

# VERTIGO

## A Buffy Fanfiction by AmandaK

### CHAPTER 1

"Dammit, Dawn," Buffy murmured below her breath. "Where are you?" She pushed the curtain aside to peer out across Revello Drive for the tenth time in as many minutes. Outside, the last of the summer's evening light was fading fast from the sky, coloring it a deep blue before turning black. While she watched, the streetlights came on, casting circles of yellow light on the pavement.

The backdoor slammed shut. "Snack size ready for a good round of rummy?" Spike's voice drifted in from the kitchen. A moment later he entered the living room, shrouded in darkness, and caught sight of Buffy standing at the window. He switched on a light. "Something the matter, Slayer?"

"No. Yes. Dawn. She knows she's supposed to be home before sunset. Tell me, does it look like it's still day out?" Angrily she pointed at the dark street.

"Nope," Spike agreed. "Good thing too. Or I'd've been dust."

"She knows I worry about her," Buffy continued as if Spike hadn't said a word. She squinted through the window before she continued. "Sometimes I think she does it on purpose, to torture me."

Spike chuckled. "Don't worry your pretty head, Slayer, she probably ran into a couple of boys and--" His voice broke off in a low growl. "On second thought, the Bit better not!"

It was Buffy's turn to chuckle at the clear protectiveness in Spike's voice. "Face it, buster, she's going to start dating soon. Whether you agree with it or not."

A further growl was her answer. Buffy pitied the boys, who would try to pursue her younger sister. No father could have been more difficult to deal with than the vampire that had sworn to protect the girl.

The amused smile faded from her face at the memory of the battle with Glory.

"If something happens to her..." Buffy drew a breath. "Did you see the paper? Four girls disappeared in the last two nights. Without a trace. They were Dawn's age too." She sighed. "I wish Giles was in town. Or at least Willow. I don't have a clue if it's of the

supernatural!"

"Right," Spike said. "Want me to go look for Lil' Bit then?" He didn't sound overly worried. Buffy couldn't blame him. Life on the Hellmouth had been quiet since the gang defeated Glory and brought her back from the dead. And it was the height of summer. Long days, short nights; not evil's favorite season. Still, plenty of bad guys of the human variety out there, who could hurt a girl like Dawn.

"Yes. I have to get ready to patrol."

Spike pulled away to grab the duster that he had left in the kitchen and Buffy turned back to look out once more. Something teenager-sized came racing up the street, scrambled across the front lawn and bolted up the steps to the front door. Buffy had moved at the first sign of the girl and was ready to fling the door open.

"Dawn! Where the hell--"

The words froze on her tongue. The girl who came tearing into the house as if the devil was on her heels wasn't her younger sister. "Janice?"

"Buf... Buffy..." Dawn's friend gasped, struggling to draw breath. "He... Dawn... Knife... Got her..."

Buffy clenched her fists at her side, forcing herself not to grab the girl by the shoulders and shake the information out of her. "What? What are you saying, Janice? Somebody got Dawn?"

Janice nodded, her chest still heaving with ragged gasps.

"Who's got Dawn?"

Janice looked up at the sound of Spike's snarl. Her eyes grew wide like saucers and she uttered a frightened whimper. Buffy glanced over her shoulder to see Spike, in full vamp face, loom behind her, golden eyes glinting dangerously.

"Spike, you're not helping," she told him. His eyes sought hers, for a moment confused. Then, a bit sheepish, he shook off his gameface.

"Sorry 'bout that, kitten," he told Janice. "Now, you were saying?"

Janice swallowed down her fear and managed to get some of her breath back. She told them in clipped sentences, "We were walking down Main Street. Dawn worried you'd be

mad. Because we were late, see. Then there was this man. He... he had this knife...." Tears welled in her eyes while she kept her hands about a foot apart to indicate the length of the knife. "He grabbed Dawn and..." Her voice broke.

"This man," Spike asked, "did he look like m-- Did you notice anything strange about his face?"

Janice cast another anxious glance at Spike and shook her head. "He... he had a beard..." She raised her head and met Buffy's gaze. "I couldn't do anything to help Dawn. Honest!"

"Shh," Buffy hushed her, trying to stay calm for the girl's sake despite the cold slug of fear that slithered through her insides. "It's okay. You did good. You came here. That's the best way to help Dawn."

"Do you know where he took her?" Spike asked.

Janice nodded. "I... I followed them. I can show you."

"No," Buffy said. "You better tell us. Then we take you home and go find Dawn."

Ten long minutes later Janice had been dropped off into her parents' care. Vampire and slayer were slinking along the dark Sunnydale streets in the direction of the dilapidated house that the girl had described to them.

"What do you think they want with Dawn?" Buffy asked, suppressed worry in her voice. "I mean, she's no longer a key to anything, is she?"

"Bugged if I know, pet," Spike replied. "That whole business with the bleedin' knife... doesn't sound like a demon to me."

"Me either," Buffy agreed with a sigh. A car whooshed past, filled with late night shoppers intent on returning to the safety of their homes as soon as possible. The moon was full overhead, casting everything in a silver, unreal light.

"Buffy," Spike said softly, "If they're human, I won't--"

"I know," she cut in. "I'll handle it. You just get Dawn out of there alive."

"Right."

Not another word was spoken between them until they reached the house. It was as Janice described it: a roof that missed half its shingles, paint that flaked, and most of the front windows broken. The door hung crookedly on its hinges. Voices drifted out across the weed-filled lawn.

"Okay," said a gruff male. "I kept up my end of the bargain. Five virgins. Now pay up."

"Not yet," answered another, more guttural voice. Buffy exchanged a glance with Spike. 'Demon?' that look said. The voice had an odd inhuman quality to it. Spike bared his fangs in anticipation while he nodded. He couldn't wait to tell whatever demon was inside how he felt about them kidnapping the Nibbllet. He promised to protect her 'til the end of the world and bloody hell, that's what he would do!

"We don't know yet if they're true virgins," the demon continued. "Times have changed since I last performed this ritual."

"You won't get to do your ritual, anyway," Dawn's voice squeaked. Spike's heart swelled with pride. That's my girl, he thought. Frightened, yet still keeping up her courage. "Don't you know who I am? You picked the wrong girl to mess with. My sister will be here soon and she'll--"

"Silence!" the demon voice roared.

Buffy and Spike crawled up on the porch and squatted beneath the window. They peeked cautiously over the sill and took stock of the situation in the room. Should be easy, Spike thought. One human, the bearded guy Janice had described, and a fat, ugly, seven-foot demon of a species he didn't recognize right away. When he found Dawn's pale and frightened eyes looking out from the corner of the room his fists ached to connect with the flabby gray flesh of the creature.

Buffy gestured at Spike to go ahead. He didn't need more encouragement. With an unearthly roar, he shifted fully into gameface and charged through the half-opened door, bowling straight into the demon.

He knocked the creature over and it crashed to the ground. The withered floorboards creaked under the abuse. Spike rolled and was back on his feet before Fatty figured out what hit it. The thing was big but not very fast. The vampire kicked at its ribs, boot sinking deep into fat rolls of flesh. He was rewarded with a deep guttural howl of pain. Spike dislodged his foot and drew back for another kick. This time, Fatty had recovered somewhat and it grabbed Spike's ankle, throwing him off balance. Spike landed with a

thud on top of the demon. With an 'oomph', a wave of foul air rushed from the creature's lungs. Silently, Spike thanked his lucky stars he didn't need oxygen, or breathing the foul air would have been enough to knock him out.

He wrapped his hands around the thick neck of the demon, his fingers sinking deep into its flabby flesh, and twisted.

"Buffyyy!!"

The instant Spike snapped Fatty's neck, Dawn's shriek pierced the air. Without looking where the creature's limp body fell, he jumped up and spun in the girl's direction, ready to fight of her attacker.

She squatted alone in the corner. Her eyes were wide, horrified, goggling. He followed her line of sight and hissed in a shocked breath.

Vampiric reflexes deserted him. With growing horror he could only watch, as Buffy's knees slowly buckled, no longer supporting her body. A long handle protruded from her belly; the tip of the knife peeked out of her back. Her attacker, Beardguy, grinned, under the influence of a spell or drugs or human malice.

So this was what it came down to in the end, Spike thought dimly as Buffy's body landed on the floor with a soft bump that was nevertheless as loud as a thunderclap in the still air. After Red delved into the deepest of black magicks to bring her back, after he himself had tried to kill her countless times until he lost all desire to, she died at the hand of a crazed human with a lucky streak. It shouldn't be possible. She was the bleedin' Slayer, dammit! Yet here she was, blood bubbling on her lips while her eyes sought Spike's.

Her mouth moved as she whispered. "Somebody had a good day."

Spike began to shake his head. No. No. Not here, not now, not again. Not like this. "NO!!" he roared and without thinking he leapt for the human. The chip fired up before he even reached Buffy's killer and this time Spike embraced the white-hot pain that tore through his brain. A splitting headache sweetened by the bitter taste of revenge was preferable over the agony of a broken heart. He reached Beardguy, who was beginning to grow aware of the mortal danger he was in, with a vampire bent on revenge and his one weapon embedded in the slayer's body. He never had time to react though. One pale hand wrapped in the murderer's lanky hair, wrenching his head sideways, exposing the neck. Ignoring the chip's constant assault, Spike sank his fangs into the warm flesh, the blood spouting forward and filling his mouth. Yet it didn't satisfy. Not one bit. This wasn't feeding; this was revenge, plain and simple.

The chip fired up again and again, sending sparks of electricity through his head until at last the vampire's brain short-circuited and he crumpled prostrate over his victim's body.

Muffled sobs and hitched breathing woke Spike from his chip-induced slumber. How long had he been out? It couldn't be more than a few minutes. The blood on his lips was moist and warm. His head was subject to a killer migraine but Spike forgot all about the pain when his memories kicked back in.

Buffy!

He rolled over, pushing the dead guy away from him. Dawn sat sobbing, Buffy's head in her lap. The slayer was still alive, her breathing irregular and painful. Dawn had removed the long knife. Not the smartest of things but under the circumstances Spike didn't think it would make much of a difference. Buffy was dying. A regular human would have passed away minutes ago. Only her slayer-strength enabled her to hang on just a little longer.

"Spike! Do something!"

Spike crawled over to the two sisters, uncaring about the splinters from the broken door that sliced his palms. Tears burned behind his eyelids and his throat felt strangely constricted, as if the blood he drank had congealed within.

"Nothing I can do, pet," he murmured, reaching out a hand to brush a blond lock from Buffy's face but withdrawing before he touched her. It was déjà vu all over again. The day he feared, the day he had known would come again eventually, had arrived. He had hoped, prayed to whatever deity might listen, that it would be many years from now, but here it was: he was going to watch Buffy die. Again.

"There has to be something we can do!" Dawn wailed. "We... we can take her to the hospital. Yes. Hospital is good. They'll fix her up."

Spike shook his head, sadly. "The hospital is too bloody far," he replied, gruffer than he had intended. "I'm sorry, pet."

Buffy's eyes fluttered open and after a moment they settled on Spike's face. "Spike..." she breathed.

"Yes, luv?" He leaned forward to better hear her.

"Take... care... of Dawn."

"Always, Buffy. Always." Spike was mindless of the tears that were dripping down his cheeks, the salty taste mingling with the aftertaste of the blood when they reached the corners of his mouth.

Buffy's lips quirked into a soft smile, and her eyes drifted shut again. Was she dead?

When Spike concentrated he could still make out her heartbeat, irregular and weak. Not yet. Not much longer now, though. It was a matter of seconds, not minutes.

"This can't be happening," Dawn sobbed. "Not again."

My thoughts exactly, Little Bit, Spike thought. Yet, here it was.

"First Mom, then Buffy... Now Buffy again? I can't do this, Spike. I can't go through it again. And I won't."

Something in her voice made him look up and meet her gaze. Hell. He recognized the determined glint that had come into her eyes as the Summers' stubbornness. What crazy idea had the Nibblet come up with? He'd be scrambling for the chance to save Buffy, if any existed. He'd pay any price, gladly, just to see her open her eyes and sit back up, to hear the flippant remark she had no doubt prepared for just such an occasion.

"You can help her, Spike," Dawn said. "Your blood--"

He began shaking his head when her implication filtered through. "No!" he cut in, eyes widening in horror at the thought. "I won't. I won't do that to her."

"You have to, Spike!" Dawn cried. Her voice caught. "You have to. Or I'll..." She glanced around quickly and before he could stop her she made a grab for the discarded knife. "Or I'll kill myself." She turned the knife, planted the tip on top of her heart. Her voice quavered, but her hand was steady.

"Dawn, put that down," Spike said. "Big sis deserves better than to be turned into a monster like me."

"You're not a monster." Dawn took a step back as soon as Spike took a step forward. "I will do it, Spike. If Buffy's gone, I have nobody left. I'll be all alone."

"You're not," he rebutted. "You have the Scoobies, me."

"You're not my sister," she said stubbornly. "You're not... Buffy." She pressed the knife harder against her shirt. The quick wince that flitted across her face and the heady smell of her blood in the air told Spike she had broken skin. He glanced back over his shoulder at Buffy.

God knows he was tempted. He didn't want to lose Buffy any more than Dawn did. But he could he do what her sister wanted? She'd hate it. Hate him forever. And forever was a damn long time. What to do? Turn one to save the other? Or lose them both? Dawn could be just as stubborn as Buffy if she had set her mind to something. And Spike knew she would be true to her word.

"Hurry up, Spike," Dawn said. "We're running out of time."

It was the cold, adult determination in her voice that decided the issue. With a pained growl Spike shifted into game face and tore the vein at his wrist. He knelt next to Buffy's body, pried open her lower lip and let the blood drip onto her tongue. She was unconscious from bloodloss but her body reacted instinctively. She swallowed. He pressed his wrist against her mouth and felt her suck the blood from his veins. May the Gods forgive him. Because the slayer never would.



## CHAPTER 2

Heart thumping against her ribs, her throat dry and parched, Dawn watched the blonde vampire force-feed his blood to her sister. The knife dropped from her powerless fingers and clattered onto the floor. She didn't hear it. Oh Lord, what had she done?

She wanted to yell at Spike to stop, to take it back, but the words wouldn't come. Her voice failed her. She tried to take a step forward, to shove him away from Buffy. Her knees gave way so she dropped onto the floor beside the knife. Breathing was hard; she felt suffocated, and distantly she noted she was hyperventilating. Forcing herself to take slow, regular breaths, she tried to regain control. It was too late. The deed was done. Her sister, beautiful, strong, loving, annoying Buffy was going to wake up a vampire. The thing she was Chosen to kill. The thing she hated the most. And it was her, Dawn's fault. If she hadn't forced Spike...

If she hadn't forced Spike, they would be burying Buffy again. And she'd have to go live with her dad. "Why isn't she waking up?" Dawn croaked through stiff lips when Spike sat back and lowered Buffy's head carefully back to the ground.

"Doesn't work that way, pet." His voice was without inflection, as dead as he was. "She won't rise until tomorrow night." He shook himself back to his human mask and turned to face Dawn. His tone was kinder, warmer, when he continued. "She's not going to be happy with either of us when she does."

"I know," Dawn whispered as the tears began to fall again. "I know. I couldn't let her die, Spike. I just couldn't."

Then he was with her, his arms, cool and strong, wrapped around her as he pulled her against his chest and she cried into his shirt. "I understand, sweet bit," he murmured. "I understand. Shh... it'll be okay."

How? she wanted to ask but sobs kept wringing themselves from her chest and again her voice failed her. She cried and cried and cried until there were no more tears left.

Dawn pulled back and glanced past Spike to the world outside. The sky was beginning to lighten; morning would come soon.

"Sun's coming up," she muttered, rubbing a fist along her cheeks to dry off the tears. "You have to go home."

"And leave you alone?" he replied, quirked an eyebrow. "I don't bloody think so. Sis would stake me first thing when she wakes up."

Dawn chortled, a sad, humorless chuckle. "Yeah, she would."

Spike lifted Buffy's lifeless body and shifted it until he had a good grip, cradling her head against his shoulder. One arm dangled limply. Reluctantly Dawn took the hand to lift the arm and fold it over Buffy's body. Her flesh was rapidly losing the warmth of life and already the skin felt cold to her touch. Dawn shuddered. From now on, Buffy was going to feel as cool as Spike did. Which was okay for him – it was the way she'd always known him to be. Her sister was another matter.

She followed Spike out of the house, through the dark and silent streets of Sunnydale, back to Revello Drive. While she pushed past him to open the door, she took a deep breath.

"Is she going to be the same?" Dawn whispered. "Will she still be Buffy?"

Spike took the body up the stairs and to Buffy's room, where he gently laid her upon the bed. "Not exactly, pet," he said.

Dawn winced. "But she'll remember, right? Like you remember when you were William?" She was desperate for some form of consolation, desperate to believe it would all turn out right.

"We'll help her remember, luv. 's All we can do."

She watched as Spike tenderly arranged her sister's limbs until Buffy appeared to be sleeping. She looked normal. If you ignored the rust colored bloodstain that bloomed on her shirt, that was. And the two-inch long tear in the material at the center of the stain. Dawn felt fresh tears well in her eyes. Amazing. She thought she had done all her crying back at the house.

"You should get some sleep, Nibblet," Spike's quiet voice interrupted her thoughts before the tears could fall.

Dawn shook her head vehemently. "I don't want to. I want to stay here. With Buffy."

Spike lifted her face with a cool finger beneath her chin. "Nothing is going to happen here," he said calmly. "You're exhausted, physically and emotionally. Go get some sleep. Big sis is going to need our help when she wakes up. Can't have you falling over from exhaustion."

Dawn hesitated a moment more. "Will she be okay?"

"Yes," Spike said. He pulled a chair over beside the bed. "I'll be here keeping watch."

"Okay... Should I get you some blankets or something?" Dawn asked with a nod at the window. The square was growing visibly brighter behind the thin curtains.

Spike blinked. "Yeh. Thanks."

A few moments later Dawn returned with a pile of blankets in her arms. "Need some help?"

"No, I can handle it." Spike shook his head. "You go get some rest."

Dawn walked back to the door. In the opening she stopped and turned. "Spike?"

"Yes, ducks?"

She darted back in and planted a kiss on his cold cheek, smiling at the dumbfounded look he gave her. "Thank you."

Spike fastened the blankets over the curtains, casting the room in deep shadows despite the sun that rose on another scorching summer day outside, and sat back down in the chair beside the bed. The wickerwork rustled to accommodate his weight. He stared at Buffy's profile, so still and pale. Every instinct shrieked that this was wrong. The room was too quiet. Her chest didn't rise and fall with every breath. The sound of her heartbeat was loud in its absence, as was the rushing of blood through living veins.

His gaze fell upon the blood-soaked shirt, which covered her upper body. She shouldn't have to wake up in that filthy rag, still covered with her blood, shed when she was alive and warm. Yet he couldn't bring himself to undress her and put a clean shirt on. It wouldn't feel right. Perhaps, he made a mental note, Dawn could do it, after she woke from a much-needed sleep.

Spike rubbed his face with a weary hand. He shouldn't have given in to the Nibblem. He should have wrested the knife from her and let Buffy die in peace. He was a soddin' selfish wanker, who wanted to keep the slayer at his side no matter the cost. It had been so easy to yield to Dawn's blackmail, so easy to do as she demanded and turn Buffy into the soulless monster that he was. It wasn't what Buffy would have wanted; Spike wasn't

lying when he told Dawn that the slayer would be none too pleased with either of them. Although, 'none too pleased' had to be the biggest understatement of his undead life. He also knew he was going to take the brunt of her anger; he'd try his best to shield Dawn from the worst of it. After all, it was he who turned her. And in all honesty, he couldn't claim that the thought never crossed his mind before Dawn forced him to act upon it.

It was not too late, though. He could still set things right. All he needed was a little stake. Should be plenty of those around in this house. However, he remained frozen in the chair, unable to bring himself to search for one of the wooden sticks and drive it through Buffy's heart.

Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad. He would help her. Like he had helped numerous fledglings --a lot of them Dru's-- how to deal with their new unlife. In most cases that came down to a couple of survival lessons: sunlight will do you in. So will a stake through the heart. Watch out for the slayer. Blah blah blah.

This time it was different. None of those lessons would be necessary; Buffy could write a textbook on vampire lore. But somewhere inside the demon, which was going to rise come sunset, was a part of the old Buffy, the human Buffy. It had to be there.

All evidence pointed to support this theory.

Dru, driven off her rocker before Angelus turned her, and she was a raving loony of a vampire. Angelus wasn't much as a human, and had been an even meaner vampire. From what the Scoobies told him, Harmony had been an airhead when she was alive, and look what a pathetic excuse for a vamp she made. And he himself? Spike snorted. He was love's bitch. Had been back in the days of breath and heartbeat, and always would be. So it stood to good reason that Buffy might retain some of the qualities that made her Buffy. She would just have to find them again.

He held onto that thought like a lifeline during the long waking hours. Outside, the sun traveled across the blue sky. Inside the room, nobody breathed for many hours, until night fell at last.

"Spike?"

The shadows were deepening within the room when a soft call startled Spike from his introspection. The door opened to reveal Dawn. Her face was pale, her eyes red and

puffy and surrounded with dark circles. She looked as if she had been crying more than sleeping. "Has she--"

Spike shook his head. "Not yet."

"Oh." Dawn entered the room, her feet dragging across the carpet. She came to hover beside Spike and looked down at her sister. "She looks... dead."

"She is dead, pet," Spike grumbled. He instantly regretted it when he saw Dawn flinch at his gruff words. "Sorry," he murmured.

"Shouldn't we, like, have buried her, or something?" Dawn asked after a long silence.

"And have her dig her way out of her grave again? Don't bloody think so." He sighed. "It's not important. Although Dru has a soft spot for burying her--" He cut off.

"Oh."

"Look, can you do me -- your sis a favor?"

"Sure," Dawn sniffled, biting back a sob. "What?"

Spike gestured at Buffy's bloody top. "Her shirt... She won't like waking up like that. I was going to change it-- I couldn't--" He fumbled for words. "Can you--?"

Dawn gave a sad half-smile. "Change her clothes?"

He nodded with gratitude. "Yeh."

"Sure." Glad for something to do, Dawn pivoted on her heels, walked over to Buffy's closet, and began rummaging through her clothes in search of something suitable.

"I'll be outside," Spike said. "Holler if you need help." Inwardly he was praying she wouldn't. He didn't like having to put Dawn through dressing up her dead sister; however, he found himself incapable of taking the task upon him. It wasn't the thought that Buffy would stake him as soon as she found out. But it would feel... awkward. Not right.

He snorted at himself while he made his way down the stairs. Bloody wanker.

He went outside onto the front porch, patting his pockets in search of a cigarette. As soon as he found the crumpled packet, he shook one out and lit it, inhaling the smoke

with relish. All day he had craved a shot of nicotine and Buffy never allowed him to smoke in the house. He gave a dry laugh at the thought. She was not exactly in a position to stop him. Yet.

He stared out across the darkening yard. Night was falling fast now, as it always did in summer. Stars twinkled overhead and the nearly full moon climbed over the roof of the house across the street, coating everything in silver.

"Spi-ik--"

Dawn's scream was cut off. Faster than should have been possible for even a vampire, Spike wheeled and raced up the stairs three steps at a time. Growls and grunts came from Buffy's room, mingled with thuds and bumps and the sound of shattering furniture.

Spike flung open the door and froze on the threshold at the sight before him. Dawn was on her back on the bed, trying to fight off a snarling Buffy. The slayer's blond hair hung loose, hiding her features but Spike didn't need to see her face to know it would be ridged, with yellow, feral eyes and deadly fangs.

He flung himself at her, forcing her to abandon the attempt to feed on her sister, cursing himself for leaving Dawn alone with Buffy, when he had known she would rise soon. He recalled how strong the bloodlust was, that first night. How much it hurt. He remembered the terrible confusion of waking when he knew he had died. He should have been here when she opened her eyes.

Dawn was sobbing, gasping for air. While Spike struggled to keep Buffy subdued --damn, she was strong, much stronger than a regular fledgling had any right to be-- he risked a glance in the younger girl's direction. With relief he noted that, although she looked shocked to the core, she appeared otherwise unharmed.

"Dawn! In the fridge. Get a package. Pig, not human." If he could prevent Buffy from discovering the sweet taste of human blood, she might find it easier to resist the temptation to feed.

"Should I warm it--"

"No! Just get it!"

Dawn scrambled from the bed and ran from the room to get the blood. Spike turned his attention back to the struggling vampire in his arms. With a pang he realized that's how he had to think of the slayer from now on: a vampire. His child. In need of his help, his guidance, his protection.

He wrapped his arms tighter around her frail form, hugging her to his chest. "Ssh, luv, it'll be all right. I know it hurts. Hang in there. Dawn will be right back."

She struggled and sobbed. "What have you done?" she wailed, trying to break free. Spike had to call on every ounce of strength that his seniority gave him to keep her imprisoned in his embrace. Apparently, the clinical part of his mind jotted down, slayer strength transcended into death. "What's wrong with me? God, I'm so hungry. It hurtssss!"

Dawn reappeared, a plastic bag filled with thick, red liquid in her hand. Keeping her distance, her eyes never leaving her sister, she handed it to Spike. Holding Buffy captive against his chest for a moment longer, he tore the package with his teeth and shoved it into her face. "Drink," he ordered. "You'll feel better."

Buffy sniffed once, stopped struggling, and gulped the bag empty. "More," she demanded. "More."

Three bags of blood later, Buffy stopped thrashing so violently in Spike's arms. He slowly eased the pressure.

"Better?" he asked.

"Much," she murmured. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and licked the remaining blood from her skin. She was going to need some practice before she could sip from plastic bags without making a mess.

Dawn ambled further into the room and took a cautious seat on the edge of the bed. "Buffy?"

The moment she spoke Spike knew it was a mistake. Buffy wasn't ready yet, the initial bloodlust still strong. Her eyes took on a delighted glint and before Spike could stop her she lunged after her sister. Dawn squealed with shock and fright and shot backward on the bed so forcefully that she tumbled down the other side.

Spike slammed into Buffy, grabbing her around the waist and pinning her onto the bed. She flailed against his grip although not as fiercely as before. The pig's blood had taken off the edge of her craving for blood.

"Lil' Bit," Spike said in a low voice, his eyes never leaving Buffy's face, "go to your room and lock the door. Don't come out till I say it's okay."

"But, Spike--" Dawn began to protest.

"Now, Dawn." Spike's voice brooked no further objections. "It'll be all right, I promise."

As soon as Dawn left the room, Buffy relaxed beneath Spike. Although he would have given anything to keep Dawn from seeing her sister like this, he couldn't blame Buffy. It had been more than a century ago but the memory of his first night, the way the pounding of hearts and the rush of blood could drive your demon crazy, was still fresh in his mind. It took time and willpower and effort to learn to control the urges. To learn the stealth and skill needed in the hunt for the right victim and the right kill. It took a cunning vampire that survived beyond the first days.

"Can't let you eat your sister, luv," Spike said when Buffy wriggled beneath him. He kept her wrists pinned over her head and straddled her, effectively rendering her powerless.

"Why not?" Buffy complained, turning her head to look at the door with longing. She ran a tongue along her fangs. "She smells yummy."

Spike chuckled. "Bit does, at that. But it wouldn't be... right." Bloody hell.

Buffy turned her head back and glanced up at Spike. "Well, if I can't eat her..." A feral smile turned up the corners of her lips and she shifted her hips beneath him. "What else can we do for fun?"

Spike growled deep in his throat, willing his body to not respond to Buffy's squirming. So that's one of your basic urges, eh, pet, he thought to himself. Shagging the Big Bad. He grinned wryly to himself. If only the offer for a rough and tumble with the slayer had been presented to him a day or so earlier. Now, however...

"Stop that! Get a bloody grip, you stupid git!" Now, the time wasn't right. It wasn't Buffy who was arching her hips up to him. It was the demon. It never would be Buffy again. Not completely, but perhaps someday she'd learn controlling those basic hungers for blood and sex and pain. Then, if she still wanted him...

He pulled in those threads of thought. He needed to concentrate, not daydream about the future.

"Spike?" Dawn's muffled voice drifted from down the hallway.



"Yes, Nibblet?"

"Can I come out now?"

Spike paused. He contemplated Buffy as she sat studying her pale hands, searching for a pulse and failing to find it. "Will you promise not to eat Lil'Bit?" he asked.

She looked up. "I promise." She sounded petulant and Spike narrowed his eyes. Buffy was going to cause him as much trouble as a vampire as when she'd been human. "Cross my heart and hope to die."

"It's okay." He raised his voice to reach Dawn in her room. Her hearing wasn't as keen as his.

He heard a click as she unlocked her door and opened it. A few seconds later she appeared in the doorway, tense and looking ready to bolt at the first sign of trouble.

"Buffy?"

"Hello Dawn." She looked up, baring her fangs in what Spike suspected was meant to be an encouraging smile. It merely made her look dangerous and insane.

"I love you."

The smirk disappeared and Buffy hung her head. Spike waited, still and rigid. Perhaps the Nibblet had the right idea. Perhaps she was going to get through past the demon.

"Look at me," Buffy muttered. She rubbed a hand along the front of her recently clean shirt, now splattered with blood that had dripped from her chin when she gulped down the bags of blood. "I'm all dirty."

Dawn walked over to her closet and pulled out another shirt. "Here," she said, handing it to Buffy. Spike could tell she was strung taut and keeping her distance, ready to flee at any sign of hostility. When Buffy accepted the shirt with a nod of gratitude, she relaxed. And so did Spike.

## CHAPTER 3

A low keening escaped Buffy when she looked into the mirror. Oh God... Nothing but the room behind her reflected in it, with the rumpled bed and the overturned chair. Her hands flew up to her face, her fingers trailed across the ridges and bumps of her vampire face. Her eyes grew big with horror. She whimpered again and hung her head, hiding her face behind the strands of blond hair that fell forward.

"Buffy, luv, look at me," Spike said softly somewhere at her right shoulder.

Buffy shook her head. "No."

He sighed, his breath a whiff of cool air against her cheek. His fingers clasped her shoulders, forcing her to face him. She resisted a moment, then with a sigh of her own allowed him to turn her around. Her head whipped up and her eyes blazed with anger when her gaze met his.

"Look at me. Look at me!" she hissed between her fangs. "Happy now, Spike? Proud of what you did?" Her composure broke and tears welled in her eyes. They looked odd, coming from the yellow irises.

"No, luv," Spike whispered. "Not happy. I didn't have a choice, we couldn't lose you again." He ran a finger along her brow ridges and she shrunk back from his touch. "It's not so hard to control," he told her. "Concentrate."

A small furrow appeared among the ridges as she tried to make the demon retreat. Her appearance flickered between ridged and bumpy and the smooth planes of her human face. Then she stood before him. Buffy. As she used to be. A bit paler perhaps, but just as beautiful, with her green eyes, dark lashes and pink lips. She lifted a hand to prod her features.

He smiled. "See?" he said. "It's not so bad."

Not a smart thing to say. Renewed anger surged through her and the demon threatened to come forward again.

"Not so bad?" she yelled. "Not so bad? Spike, you made me a friggin' vampire! I can't even be in the same room with my sister without wanting to feed from her! How much worse do you think it could be?"

"You could be dead," he whispered.

Her shoulders slumped. "That wouldn't be worse. That would be better. Anything would be better than this."

"You'll learn to control it, Buffy," Spike promised. "I did."

"You have a chip," she spat. "You don't control it, it controls you! What have I got?"

"Me, pet," he said. "As long as you need me. As long as you want me. I'll help. There's still some of the old, proud, stubborn slayer in there. You only have to find it."

"What am I going to tell Willow and Xander? Or Giles!" Buffy let out a strangled noise. "Giles is going to have a heart attack when he finds out! Thank God Mom isn't around to see this!"

Dawn wished she would shut up. Buffy had been yammering non-stop about her fate for the past three hours and it was beginning to seriously grate on her nerves. Guiltily the teenager wondered if perhaps they should have let Buffy die. Her sister was even more aggravating undead than when she had been alive.

They had gone down to the kitchen and were seated around the kitchen table. Actually, Dawn thought as she watched the other two, things looked normal. Well, as normal as they ever did around the Summers' house. On her left Spike sat nursing a mug of O-neg and Buffy was being her usual annoying self on her right. Yes, everything looked normal. If you discounted the mug of blood in front of Buffy that she sipped from when she wasn't voicing complaints and grievances.

"We'll tell them nothing," Spike suggested, raising an eyebrow in Dawn's direction.

"Yes!" Dawn agreed quickly. "Nothing. It'll be, like, our secret!" Hopefully she looked at Buffy.

"Dawn! Really!" Buffy exclaimed after a shooting a glare in Spike's direction. "I can't not tell them. What about the sudden sun allergy? How do I explain that they'll need to invite me into their homes again? Not to mention the liquid diet?"

"Slayer's got a point," Spike muttered into his blood.

"Don't call me that," Buffy snapped, finishing off her drink. She crinkled her nose and

sniffed, leaned closer to Spike and sniffed again. "What's that?" she asked, her eyes trained on his mug.

"Blood, of course," he said, pulling the cup away from her scrutiny. "What else would it be?"

"It smells different. Sweeter."

Spike's features softened. "It's human. O-neg. Bought fair and square from Willie's, so don't give me grief."

"Can I have a taste? Please?" Buffy batted her eyelashes at him for a moment before directing her gaze back to the cup in his hands.

Dawn swallowed. The nausea in the pit of her stomach threatened to overwhelm her.

"No!" Spike raised the mug and swallowed its contents in one gulp. "I don't want you to taste human blood."

"But it smells nice!"

"Buffy, it'll only make things harder for you. Stay with the pig's blood, all right, you'll be happier that way. And so will Dawn."

Dawn nodded in agreement. It was bad enough that her sister had a craving for blood without her going to hunt humans. She really hadn't thought things through last night, Dawn secretly admitted to herself. Spike was the only vampire she knew up close and personal, and he had never threatened to eat her like Buffy did. She always felt safe around Spike. She knew the stories of course. Both Buffy and Giles told her plenty to discourage her from befriending the vampire. And Spike himself was always good for a story or two when she asked, his words giving her delicious chills. But that was all they'd ever been: stories. Now, slowly, it was beginning to sink in that those stories had really happened, what it truly meant to be a vampire without a government chip. And Dawn wasn't sure she liked this new Buffy much.

"More!" Buffy demanded. She slammed her mug on the table in front of Dawn.

Dawn blinked. "Get it yourself! I'm not your maid." Anger began to stir deep within her. This Buffy was insufferable! If it wasn't bad enough before, when she was always bugging her about homework and curfews.

"I died, you have to be nice to me. Or I'll bite you."

"Spi-ike!"

Spike rolled his eyes in silent suffering. "Buffy, shut up. Dawn, please get another bag from the fridge."

"Fine!" Dawn pushed back her chair with so much force that it fell over. She ignored it as she stomped to the fridge and flung it open. "You should have let her die!" From the corner of her eye she caught Spike flinch but she was too upset to feel guilty.

"We're all out," she informed them after a look in the fridge. "No more blood at the Summers Drive-Thru for Hungry Vamps." She folded her arms across her chest and grinned at Buffy with a satisfied smirk. There. Take that.

"Spike, I'm hungry," Buffy whined. "Can I go eat Dawn now?"

Spike lowered his head and rested it on the table's surface.

So, this was what hell was like, thought Spike, thumping his head against the table hard enough to make his skull throb in protest. None of that eternal fire and infinite pain rubbish, but two women driving him out of his mind with their bickering.

"I. Want. Blood." Buffy demanded. She marked each word with a bang of her fist on the table.

"And I said we're out. Go get some yourself!" Dawn yelled back.

"Both of you, shut the fuck up!" Spike roared loud enough for the girls' mouths to snap shut and their faces to turn to him. Dawn's eyes were wide with shock and Buffy's were glimmering with... with something that he didn't want to think about too much.

"Nibblet," Spike continued, "you're not helping here, luv. Why don't you let me talk to Buffy alone for a minute?" The last thing he needed was Dawn provoking Buffy into going out and making her first kill. The longer he could keep her from crossing the boundary into killerdome, the better her chances of learning to control her cravings. Or so he hoped. Nobody had ever done what he tried to accomplish here: teach a newborn vampire to resist their urge to kill. He was flying by the seat of his pants, fumbling forward without compass or map, and he hoped he was doing the right thing. If not,

Buffy's mates would probably stake them both.

Dawn opened her mouth to protest. He quirked an eyebrow and her mouth snapped shut again. Her lips puckered in a stubborn pout, however.

"Fine," she muttered and stomped from the kitchen.

Spike turned his attention to Buffy. She looked at him with barely concealed hunger, despite the numerous bloodbags she had consumed. It got better over time, but the first night the bloodlust was the worst.

"I'll get you some more blood," he said and her eyes lit up. "You stay--" He paused. He couldn't leave Buffy alone with Dawn. Not yet. Perhaps not ever. "No, you come with me. And stay close. No wandering off, you hear?"

Spike inserted the metal filament into the lock and wiggled it expertly. Less than thirty seconds later he felt the tumblers give and with a muted click the door unlocked. He cast a quick look around to make sure that the street was still deserted. A few feet away, Buffy lounged against the pole of a streetlamp, looking bored and eager at the same time.

He slipped through the crack of the door and quickly made his way across the dark store. In the far corner stood a large walk-in freezer, where the blood was stashed. Spike turned up his nose with disgust at the heavy smell of pig's blood. Raiding the hospital would have been more to his liking, except that stealing human blood would've given Buffy a taste for the stuff. Thus, soddin' pig's blood it was going to be. He glumly imagined he'd have to live on it for a while as well. Had to set a good example for the slayer, after all.

He grabbed a couple of containers and left the store.

No Buffy in sight.

Damn.

She never listened to him when she was alive. What ever made him think she would change the habit when she was dead?

She couldn't be far; he'd been inside the shop less than a minute. Spike cocked his head

and pricked up his ears, listening to the quiet sounds of the night. There! A soft deep-throated growl, the quick patter of feet, then a muffled human scream. The noises came from the alley behind the butcher's shop.

Spike ran to the corner and paused. A pair of boys, fraternity kids by the looks of their clothes, huddled in the corner between a dumpster and the shop wall. They were drunk, or incredibly stupid to go wandering about in this part of town after dark. Not too drunk though to know that their lives were in danger from the frail blonde, who advanced upon them with slow deliberation; the heady scent of fear was strong in the air.

Buffy was taunting the frat boys. "That wasn't nice, to run away from me. Not very polite, are you? C'mon, all I want is a little bite, a small taste." While she spoke, she moved closer, step by step, shifting her weight from her left foot to her right and back. At last, the biggest of the two kids, a prat with a shock of dark hair curling on his forehead, gathered enough courage and lunged for her. She laughed. With ease, Buffy blocked his right hook and cuffed him across the face. He dropped like a brick. She snatched the other kid, swung him around and pulled him close to her, her arm around his throat.

Spike couldn't help but admire her feral beauty. Slim of built, she moved with the grace of a lioness. Fierce, unafraid, light on her feet. She was a dancer, all right. Like him. The moment he laid eyes on the slayer, all those years ago at The Bronze, he had known she would make a wonderful addition to their little family. He'd never wanted to kill her. Not really. He had wanted to turn her.

Last night, at last, his most secret dream had come true.

For the longest time Spike hesitated, stuck in indecision. Every undead cell in his body desired to give in to the urge, dump the containers of disgusting pig blood, and join Buffy in the fray. They would be so good together. The soddin' chip wouldn't be a problem. She could kill for him, like Dru had once done. Together, they could rule the world.

A sudden memory flashed behind his mind's eye. Dawn, this morning, her face pinched with worry. "Buffy will be like you, won't she? Not all 'grrr' and evil?"

"Pet, I am evil," he had told her.

Stubbornly, Dawn shook her head. "No, you're not. If the chip went broke would you kill me?"

"No, Nibblet, never." It had taken him less than a heartbeat (hers) to answer her.

"Then you're not all evil. I want Buffy to be like you."

"She will," Spike promised against his better judgement. "She will."

Not if she sank her fangs in fratboy's throat, she wouldn't.

Spike grunted in frustration. When had he become bloody Superpoof?

"Buffy, no!" he yelled. He dropped all but one of the containers of blood. Buffy raised her head upon his approach. A growl rumbled deep in her throat, a warning not to come closer. Again, Spike was reminded of a lioness, a lioness defending her kill. Like the predator of the plains, every vampire was possessive of its kill; if he wasn't careful, she could easily turn on him.

Cautiously Spike sidled up to her. "Buffy, luv, you don't want to do this." He kept his gaze locked on hers, capturing her yellow eyes and drawing her attention away from the young man in her arms. "Here. I have somethin' for you." He wrung the lid off the container in his hand and held it out to her. The smell struck her like a blow to the face. She reeled at the heavy scent, lips curling, and dropped her victim. Instead, she snatched the container from his grip and gulped down the thick, red liquid.

Spike's undead heart clenched in sympathy. A lot of fledglings didn't survive the bloodlust of the first days. It drove them crazy, made them reckless and throw all caution into the wind. They died quickly, unless their sire was prepared to take them under his wing. Like Dru had taken care of him. Like he was going to take care of Buffy.

While Buffy drank, the two college kids stirred at their feet. Spike ignored them as they regained consciousness and what little wits they possessed. When they noticed their captor was distracted they snuck off as fast as their feet could carry them. Spike watched them go with a mixture of relief and yearning.

"Oh God, what am I doing?" Buffy's cry pulled his attention back to her. Her human face glared at him as she threw the empty container at Spike. He ducked, barely in time, and felt the current of air when the plastic flew over his head.

"Luv, you know I had no choice," Spike tried. He took a step closer to her and she took a step backward.

She held out her hand, palm forward, fingers up. "You stay away from me. I don't want to hear you tell me that you love me and couldn't let me die. That everything will be all right. It will never be all right!"



He reached for her, but was unprepared for her sudden assault. Her left foot flew up, connected with his chin and his head snapped backward as he lost his balance and went down. His skull hit the pavement, hard, and all was black.

## CHAPTER 4

Thump. Thump. Thump. Who the hell was making such bloody racket? Couldn't a vampire even get a decent day's sleep anymore?

Spike cracked his eyes open. A dented, dark gray metal wall splotted with rust filled his view. A metal wall with wheels. He frowned. Faded green lettering was painted on the metal, the paint flaking and stains obliterating the words. He squinted. Sunnydale Trash Disposal.

Bloody hell. How had he ended up in a dumpster?

Thump. Thump.

The noise made it hard to think, and it took Spike several minutes to realize that if he were inside the dumpster, he could not have seen the small wheels. Or the words printed on the outside.

Okay. Not in the dumpster, then.

He wracked his brain, trying to sort through the jumble of memories that came in flashes. Buffy. At last something he recognized and he latched on to it. More memories came and they began to make sense. Buffy. Vampire Buffy. Vampire Buffy who kicked his arse. Well, no, not his arse, not literally. He wouldn't have lost consciousness if she had.

Letting out a groan, Spike sat up. The hammerer in his skull picked up the pace. A dull ache throbbed in time with the blows. Bloody hell. He had really bashed his brains this time. It was worse than the ugliest hangover he could remember.

He waited a few moments for the throbbing to fade before he risked looking around again. Although the alley was gloomy, Spike felt he could see too well. He ignored the increase in hammer blows and laid his head in his neck to look up. Hell bloody hell again! The strip of sky framed by the shop walls was glowing faintly pink.

He had to get back to Revello Drive at once, or he'd be crispy Spike.

Spike lurched along the quiet streets, occasionally plagued with double vision or spells of dizziness. It seemed to take forever before he reached the Summers' house and he kept casting nervous glances up at the sky, which was growing lighter by the minute. It was going to be another hot day.

At last, he clambered up the front steps and stumbled through the front door. He heaved a rather unnecessary sigh of relief that nevertheless made him feel better. With his boot heel, he kicked the door close behind him, shutting out the first rays of sunlight.

The sound of footsteps made him look up. Dawn was standing in the doorway to the kitchen. She carried a large cross in her left hand and a sharp stake in her right. Her eyes were wide and circled with fatigue.

"Oh, it's you," she said, and lowered both cross and stake. Spike thought he should be insulted that the Big Bad didn't inspire an ounce of fear in this teenager. He didn't really care though; he had more important things on his mind than his reputation.

"Is Buffy here?"

Dawn shook her head. "Not anymore. She came back a few hours ago, all upset and crying. She gave me those weird looks, smacked her lips, like she thought I was a pint of Ben & Jerry's. It was wiggy. That's when I got out the cross and the stake."

"She didn't hurt you, did she?" Spike's eyes flicked along Dawn's body, searching for the telltale wounds of a vampire bite.

"No. She got the keys to Mom's old SUV and drove off. I don't know where she went. She kept muttering something about needing to learn how to control it, and that you couldn't help her. Because of the chip."

"Bugger," Spike swore in a low voice. He flopped down onto the sofa, head in hands. Where would she go to seek help? Her little Scooby mates were out of town. And Rupert was in England; a phonecall would have been enough to contact him. She could have gone anywhere with the car.

"Bleedin'--Angel! She's gone to see Peaches." It was the one thing that made sense. Aside from Spike, her former lover was the only other vampire she knew, who didn't snack on Happy Meals on legs. How she thought Angel could help her where Spike couldn't, though, was beyond him. Angel had a soul; he had a chip. Same difference. Buffy had neither; she would still have to do all the hard work by herself.

"I'll call him," Dawn said, phone already in hand. "We're going to get her, aren't we?"

"Yes, Bit, we are. But I'll call." How would Dawn ever explain to Angel what had happened, what Buffy had become? He took over the phone.

"Number six." Dawn indicated the correct speed-dial button. At least the poof's number

wasn't saved under the first one, he thought glumly while pressing the button. Rapid beeps sounded in his ear, then the phone began to ring. Once, twice.

"Angel Investigations. We help the helpless. This is Cordelia speaking."

"Lemme speak with Angel," Spike growled without preamble. His fingers wrapped tightly around the phone.

"I'm sorry, who's this? Angel is not--" She paused for a beat and he could hear the tension come down the line along with her breathing. "Spike? Oh my God... Is Dawn all right? Buffy just got here but she's not making any--"

"Let me speak with Angel, you bint!" Spike hollered. The phone at the other end dropped with a thud and he heard Cordelia yell.

"Angel! It's Spike. He wants to talk with you." In a softer voice but still audible over the line, she added, "Perhaps he'll ask for some lessons in manners. He sure could use 'em."

In the background Buffy's voice pleaded with Angel not to answer the phone, not to talk to him. Spike frowned. Why would she not want Angel to talk to him? With a sudden intake of breath he realized she had not yet told him what Spike had done to her.

"Spike? What do you want?"

"The Slayer. She okay?"

"More or less," Angel answered curtly. "She stormed in here a little while ago, just before sunrise. I was about to turn in for the day. She's all upset and I can't really get a word out of her. What did you do to her, anyway?"

"Noth--" Spike swallowed and sighed. "Look, mate, it's a long story. Too long to tell over the phone. Just keep Buffy in for the day. Me and Dawn, we'll be there as soon as we can."

Angel hmphed. "Your story better be good," he grumbled. "Because I swear, if I find out you hurt her, I'll stake you myself."

"Yeah, yeah," Spike said. He was growing impatient and wanted to get going. They could discuss his possible stakeage later. Although, he wasn't too sure at the moment he didn't deserve to be dusted. "Just keep her there." He hung up before Angel could say another word.

Dawn was looking at him with wide, questioning eyes. "Let's go, Nibblet," he told her. "We got a little trip to make to get big sis home."

Angel leaned against the leather upholstery, nursing a glass of pig's blood in his hands. His eyes followed Buffy as she wandered aimlessly through the lobby of the Hyperion. Occasionally she picked up an object that caught her attention, and she turned it over in her hands before setting it back down, a curious expression on her face as if she had never before seen a candle or a vase. She looked everywhere but at Angel. He waited.

They were alone in the hotel. Gunn and Wesley were in North Hollywood, checking out a possible lead on the Gjorac demon that they had tried to locate for the past two weeks. And when several attempts at small talk fell on dead ears, Cordelia had decided that this morning was the perfect time for some errands. Angel agreed, hoping that Buffy would open up more easily when they were alone.

It was nearly noon, hours since Buffy had arrived from Sunnydale, and she still hadn't said a word about why she came running to Los Angeles in the thick of the night. Angel knew better than to push for an explanation. She'd only clam up more if he tried to force her to talk. So, he took another sip and waited.

At last, his patience was rewarded. Buffy turned to face him. "How do you handle it?" she asked with a slight nod at the glass in his hands.

He raised an eyebrow, not sure what she meant. "Butcher shop," he said. "Cordelia has a friend at the slaughter house."

Buffy shook her head. "'s Not what I meant," she mumbled. "Don't you long for human blood? Spike still drinks it, even if he has to buy it from 'donors' or steal from the hospital. Why don't you? Is it... because you have a soul?" Her voice held an odd quiver at the last word.

Angel contemplated his answer for a moment. He wished he knew where these questions were coming from all of a sudden. He suspected it had something to do with Spike and Buffy's emerging feelings for his bleached grandchilde. Angel was no fool. Spike loved Buffy as much as he'd ever loved Drusilla -- if not more. And he had long since realized that Buffy was starting to feel things for Spike. It bothered him. Not the fact that she was moving on -- after all, that's why he left Sunnydale in the first place -- but that she moved on to Spike, slayer of slayers.

"It's not easy," he said at last, slowly, carefully weighing his words. "It helps to have a soul, but it takes a lot of hard work. You know, Buffy," he said, sitting forward and capturing her eyes with his, "a couple of months, no, a year ago, I had to drink from a human. A woman, she was a friend. It was the only way I could think of to save her. I was working undercover with some demons when she came upon us. If I hadn't pretended to kill her, they would have done it. But it kept me up for months afterward. And every waking moment the memory was there: the salty-sweet flavor that's so unique to fresh human blood, the way it spurted from her vein when I broke through the skin..." He shuddered at the memory. Kate had understood why he did what he did, somehow. Still, drawing back from her had been the hardest thing since... since leaving Sunnydale.

Buffy hung onto his every word, clearly enraptured by his description. Her tongue flicked across her lips. Angel blinked at the look of naked fascination on her face. "It gets easier with time," he said with a shrug. "But the craving, it never goes away. Not completely."

"Can I have a sip?" Buffy asked, reaching for his glass.

"What?" Angel cried. "No!" He snatched away the glass before she could grab it. "Buffy! What's gotten in to you? Why all these questions, this morbid fascination with my diet. Why now after all these years?"

"Angel..." Her voice hitched on a sob and tears glistened in her eyes. He wanted to take her in his arms, wipe away her tears, tell her that whatever it was, he would make it go away.

Then, his grisliest nightmare came true. When Willow brought the news of Buffy's death, Angel's world had fallen apart and he thought that nothing more horrible could ever happen. He was wrong. This was worse. Much, much worse. Before his astonished, disbelieving eyes, the girl he loved morphed into a vampire.

"Buffy! Who... How... When..." Coherent thought seemed to have left him and he couldn't form a single proper sentence. His eyes were glued to her face; her beautiful face, contorted with ridges and fangs. He gulped, feeling sick, afraid the blood he drank would come back up.

"Spike," she mumbled.

Molten anger surged through him, hot fury and hate and murderous rage. His game face surged forward unbidden and Angel found himself incapable to stop it. "That vampire's

ugly ass is dust! Should have staked him years ago, when I had the chance."

Spike and Dawn reached the sprawling building that was Angel's home much later than Spike had planned. It had taken them a lot longer to get to Los Angeles than it should have. In his hurry he had forgotten that the DeSoto needed to gas up. They'd been seriously at risk of getting stranded in the desert before the car lurched into a small gas station on the last fumes in the tank. Spike was stuck inside, behind the blacked-out windows, while Dawn went outside to gas up and handle the leering gaze of the attendant. The continuous frustrated growl Spike had been helplessly emitting during their stop left his throat raw. He'd prayed for a single cloud so he could get out of the car and put the fear of the Big Bad into the wanker. Naturally, his prayer wasn't answered.

As if to add insult to injury, they got stuck in traffic on the highway, just outside the city limits. It was a dangerously pissed-off vampire who drove up in front of the Hyperion around three in the afternoon. Although Spike parked the DeSoto as close to the entrance as possible, the blanket still smoldered, about to burst into flames, when he finally ran through the front entrance into the cool, shaded lobby. Dawn followed on his heels.

Angel and Buffy spun around to face them. Bugger, was Spike's first thought when he saw they were both in game face. So much for breaking the news gently, with explanations and all.

The next thought was that his days were finally numbered. Angel pounced on him, grabbed him by the throat and slammed him into the wall. The business end of a wooden stake pierced his shirt, pressing painfully into his skin right on top of his heart. Bloody hell.

"Ow!" Spike yelled with his last breath, feet dangling above the marble floor. Over Angel's head he saw Buffy looking at them with a detached interest. "Watch it, mate!"

"Why?" Angel growled, his voice low and cold. "Why did you do it?" His tone reminded Spike strongly of Angelus and the blonde vampire knew he was never closer to the end of his unlife as he was now.

"It wasn't enough that she never staked you, was it? That she let you into her house, her life? No, not for William the Bloody," Angel answered his own question. "You always want to get the last word in, don't you, Spike, hand out a final insult. Did you do this to

get back at me? Eh? I'm talking to you."

Conceited, much? thought Spike, unaware he was thinking in Scooby speak. "Not 'ike 'at," he ground out. A little more pressure on his throat and Angel would surely shatter his larynx. If he'd been a breathing creature, he'd have died already. Being as it was, it just made speech impossible.

"Angel, don't!" Dawn's was pulling on Angel's arm, vainly trying to make him let go. "It's not Spike's fault!"

Three pairs of yellow eyes swiveled in the direction of the frightened girl. Spike tried to shake his head but Angel's hand around his throat prohibited any freedom of movement.

"I made him do it," Dawn sobbed. "Buffy was dying. I'm sorry!" She turned in the direction of her sister. "I couldn't let you die. Not again. I made Spike... I told him I'd kill myself if he let you die. I'm sorry!"

Angel relaxed his iron grip on Spike's throat a fraction and instinct made the vampire draw in a ragged, unnecessary breath. A heavy silence followed, in which Angel and Buffy wrapped their minds around what Dawn told them. Before either could think of something to say, Dawn did an about-face and ran out of the front door.

"Dawnie, wait!" Buffy chased her into the bright sunlight.

"Buffy!" Spike screamed at the same instant his feet hit the floor. Angel was in a better position; in a vampiric blur too fast for the naked eye, he tackled Buffy, tearing her away from the door a moment before she would have walked out. She clung to him, sobbing.

Spike touched his bruised throat. He swallowed with difficulty, wincing at the pain it caused. It'd be a few days before he enjoyed his meals again.

Buffy pushed away from Angel and sought Spike's eyes. "Is it true?" she asked in a tear-filled voice. "What Dawn said, is it true?" She had morphed back to her human face and tears streaked her pale cheeks.

"Yes, luv," Spike admitted with a sigh. "Didn't want you to know, didn't want you to blame her. I'd rather you blame me. But yes, Nibblet did threaten she'd kill herself if I didn't do it. Had the big knife near her stomach and all."



Spike hovered near the front entrance of the hotel, his eyes glued to the glass doors. The sky outside was growing a deep shade of blue; sunset was imminent. A few more minutes, then he could escape. Get in the DeSoto, and skedaddle out of here before Angel or Buffy or any of her Scooby pals decided that enough was enough and plunged a stake through his heart. Although death wasn't the worst fate he could imagine. More terrible than being turned into dust would be to live with Buffy's silent recriminations.

After Dawn ran away, time crept by at a snail's pace, the seconds as long as minutes and each minute lasting an hour. Spike had wanted to go after Dawn and got frustrated with the bright sunlight that prevented him. Buffy said Dawn needed some time alone. She squeezed a reluctant promise out of Angel not to stake Spike right away --"Although he would deserve it," the older vampire had said-- and after he withdrew to his office, an uncomfortable silence had fallen over the Hyperion lobby. Spike couldn't meet Buffy's eyes so in the end she had taken up Angel's offer to get some sleep in one of the rooms, leaving Spike alone with his thoughts.

He squinted up at the sky. 't Was about time.

"Hey." Buffy's soft voice froze his hand reaching for the doorknob in mid-air.

"Hullo, pet," he said cautiously.

"See her yet? I hoped she'd come back before sunset. Los Angeles is a dangerous place for a girl out after dark."

Spike didn't reply; he didn't trust his voice. He worried about Dawn too, wished she had come back before it was time to leave. It would have been nice to be able to say goodbye to Nibbles.

Buffy glanced sideways at his prolonged silence and her eyes narrowed. "You were gonna bail, weren't you? Leave me alone to deal with the fall out?"

"No, pet, I--"

"Don't lie to me, William."

He gulped at her use of his given name and his shoulders slumped. She was right; he had been planning to bail on her. Guilt washed over him and sat heavy in his belly. "Sorry, luv. I know this is not what you wanted. I should not have let Dawn--"

"Shh," she hushed him. "I know why you did it. I don't hate you because of it. It's just

another episode in the soap opera that's The Life of Buffy Summers. What's a little vampirism after being mojoed back from the dead, uh?" She snorted a humorless laugh and his heart went out to her. They should have left well enough alone after she died.

"I'm sorry for that too, luv," he murmured. Wasn't him, though, that time.

She turned around to face him, biting her lower lip. "Spike, I don't want you to go. I need your help to deal with... what I am. For better or for worse, you are my sire. You have a responsibility."

He nearly burst out laughing, when it hit him that she was right. Not many vampires lived up to the responsibilities of a sire. Didn't like the strings that came with a child. In this case, however, he would happily accept them if she'd have him.

"You sure about that, pet?" he asked. He quirked his head in the direction of Angel's office. "What about the Poof?"

"He's willing to help. But we've grown too far apart. It won't work. I need you, Spike."

He contemplated for a moment, staring out the door while the streetlights turned on, casting their orange glow on the world. Then he gave a nod. "Let's go find the Bit and go home."

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