgled at us.
Asher made a noise to indicate he wanted down, and then, he ran over to the baby, came up short, and lightly touched her waving hand. “Hi.”

“He’s so sweet, Buffy. Very gentle,” Willow observed as she gave me a brief hug.

“He’s had a good role model in the lil Bit.” Spike shook hands with Oz.

“He means Leah,” I clarified.


I gave Spike side eye and lowered my voice. “She’s actually hanging out with Shane.”

Spike, of course, heard me and rolled his eyes before scooping Asher out of my arms. Our son practically launched himself into my husband’s embrace.

“Gonna borrow the microwave,” Oz said, tugging the diaper bag off Willow’s shoulder, so we could continue our conversation. “Feed Sophie.”

“Thanks.” Willow kissed her husband’s cheek and watched the guys head into the kitchen before turning back to me with shining eyes. She loved the juicy gossip. “So, she’s hanging out with Shane now?”

“I think she was serious about playing the field. She and George haven’t been together in a while; I don’t think he’s dropped his candle for her, but they have an understanding. And Shane and Charlotte just got here.” Shane had taken an English teaching job at Tulane; Shane and Spike had grown very close, and they were each other’s only family in the States. Charlotte was newly enrolled in one of the city’s best private schools. Dawn had finished her master’s degree, lived in her own apartment in River Ridge, and was working as a communications consultant at a local hospital. She was often called in to deal with the supernatural cases – demons who came in for treatment. Her niche was growing, and she was considering going back to school for a degree in counseling. In her spare time, she and Willow were still working on her portal-opening skills.

“Poor George. How’s Spike taking this more serious turn with Shane?”
I wasn’t sure how Spike was taking it, and I wondered if he and Shane had discussed it. No doubt they had because my husband was being way too blasé about it. “I think Dawn has made her intentions clear. She’s not ready to settle down.”

“You do realize what this means.” Willow frowned, her emerald eyes big.

I laughed at her aghast expression. “What?”

“We’re officially old.”

“But no longer waiting for the other shoe to drop. When it comes, it comes.” Somehow, despite my constant worry about my son (as was a mother’s prerogative), I didn’t freak out as much about the rug being pulled out from under me. There would be scary times, but I’d been through enough of them now to know that we’d make it through and that I wasn’t alone in having to deal with them.

Willow bobbed her head once. “Right. We got the shoe drop-age handled as long as we have each other.”

“I like this infinitely better.” I hooked my arm in Willow’s.

“Me, too. And in other news, Xander texted me photos. You’ll never guess what of.” Willow held up her phone and jogged it awake.

“Lemme see!” Willow pulled up the texts, clicked on a picture, and passed me the phone. I scrolled through them: beautiful photos of a variety of engagement rings. “He’s finally doing it.”

“Getting engaged again. I never thought he would. It took him so long to get over Anya.” Willow poked at the screen even as the cell was still in my hands. “I love that one. It reminds me of Carrie for some reason.”

“Ooo. That’s gorgeous.” Looking at diamond rings reminded me that Spike hadn’t bought me a traditional engagement ring; I really didn’t care. All that mattered was that we were together. My heart beat a little harder with love for him.
Said vampire poked his head around the corner. “You birds coming? Gumbo’s ready.”

“Yes,” I said, smiling at him and feeling that familiar desire to take him where he stood, no matter who was around. I could control myself – for now.

Sophie let out a screech, and Willow disentangled herself from my arm and hurried toward the kitchen, bringing her phone with her.

As I approached Spike with my arms outstretched, he drew me close, kissing me full on the mouth and letting me know with his movements and the way he lingered that he knew what my body was telegraphing. “Later, pet,” he growled so low I could barely hear him.

“Sooner than later,” I returned, gazing into his brilliant blue eyes, which echoed my desire.

“Mama!” Asher called, straining to see me from around the back of the highchair where he perched. “Gum-o! Eat!”

I laughed; I seemed to do that a lot these days. “We’re coming!”

Chapter End Notes

A short letter will follow...later this week. Thank you so much for all your support with this fic! It means a lot...you don’t even know how much!
Epilogue 2: Dear son

Chapter Notes

I've been procrastinating on posting this last part...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dear son

So, you turned eighteen today, and I've spent the better part of the past weekend reading over what I wrote over the first year of your life. I was nervous about revealing too much when I started, but I think by the time I finished the story, I'd relaxed into the writing. I didn't hold back as much. You'll see. At the same time, you shouldn't have to squint and half-close your eyes at any parts. Promise.

If you read this and have questions, ask me or your dad. We don't want you to ever be worried about asking us anything. We want you to know this story – the story of the creation of you. You were loved before you were even here. Though your dad and I made mistakes with one another and weren't perfect before or after you came into this world, you should know that we both wanted you. We did more than wait for you like those elephant parents in that book we used to read to you when you were younger. We fought for you; we will always fight for you.

That doesn't mean you should feel like you owe us something. That's not my intention with this. Maybe some of your Pop Pop rubbed off on me, but I wanted to document the who, what, where, when, and why of how you came to be. (And maybe Pop Pop helped... just a little.) Though your dad and I went to a clinic in Colorado for help in having you, you were created out of love. I want you to always remember that.

You're turning eighteen, and there's a whole world out there to experience – a world that isn't always pretty. Your dad and I don't want you to live in fear. You're going to stumble. Things aren't always going to go your way. Scary stuff is going to happen. Your heart will get broken. You may feel like your world – your life is ending. (I know you already know this.)

What matters is what you do next, how you make sense of what's happening, and how you own your piece whatever that piece might be.

Trust me when I say that I know without a doubt that you'll figure out what to do with whatever happens – good, bad or in between. Whatever way you need us, your father and I and the rest of your family will be there to support you while you sort it out. You may feel alone, but you won't be. It's not always gloom and doom, but there is sometimes darkness before the light, and I know many good things are coming your way, too.
All that said, your dad and I are so incredibly proud of you. You’re a beautiful person inside and out; you’re compassionate, observant, and generous like your dad; you work hard; and you always try. You are one of the brightest parts of our life. We love you without measure. Happy birthday, Ash.

Love,

Mom

11:05 PM
8-4-18

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who took the journey through this tale with me. It’s probably one of the most personal fics I’ve ever written. Thank you for the likes, comments, and support and a special thank you to all who shared your own stories in the reviews. I loved reading every one of them and got ridiculously excited when you shared.

Special thank you to swifthorse for the challenge and for reading every single rough draft of every chapter and cheering me on. I didn’t have a beta for most of this fic, so any mistakes are mine.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!