

SEASON'S SLAYINGS



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SLAY BELLS RING

On the one hand, it was nice to know he could still make people scream.

On the other, his head was already throbbing its punishment for the alcohol he'd washed down his throat, and this silly chit wasn't helping matters in the slightest with all her bellowing. And since *he* was the one lying starkers on a cold slab of metal with unforgiving fluorescents burning his retinas—oh, and his chest had just been bloody sliced open—her reaction seemed a bit over the top.

Spike hissed and pressed his palm to his brow, fighting to sit up. The room spun a bit, but not so much that he missed the clinical setting, complete with lots of metallic surfaces. A standing tray of surgical instruments was at his left, right near where the wailing woman in mint-green scrubs was, well, wailing. She was still holding the scalpel that had just been about an inch deep in his chest which, complete with the tag he saw looped around his big toe, filled in the hazy bits rather nicely.

His last memory was a streetlight rushing toward him through the DeSoto's smeared windshield. Smeared not because the sun had been out—it hadn't—but because he'd been in such a rush to get out of Sunnyhell that he'd half-arsed preparing his car for a nighttime escape. No dawdling when he knew the Slayer would be out in full bloody force, hunting him down all over again just so she could manhandle him back to the watcher's flat. There, she would no doubt press herself against him like the sodding tease she was and flood his mind with even more memories no amount of alcohol could drown out.

You're covered in her, Dru had said. Fucking bitch had never spoken so clearly in her life. No riddles, no wacky metaphors to admire and interpret, and it had still taken a sodding spell to make Spike realize what she'd actually been saying.

He might have enjoyed a longer stint in denial had his days not been filled with Buffy afterward. Buffy popping in to interrogate him about those commando blokes, shoving him with a bit too much relish into the watcher's tub, her hot little hands making his skin burn, the rush of her pulse taunting fangs that still wanted to sink into her delicate little throat but not for the right reasons. He knew she'd love it, knew she'd go wild, and knowing that was a more brutal torture than whatever those army gits had done to make him harmless as a kitten.

Put like that, the only sane thing was to get as far from Buffy

Summers as he could. Big world, wasn't it? More than one way to undo some government sabotage, and all alternatives were safer than sticking around so he could lose even more face in front of the woman he'd hated discovering he actually loved. So he'd waited for his chance, for Rupert to become comfortable enough with him that he no longer insisted on securing him to the furniture, then bolted. But not before helping himself to the watcher's stash of spirits, because god knows Spike had needed as much help forgetting that he was lost for the Slayer as he could manage.

The first stretch of the drive had gone all right, most of his attention fixed on making sure he cleared Sunnydale without incident. He'd cranked the volume on his radio up as loud as his sensitive vampire ears could tolerate and belted out the lyrics to whatever blasted through the speakers, trying and failing not to wonder how the Slayer would react when she came in for her nightly torment only to discover he'd up and left. No more Spike for Buffy to kick or taunt or, in the event of a spell, snog. Or more than snog. Not that she'd gotten very far, but he'd have to drink a whole hell of a lot more before he forgot the way her hand felt around his prick, the strength she'd *just barely* teased him with. *Just barely* because it had all been a sampler, hadn't it? Buffy dragging him off to the loo, flushed and giggling, telling him she'd hurry back from the magic shop so she could show him just how well a girl like her could bruise a bloke like him. Smirking that saucy little smirk of hers when he'd called her a tease, and singsonging that it was all she could do to pay him back for the potshots he'd taken after finding her moping around about that Parker git.

In the middle of remembering the way she'd pumped and stroked, Spike had done what any rational slayer-hating vamp would have done at that point—kept one hand on the wheel and reached for the sodding scotch with the other so he could hopefully drown out the parts of him sick enough to wish the spell had gone on longer. Or worse, never ended.

One bottle had become two. Then three. Then things got a bit blurry after that. Up until the streetlight, that was.

And if he was waking up here, his head ringing where it wasn't pounding and vice bloody versa, that likely meant he'd missed one hell of a funny show. One involving paramedics and flashing lights and some sod

with a stethoscope trying to find a pulse or a heartbeat and coming to the obvious conclusion.

Fuck.

Spike again eyed the bint who had been about to slice him open. She was still screaming, her face almost purple with the effort, and in the old days, that was what he would have considered a serious invitation for a good being killed. But these weren't the old days—these were the strange, new, bloody awful days and he didn't have the option of letting his monster out. He had to play this careful-like.

Because his life had become a fucking nightmare.

“Look,” Spike said, raising his hands in a gesture of surrender. The barmy chit just screamed louder, hitting a pitch that he was certain would have his brain leaking out his ears if he had to take much more of it. Fortunately, his voice was also evidently what she needed to be startled into action. Less fortunately, she only got as far as crashing against another metal surface, adding the clatter of medical utensils hitting the floor to the ongoing shrill. Before he could do so much as roll his eyes, the door to the small room flew open and a whole host of new wankers spilled inside. And once they took a gander at him, they all *also* began screaming at the top of their lungs. Lungs that Spike, very unfortunately, could not rip out from between their ribcages.

Somewhere, he was sure Dru was laughing her little black heart out.



The truly embarrassing thing was it didn't take him long to buckle.

In fact, it took less than ten minutes.

Once the screaming stopped, once Spike was allowed to get in a word edgewise, he was given a selection of clothes to wear—not his, as they had literally cut the jeans and T-shirt off him—and hustled from the morgue to the sheriff's department, where he learned the name of the town where he'd marooned himself—Mistletoe, California—and that the only piece of clothing they hadn't outright ruined was the duster. Bloody good thing, too, as he'd have risked more than making his head explode in pain to avenge his most hard-earned trophy. Then he'd be facing more than just a good tongue-lashing from the Slayer for his efforts.

As it was, the tongue-lashing he was looking to get from her wasn't going to be the fun sort, anyway. After listening to his explanation, she'd growled something about her watcher never going for it—*it* being bailing Spike out of the rather remarkable mess he'd made—only to call back a few minutes later, having spoken to the watcher in question and learned that he would indeed chip in the dosh to bail Spike out. Likely the path of least resistance, when the alternative was letting the whole town in on the existence of vampires.

Which was what she showed up to do some five hours later, and in the sort of towering temper that would have lesser men shaking in their boots. But Spike was not a lesser man.

"Took you long enough to get here," he snarled.

Buffy drew up next to where he was handcuffed—both wrists looped through one of the chair's arms—and favored him with one of those holier-than-thou glowers. "It's two days until Christmas," she spat as though that meant anything to him. "You know what I should be doing right now? Making holiday cookies. Watching Jimmy Stewart romance Donna Reed on repeat. Taking a hot bubble bath. Or hell, maybe getting all the shopping done I've had to put off because of the never-ending crisis that is my life. Instead, I get *you*."

"Sounds like I saved you from bein' bored outta your mind. Think the words you're lookin' for are, 'thank you.'"

It was the wrong thing to say, which was exactly why he'd said it. Buffy's eyes narrowed into slits, her nostrils flaring and her flushed skin turning an even deeper shade of red. He had to fight the urge to adjust himself—she was beyond gorgeous when she was this fired up.

"Spike, I had hours on a bus with nothing to keep myself entertained but wondering what would happen to a vampire if I decided to take Scrooge's advice and shove a stake of holly in your heart. You know, to be festive. Get in the spirit of the season." She flashed him a flat smile. "If you know what's good for you, you'll keep your mouth shut."

But Spike didn't know what was good for him, or he didn't care enough to let it have a vote. And hell, it wasn't like the Slayer was the only one with a license to be pissed off. He sure as fuck hadn't asked her to turn his world on its head and make him realize the only kind of *eating* he wanted to do involved her cunt, the bitch.

“Bullying creatures who can’t hit back? Pretty sure that’ll land you on the naughty list, Slayer.” Which was something he so shouldn’t have said, because *naughty* and *slayer* in the same sentence did barmy things to his head. And his cock. Mostly his cock. Which she *couldn’t* notice, or she might actually follow through on one of her little threats. “Keep on like that and someone’s getting coal this year.”

“Well, as long as I can lob it at your head.”

“Would match the stake up your arse. Give you somethin’ else to squeeze into a diamond.”

“Spike, and I mean this with all sincerity, zip it or I will zip it for you.” She looked around, all aflutter, and it happened again. That raw surge of pure bloody lust that had his dick swelling and him without much recourse to hide the fact. The red in her cheeks and the fire in her eyes, the way her hair looked just slightly ruffled—hell, he even fancied the way she smelled under the less-pleasant odors she’d carried with her from the bus. Her blood was hot, and he caught a whiff of pure slayer sweat, but the skin beneath that smelled of fresh soap and lotion. He wondered if she’d just hopped out of the shower when he’d first rung her up for this yuletide errand, and the image of a wet, pink Buffy dressed only in a towel and holding a phone to her ear redefined pain and suffering.

Fuck, maybe he would be better off if she just staked him. If all he had to look forward to was salivating over Buffy, then what point was there to living? The conceit of a vampire mooning after the Slayer had been insult enough when the vampire in question had been saddled with a soul. Spike had no such excuse. Hell, he couldn’t even blame the government prats for whatever they’d done to his noggin. Everything he felt had been there before. It had just taken a spell to become obvious.

To him, at least. God help him should it become obvious to anyone else.

Thankfully, the tosser who had cuffed Spike to the chair came stumbling out of a nearby office before his thoughts could become any more depressing. “Are you Miss Summers?” the man squeaked. He was a lanky sort with vibrant ginger curls and a pockmarked face to match. “I hope so, because I want to get out of here before nine.”

Buffy transformed in a blink, going from raging bull to soft school-

girl. He hated how much he liked it—how much he wished that smile was aimed at him.

“Thank you for waiting,” she said as though the bloke had done her a personal favor. “We’ll be out of your hair in a jiff.”

Spike snickered and settled in.

He doubted that.



It was a burden, this *being right all the time* business.

Turned out Spike and the Slayer were grounded in Mistletoe for a few days, all courtesy of the piece of town property he’d rammed into. Oh, and the minor fact that he’d been driving under the influence. How the wankers could prove this, he had no sodding clue, considering he’d been a bit too dead to give a breathalyzer and any of those fancy tests they used on blood would have funny results. Still, the open bottles in the passenger and backseats, as well as the general alcohol stench of the car itself, had built up a nice circumstantial case that he couldn’t bite his way out of.

Thankfully, the watcher had prepared for all this and sent Buffy with a good amount of dosh to calm everyone down. Why, Spike had bugger-all idea—Buffy had a hard time explaining it too and ended up muttering something about him being a valuable resource in trying to learn more about those commando blokes. The excuse seemed weak but hell, he wasn’t in a place to complain.

Still, settling the bill was only the first part of the problem. The second was that the DeSoto wasn’t drivable. It wasn’t a lost cause, but it’d take a few days to get the parts needed to make the repairs. Buffy could hop a bus home, but that would defeat the purpose of her marching her cute little slayer arse down here to bail him out. So she was stuck with him, and even though Mistletoe wasn’t a hotbed of tourist activity, the town’s only inn was packed thanks to out-of-towners visiting for the holiday. That left a pitiful motel, of which there was only one room available.

Even worse...

“There’s one bed,” Buffy intoned, her overnight bag hitting the floor.

He didn't know why she felt the need to say as much—his eyes were working just as well as hers. "I have to spend Christmas in a motel room with *you* and there's only *one bed*."

"What's the matter, Slayer? Worry I'm a cover hog?"

She whirled around to turn her brilliant glare on him, her eyes all but glittering in the weak light that poured in from the street. If he were less of a bastard, he might have felt a pang of remorse. But he wasn't less of a bastard—he was the man he was, just as brassed and bitter as she was, only he had more right to it, being the hapless sod who had discovered he was in love with his mortal enemy. Misery loved company, after all, and Spike had gone through enough of his life miserable and alone. Might as well extend it to the Slayer. He could think of no one worthier.

"You're taking the floor," she informed him in a brusque, business-like tone. "And not a word."

"The hell I am. Not like I asked for this, is it?"

"No, Spike. It's a lot like you escaped Giles's place, climbed into a tin can you call a car, then destroyed both that car and public property because you couldn't keep your hands off the booze long enough to get far enough away from Sunnydale that you would officially stop being my problem." Buffy stormed around him and gave the door a good, hard slam that made the walls shake. "It's a lot like you forced me to leave right before *Christmas* to bail your undead butt out of jail, and I'm going to be stuck here with you until your stupid car is fixed. Forget Christmas—my entire winter break is ruined. Do you know how many breaks I get?"

It was the wrong thing to do, the wrong way to reply, but Spike, by virtue of being himself, couldn't be bothered to care. Instead, he made a show of glancing around—looking over her, behind her, a frown firmly fixed in place.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Tryin' to see if there's anyone here who cares." He could swear he heard her blood boiling, and god, it was delicious. "Seems to be just the two of us."

The Slayer wasn't about to stake a creature that couldn't fight back. She'd made that perfectly clear. She was, however, not above punching such a creature with every ounce of preternatural strength that came

with her calling. So when her knuckles crashed into his nose, when his feet parted ways with the floor and his body went barreling into the door she'd just closed, he wasn't surprised. A bit miffed, yeah, because he didn't have the pleasure of paying her back, but not surprised. Buffy liked to pretend she played fair, but she got her jollies just the same way he did.

"One more word," she said in a low, dangerous voice. "One more word, Spike, and I swear. I'll tell Giles I tripped or something. And I'm willing to bet the only reason that would make him even a little grumpy is that it will mean he paid to bail out a pile of dust. You wanna see if I'm right?"

Spike rolled his eyes, climbing back to his feet. "Look, it's not like this is my idea of a good time," he snapped. "The whole bloody reason I left was to get away from you lot. You think I wanted to ring you up?"

"Then why did you?"

"Know anyone else who would've dropped everythin' to come to the rescue?"

"This is *so* not a rescue. This is retrieving a resource. Sure, that resource is probably spent up and all kinds of useless, but you know, leave no stone unturned."

That was a bunch of bollocks and he knew it. He thought about telling her as much—it would be nothing less than what she deserved—but decided that he'd tested her patience enough for one night. And they did have a ways to go, especially if he wanted to get out of this situation with all his parts in working order.

Worse fates, he supposed, than being stuck in a room with the woman he loved. Even if he was hard-pressed to think of any. Which was the whole sodding reason he'd been keen to skip town in the first place. He'd needed to put as much distance between him and the Slayer as possible and now here he was, shacking up with her, even if only for a few days.

Fuck, maybe it was time to part ways with the DeSoto. It had been a good car, faithful and all that, but he wasn't sure it was worth hanging around here just for the dubious honor of escorting her highness back to the Hellmouth. He could wait until she conked out, find a set of wheels

to hotwire, and be halfway across the country before she caught on that she'd been ditched.

Anything was better than this torment.

"What is that look for?"

Spike started, forcing himself out of his thoughts and back to the present. "What look?"

"You had a thinky look."

"Did not."

Buffy stared at him for a dull moment. "You're right. My mistake. A thinky look would suggest you know how to use your brain and clearly"—she waved a hand at the room—"that's not the case."

"Oooh, kitty's got claws."

"Just do us both a favor and don't do it, whatever it is."

"Have to know what the bloody hell you're talkin' about first."

She groaned and rolled her head back as though he were the most frustrating person on the planet, and that couldn't be the case because that honor was hers. "Whatever it is you're planning. Just drop it."

Spike scoffed. Knowing slayers was his business, not the other way around. "You're off your rocker."

"I mean," she continued, speaking as though he had not, "on one hand, your ideas tend to backfire rather spectacularly. On the other, I am unfortunately in the splash zone and I am not in the mood to get wet."

Oh, that was a delicious bit of wordplay. "There's a pity," he drawled in a low voice. "Seem to remember you smelled particularly delectable when you were...hot and bothered."

Buffy took a wild swing at his nose again, but this time he saw it coming and caught her fist before it could make contact. Squeezed his cool hand around her warm skin and fought back another laugh when her cheeks flushed like she was suddenly thinking things reserved only for the naughtiest of naughty slayers. If only.

Or maybe not if only. He fully expected her to give him another less-fun version of a tongue lashing, but when she opened her mouth, there was a wobble in her voice, one slight enough for most people to have missed. He wasn't most people, though. He was the bloke who knew her better than she knew herself, whether she wanted to admit it or not. The one who had made the study of the Slayer, of *her*, his most pressing prior-

ity. So when she said, “And here *I* have this crystal-clear memory of telling you to never say anything gross like that to me again,” he heard what he wagered only he could.

Which made him do something very stupid.

He grinned. “What, hot and bothered?” he asked, firming his grip on her fist when she tried to pull it back. “You have somethin’ to be ashamed about, Slayer? Or are you just too shy to admit you didn’t get as much of the Big Bad as you were hoping? Pity that spell didn’t last just a teensy bit longer, innit?”

“One more crack out of you and your only ride back to Sunnydale will be in an ashtray.”

“It’s all right, pet,” Spike purred, leveraging his grip on her fist to tug her closer. “Our little secret, yeah?”

It would have been easy for her to pull free—she was, after all, much stronger than him—but for some reason, she didn’t, and that fact made his undead heart constrict. That and the realization that she hadn’t been this close to him since the spell. The one that had started with them sniping at each other, ready to tear one another’s head off, before she’d been in his arms, and he’d been moved to drop to his knees so he could ask her the question he’d never gotten to ask in life.

No one had discussed the spell since the witch had baked up a tray-full of apology. Beyond the normal blustering, Buffy hadn’t said much to him at all, and nothing he’d call important. She’d gone back to status bloody quo, leaving him to wonder if that *forgetting* spell she’d hinted at had been more than just a thing she’d said.

Well, he had his answer at last. The wobble in her voice a moment ago could have easily been a fluke. The ears playing tricks on him, and all that. But what was happening now, *this* moment, was something else entirely. Time’s past, he would have already been sent head-first into the nearest wall just for holding onto her like this. For daring to touch her with his filthy vampire hands or some rot. She would have quipped something at him that made him both want to rip her tongue out and shove his own down her throat and they would go like that for a bit, taking the mickey out of one another until someone forced them to stop or one of them truly ended up dead.

Buffy wasn’t quipping, though. She seemed caught, captured. So

much so she didn't tug herself free, even when he lowered his head or when his lips brushed the warm skin along the back of her hand. Instead, he felt a tremor rush through her, as though she were fighting something he couldn't see. Something that wasn't a beastie at all.

And god, it was delicious.

"What's our secret?" Buffy asked what seemed like an age later, long enough he'd forgotten what he'd said and had to run his mind back. That her voice sounded more like the girl she tried to be than the Slayer she was didn't help matters. Made a man think things he knew he shouldn't.

Either he pushed his luck or he backed down. And Spike never backed down.

"That you're not over...what'd you call it? The bad boy thing? Can help wean you off if you need a hand. I'm a giver like that."

That did it. Whatever spell had settled over her broke at once, but not before he saw her cheeks bloom with deeper color or before he caught a whiff of what he was certain *wasn't* disgust. And that was more than curious—that was downright neat. Here he'd been teasing, and it seemed he might have accidentally stumbled across the truth.

"You're bent," she told him, stepping back and fixing him with her reliable glare once more. "And delusional."

"And you're—"

"No. That's it. No more talking for you." Buffy backed up a step, then another, each one seeming to come easier for her. When she had more than half the room between them, she huffed out a deep breath. "In fact, those are the new rules. Talk and dust. Think I'm bluffing? Feel free to put that luck of yours to the test. It's done so much for you lately."

But she didn't give him a chance to talk. Instead, she plucked her overnight bag off the floor and made a mad dash for the privy in one smooth, seamless motion, and slammed the door closed behind her.

Leaving Spike to stand there like a dolt, blinking at where the Slayer had stood just seconds ago, wondering what the hell had just happened. If it was possible after all, this insane notion that the Slayer might actually fancy him. That the spell the witch had cooked up had made a mark on her that was anything like the one it had left on him.

And if that was true... Spike inhaled and eyed the bed. The single bed.

Could be this had the makings for a happy Christmas after all.



He was going to bloody kill her.

Spike turned on his heel to pace back up the strip of floor along the bed, sparing the door another glare as he did so. It remained stubbornly closed, as he'd known it would, but the sight still pissed him off. Five hours and seventeen minutes she'd been gone. Five sodding hours in this pissant town knowing full bloody well he couldn't go anywhere and that he hadn't had anything decent to eat since he'd left the Hellmouth. The bitch was doing this just to punish him, and fuck if it wasn't working.

Never mind that the accommodations were terrible—Spike had slept on many floors over the last century, but this one must have been mopped with holy water for as much kip as he'd managed to grab, and all of it had been her fault. Never mind that, as a vampire, he hadn't been able to nod off until close to dawn, but he'd been stuck listening to the rhythm of her breaths, her sighs, the little sounds she made when she shifted or turned and the rasp of sheets against her skin. Angelus could take a few lessons in torture from this bitch, and he was sure she'd known it too. It was what she lived for, tormenting him, and she did it with a flourish he'd admire were he not the sorry sod on the receiving end.

Could have been worse, he supposed. She might have actually caved and let him rest his weary bones on the actual bed. Spike doubted he would have slept at all, even if it was the cushiest mattress in all the land. Being that close to her would flood his mind with even more ridiculous fantasies than those already there—that maybe she'd snuggle up next to him in the night, cover him with her warmth. That she'd realize she liked waking up with his chest under her cheek. Or she'd study him, decide he was an all-right bloke after all, and that she wanted to give him that blowie she'd teased him with all night during the damned spell that had ruined everything.

As it was, he'd snagged a couple of hours and woken up to a rumbling stomach and a familiar itch in his mouth, his fangs looking for any excuse to slide out and into something soft and warm. That Buffy had

been prancing around in a towel, bringing what had only been a daydream earlier into startling life, hadn't helped matters. He'd seen a glimpse of creamy thigh before she'd whirled around and caught him, and then the shouting had started.

It wasn't his fault she'd assumed he'd be out like the dead until sundown like a good little vampire. She still had made the decision to throw caution to the wind and flaunt all that supple flesh in front of a starving man. Would have served her right if he'd taken a bite out of her, migraine or no.

Damn, he needed blood, and he needed it now. When he'd relayed as much, Buffy had rolled her eyes and told him to suck it up. He'd been hungry and desperate enough to suggest that she suck something else and had won a nose that had yet to stop throbbing for his efforts.

Bloody bitch was going to be the death of him.

He'd been left to stem the flow of blood from his nostrils and inform her that licking that up wouldn't count as lunch, only to earn a look like he was some sort of thing she'd scrape off her shoe. Well, excuse him for trying to be informative. For all he knew, Buffy assumed that any blood was fair game and he could nourish himself just fine by bleeding some on his own. Once he'd quelled the urge to kill her—as best he could do, seeing as that was the sort of thing that never went away—he'd asked her nicely to find him something to nibble on. Couldn't do it himself, being that the sun was out, and Buffy had begrudgingly agreed. Had a bit of last-minute Christmas shopping to do, herself. And since they were stranded here until the DeSoto was back in working order, odds were good she wouldn't get another chance. So she'd gotten herself all dolled up and flitted right out of the room and into the sunlight where he couldn't follow. And that had been that.

Five hours and twenty-one minutes ago.

Spike snarled again and threw another glare at the door. Vampires had a considerable arsenal of abilities on their side but willing a person to materialize was not among them. Not that he trusted himself to greet her in any manner other than the sort that would earn him another nose punch, but even that would be welcome, as it'd be *something*. Anything. The only thing to do in this hovel was flip between the two functioning

channels on the telly or crack out the proffered Gideon from the nightstand drawer, and bored as he was, Spike wasn't quite that desperate yet.

Yet.

God, he hated her.

If only he could hate her in the right way.

The sun was only an hour or so from setting by the time the familiar thud of her heartbeat reached his ears. Spike glowered at the door, torn between wanting to pounce on her the second she crossed the threshold and play like he hadn't noticed she was gone at all. As hungry as he was, no one would mistake his enthusiasm for anything other than the need to tame the bloodlust, but he knew the real reason he was steamed had nothing to do with the tummy rumblies, and even if *only* he knew the truth, he was becoming increasingly paranoid that she'd be able to look at him and see it. Ridiculous as that was.

Not ridiculous enough to risk it, though, he decided. And so he flung himself at the last minute into the chair positioned at the small folding table the motel had decided to deem the writing desk, hitting it hard enough that it tipped onto its back two legs. Buffy opened the door just in time to see him lose balance and tumble back, his feet swinging wildly over his head, hovering for a second in midair, before giving in to the wrong direction's gravity pull and sending him crashing to the hard-as-rocks floor he also got to call a bed.

Then the bitch started to laugh and didn't stop.

Yeah, he was going to kill her. He was going to undo whatever those government prats had done to him, snag him up a slayer, and take his time unburdening her of the calling she resented so much. Make her remember who he was, and more importantly, who he wasn't—someone to bloody *laugh* at.

It was only that thought, that *promise*, that could have convinced him that he was better off getting up than waiting out the night on the floor. So Spike, mustering up whatever dignity he could summon, sprang to his feet. "Where the hell have you been?"

Buffy was still laughing, though, her face flushing so brilliantly that he felt his anger begin to chip away. Then surge again when he realized it was chipping away. Out of his head in love with her or not, Big Bads

didn't turn into soft, purring kittens just because a pretty girl was radiant when she laughed.

Only *radiant* was too tame a word for the Slayer. She was something more, something purer. And he hated that he'd noticed that, too.

Finally, after what felt like an age, the laughter began to dissipate, and Buffy lifted a hand he belatedly saw was weighed down by several fat plastic shopping bags to wipe away the tears that had started to gather in her eyes. She managed to clear those tears away using her knuckles, though awkwardly, before she moved toward the bed again. "Oh man," she said. "I really, really needed that."

Spike grunted rather sulkily. "Glad to be of service. Wanna answer the bloody question?"

"That question being?"

"Where have you been all sodding day?"

Buffy snickered. "Where do you think?" she replied, depositing both handfuls of bags onto the ugly comforter. There hadn't been quite as many in her other hand, but enough that she looked relieved when she let them go. "I told you, I still had some Christmas shopping to do."

He eyed the bed, which was now more bag than mattress. "*Some.*"

"Okay, so, most." She wrinkled her nose in a way he would *not* find adorable. "I do my best work under pressure. And it's not like I'm going to have any time when we get back to Sunnydale since, thanks to you, that won't be until after Christmas is officially over."

She'd picked the wrong bloke to trot out the guilt trip with. "Yeah, well, you can go ahead and cough up whatever you bought for *me* now, so long as it's red and rich in iron." Spike held out a hand. "Been waiting all day. About to gnaw my bloody arm off."

Buffy made a face, rolling her eyes as though it was unreasonable to want to eat at least once every twenty-four hours. "Well, maybe next time, you'll think before you drink, drive, and plow your car into a streetlight."

The *next time* he got behind the wheel, she'd be right there with him. In the seat beside his, which, dear oh dear, didn't have one of those safety belts that had become the rage in the sixties. Maybe if he was lucky, he could stage another crash—the sort that would send her hurtling through the windshield. It wouldn't be the best way he'd done in

a slayer, but he would make sure the history books recorded it anyway. Creativity ought to be acknowledged.

Before he could say any of that, though, a pack of bagged blood hit his chest and thunked unceremoniously to the floor.

“Make it last,” she said in her holier-than-thou voice that couldn’t help but turn him on. “Small towns apparently don’t love it when a stranger rolls through and buys blood by the gallon. I’d really like to not have to go back and ask for seconds.”

Spike looked from her to the blood lying at his feet and back again. She couldn’t be serious. “That’s it? Your new plan to starve me into submission?”

Buffy rolled her eyes and upended one of the many bags so that a cascade of red went tumbling over the mattress. “I would say that bleach has fried your brain, but I’m starting to think you don’t have one to fry,” she said through her teeth. “One more time—make it last.”

Well, he thought, surveying the goods with some relief, that was a bit better. Except... “Uh, Slayer?”

She answered in the form of a glare.

“You do know blood spoils if left out, right?”

“Yep. I wrote that down on my ‘things that aren’t my problem’ list.”

He sucked in his cheeks, tamping down the urge to take a mad swing at her too-perfect face. Not worth the headache. Literally. “You’re right. It goes bad, I’ll just dump it out. Explain to the miserable sod who owns this dump that it was a heavy flow month for you. Way you’re actin’, I’m sure that wouldn’t—”

Her knuckles crunched into his nose before he could choke anything else out, which, pain aside, was likely for the best. Picking a fight with the Slayer was always dangerous business, but never more so when he couldn’t fight back.

But it was this or *something else*, and *something else* was even more likely to get him staked, seeing as *something else* was seizing her, pulling her to him, and continuing where they’d left off before the sodding spell had ended. All that build-up, all that anticipation, the taste of her still burning in his mouth, and now she was here and all around him and there was fuck all he could do about it. Couldn’t thrash her around until his better senses took him over again, couldn’t throw her on the mattress

and show her what it was like to have a real vampire between her legs, couldn't do anything but *wait* while she did her bloody *shopping* and hope she brought home enough table scraps to keep him from turning into a walking skeleton.

Whatever he'd thought he'd seen there the night before had been his own head trying to trick him into thinking he wasn't as alone in this as he was. That maybe the spell hadn't just affected him. But it had, and he couldn't do this. Couldn't be with her, couldn't be without her. Not here. Not when there was no end in sight.

"Say one more thing like that to me," Buffy practically snarled. "I dare you."

He didn't know how or why, but his first instinct was to laugh, so hell, he went with it. "Just one?" he replied, cupping his nose, which was once again bleeding freely. "That'll do it, then? You'll put an end to this?"

"Wanna try me?"

"Don't need to. Already know you're all talk."

She shoved him hard enough that he went skittering back until his spine collided with the wall. And he'd give it to her—it was a good shove. Good show of force. But, like everything else she did when it came to him, ultimately more bark than bite. Buffy was a lot of things—and if anyone needed a list, he'd be more than happy to provide—but what she wasn't was someone who killed just because she was pissed off. The girl had a heart bigger than anyone he'd ever known. Even room in there, somehow, for creatures like him.

Just not the way he wanted to be there. Not sodding charity or whatever else.

"Look," she said, prowling forward in a way he knew she didn't mean to be seductive but was anyway. "I know you don't care. Believe me. Memo received. I know that you hate me, and hey, all with the mutual. And I get it. I've threatened your life a time or two and even when you've really, really deserved it, I've been lenient. As in way. But this, Spike? You came to *us* for help, which we had no reason to give but did anyway. Even though the information you have on those commandos is the opposite of useful, we *didn't* throw you out on your undead ass and tell you to fend for yourself. We bought you blood. We made you comfortable—"

“Comfortable?” Spike sputtered. It wasn’t the first time she’d used the word to describe being chained and tossed in the tub, but it somehow managed to surprise him all over again. “Think you’ve taken one too many blows to the head, Slayer.”

“Oh, that’s right. Forgive me for not letting the mass murderer walk freely in my watcher’s home. How inconsiderate.”

He rolled his eyes, wiped away the last of the blood trickling out of his nose and tightened his hands into fists. The urge was there again to take a swing right back at her—let her see how much she liked it—but the shock of pain he knew would follow would diminish that fleeting bout of satisfaction. Not worth it. “Might have been a decent excuse once,” he said instead. “Things are different though now, aren’t they? Ever hear that you catch more flies with honey, honey?”

“Ever hear that beggars can’t be choosers? You’re the beggar in this scenario.”

“And even though you’re the goody-good guys, I’ve still somehow been tortured by blokes more considerate than you lot.” That much was a flat-out lie, but a little exaggeration never hurt anyone. “So yeah, if you think I was keen to stick around while you let me rot in some tub or let a fledgling witch use me for magical target practice, you’re even dizzier than you look.”

“Well, if you don’t like it, feel free to *not* come crying to us every time you need help,” she shot back. “I didn’t have to do this, you know. Giles said it was up to me. And idiot that I am, I decide to drop everything and take *my* precious free time to help your sorry, pasty—”

“Why’s that?”

Buffy paused in mid-insult, her mouth hanging open and her eyes a bit wide. Then she blinked and shook her head, stepping back. “Huh?”

“You said it was up to you.” Spike arched his eyebrows, intrigued. Of everything that had happened since he’d made the phone call that had brought her here, this was the only thing to have truly surprised him. Hell, it more than surprised him—it made him feel...something. Something he knew better than to feel but felt anyway. “Why’d you do it?”

She blinked some more, this time in a way that betrayed she was searching for something to tell him, which was beyond intriguing. Had she even stopped long enough to consider the answer to that, herself?

From the phone call she'd made the night before to bring her watcher up to speed, Spike knew Rupert had told her, much to her consternation, there was no point in hopping a bus home and just trusting that Spike would point his car the right way once it was fixed properly. But then, she was the one who had made the decision to come in the first place, even with free time being the hot commodity it was. A more desperate man might read something into this.

"Because I'm clearly out of my mind," Buffy sputtered at last. "The point, Spike, is that you asked for help."

Really? He thought the point was that she was ready to stake him for making a crack about her monthlies, and if he ran his mouth again, he could kiss this mortal coil goodbye. The poor dear couldn't keep her story straight.

He could have said as much. Maybe he should have. But he didn't. The girl was turning him into a right softie, and fuck, he was letting her.

"So that's it, then?" he asked instead. "Reckon you have me at your mercy?"

Buffy didn't answer at first, rather looked away, blinking hard like she was trying to hold herself together, which was bloody humbling. In all the time he'd known her, the Slayer had never been anything other than the picture of absolute resolve and strength. She'd no sooner betray any sort of weakness around him than she would conspire to bring about an apocalypse. Yet here she was, softening right in front of him, the anger and frustration in her eyes fading into a sort of desperate sadness that couldn't help but strike him in the heart. Buffy being vulnerable, being soft, being *human* around him was nothing short of a gift. A piece of her most of the world never got to see.

"This hasn't gone the way I thought it would," she muttered, her voice thick.

"No?" he asked, trying like hell to sound like he didn't give a damn. "Lemme guess. I was supposed to take my lumps like a good little boy."

"You were supposed to help me not care."

"Not care?"

"That this is the first year that I'll be completely on my own for Christmas." Buffy's eyes went wide as soon as the words were out—a startled sort of wide, as though she'd only just then realized how much

she'd betrayed. Then she slapped a hand over her mouth, a pretty red blooming across her milky cheeks, and started to turn away from him. And he couldn't let her—not when she'd given him a tantalizing glimpse of authentic Buffy. Not the bitch wearing her armor, but the girl who had trusted him for a few precious hours with the deepest and most secret parts of her. The girl who had made him realize what he should've known without the help of that stupid spell because the fact that he was in love with her was bloody obvious.

Spike released a slow breath and took a step forward, reaching for her wrist before he could stop himself. Not wanting to, even knowing there was every chance Buffy would take another swing at him for daring. But she didn't. Instead, she let him drag her hand away from her mouth as her chin did that wibble thing that never failed to strike him dead center.

"Why are you gonna be alone for Christmas?" he asked.

Some of her fire returned to her gaze. "Like you care."

"Pretend for a second I do."

"What? So you can kick me while I'm down?"

"Got no one else to lend an ear, do you?" It wasn't the right thing to say, and to his credit, he realized as much almost at once. "Won't poke fun. Not like I have much room to talk, right? I'm the sorry git whose one and only phone call happened to be to the bloody Slayer. Don't think a vamp can sink much lower." Shell of a loser, she'd called him one time, and it had been right then. Weeping, moaning, crying his fool heart out over Dru, and having no clue it could get worse. That it *would* in just a year's time. Now he didn't even have being a vampire to fall back on, and he was heartsick for his mortal enemy.

Maybe the same had occurred to her, or maybe she was past the point of caring. Spike didn't know. All he knew was something changed in Buffy's expression. More of her hardness, her cynicism, seemed to thaw, taking the tension framing her jaw and living in her shoulders along for the ride. Then she sighed and looked down.

"It's not like it should matter," she said in a tone that made it clear it mattered quite a lot, regardless of whether it should. "I'm supposed to be this grown-up now, right? All with the independent. And since my special take on Thanksgiving was such a smashing success, Mom doesn't think twice about agreeing to go to this swanky art conference in LA

right before Christmas and decides to stay over so she can meet with a few potential suppliers right after. So no making of gingerbread men or reading 'T'was the Night Before Anything' on Christmas Eve for me. She didn't even decorate the tree because she didn't have time. Meanwhile, Xander's gone to his uncle's with the rest of his family, and Willow's dad is *really* cracking down hard on the observations of any gentile holidays because he thinks college will have her brainwashed so she *has* to come home. The closest thing I was going to have to a normal Christmas was Giles...or so I thought, but it turns out he was going to ask me to take over vamp-sitting duties anyway so he could fly back to England to see some niece or nephew or cousin or something. Not sure what I would've asked him to do anyway. Watch schmaltzy movies all day? Make Christmas cookies? He'd do it for me, but it'd still be with the weird."

Something in his chest gave a powerful lurch. "So when I called..."

Buffy offered a little half-shrug. "Perspective, I guess. Like it doesn't matter that everyone's bailing on me because I had slayage duty anyway, my life being the textbook definition of unfair. I wasn't even sure you'd be here when I got here—you had plenty of time to make with the getaway. And then I'd have to track you down and everything would be your fault." She pressed her lips together. "Same thing today."

"You thought I'd light out while you were doin' your shopping?"

Another little half-shrug. "Seemed possible."

"Even with the sun out and me down one set of wheels?"

"You showed up on Giles's doorstep wearing a blanket. I'm pretty sure if you wanted to be gone, you would have found a way to do it."

Fuck. If he'd had any circulation, that might have made him blush. "And you dropped everythin' to come to my rescue with the hope that I'd give you a decent chase."

"At least I can admit I'm pathetic."

"Not pathetic, pet. Nothin' wrong with bein' a bit glum you don't get to spend the holidays with the ones you love."

The look she gave him was pure Buffy bewilderment. Open and vulnerable, yet tinged with enough suspicion that he knew it was him she was seeing. Just not the him that she expected. And if she asked why he was being so bloody nice, he'd have nothing to tell her. Nothing except the truth, and *that* he could barely stand to tell himself. Wanting to shag

the Slayer was one thing—wanting to comfort her, give her what she was missing, make everything that was wrong in her world right, and more than that was bloody unnatural. So much so he'd decided that staying to have the army blokes set him right again wasn't worth the risk of becoming even more of a git than he already was.

Even if he feared that was a battle already well and lost.

Just like the rest of him.



Forget lost. He was well and buggered.

Ever since their little talk, ever since she'd let spill her seasonal disappointments, things between them had been different. Hell, he'd go so far as to say they'd been civil, which was something he and the Slayer had never been. It was enough to make a man think things he shouldn't, which was especially dangerous when his head was already full of the same.

Fact of the matter was, there was a part of him, a very real part, that existed solely to find a way to give the woman he loved exactly what it was she said she wanted, no matter how he had to go about it. So it was of no surprise to him when, after Buffy ducked out of their shared room a second time, Spike started thinking of ways to make a run for it.

Not because he actually wanted to run, mind. He wasn't sure he did anymore. He *was* sure he wanted Buffy to not be miserable about her Christmas. Because he loved her, and even if he hated that he loved her, that didn't make the actual love part any less real. Buffy wanted him to be the bad guy? Suited him fine. He could do that.

Only he hadn't. Not then, at least. Which meant he'd been there when she'd come back maybe twenty minutes later, dragging an oversized cooler into the room.

"For the blood," she'd said at his bemused look. "So it won't spoil and I don't have to make repeat trips and become the creepy blood lady they tell stories about to scare the local children." She'd flipped the lid off to reveal a cavity almost bursting with ice. "This'll do until we get the car, right?"

It hadn't been a gesture, he'd told himself. Not something she'd done

to be nice or make him comfortable, but that was a hard thing to force his lovesick heart to believe. But he had to believe it—he *had* to, or he would start to spiral.

Not an option where Buffy was concerned.

That conviction had worked for a bit, long enough for her to order nosh and find some cheery holiday program on the telly. Then it had been time for good little slayers to catch their kip again, and Spike knew the dance. Grab his patch of floor and try hard to ignore the way she breathed and the hum of her pulse and all other things *Buffy* until sleep finally found him.

He'd been in the process of making up his space when he'd said it. Hell, he couldn't even remember the way the words had run together now. Something about the floor being unforgiving at the best of times, but especially when he was walking off the punches she'd thrown at him on top of nearly being sliced open at the morgue. However he'd said it, he'd meant for her to crack a grin. Maybe roll her eyes, tell him he'd earned whatever he got, and to take it without complaint.

He hadn't expected her to say, "We can share the bed."

And that had been it—he'd known it then, like he knew it now. He *had* to get out. Not because Buffy needed a distraction over the holidays and he was here to provide, but because if he stayed, he'd spill. He'd give her everything he had bottled up and she'd destroy him as a result, probably without even trying. She was just that good at destroying things. He should know.

Running for the door at that moment would've been a bit of a giveaway, though, so he'd forced himself to slow down. Do this right, which included climbing onto the bed beside her. Onto, not in, because he didn't need the blankets and she did, and that invisible line had been important to respect. He'd waited until her breathing had evened out, then popped back to his feet, shoved as many packs of blood into the pockets of his duster as he could manage, and bolted.

Only he hadn't gotten as far as a block into Mistletoe proper. Walk around a town this close to the Hellmouth with blood in your pockets, you're asking to be jumped by a vampire. Or, in his case, three.

For a second there, Spike had been sure that was the end of his story, and he'd been fairly furious at the fact. More than a century of carving a

name for himself, being the one who ran toward danger rather than from, only to go down in history as a muzzled has-been done in by a team of sodding fledges over blood that they didn't even need to steal.

And he might have dusted screaming that very fact had the Slayer not chosen that moment to make one of her brilliant entrances and save the bloody day.

Just like she always did.

"Seriously," Buffy snapped at him now, blocking the incoming blow of the first ugly fucker while kicking her leg out in a perfect arc so that her foot smashed into the stomach of the one behind her. "Willow had the gall to call *Xander* a demon magnet. What is it about me, huh?" She whirled around, pinning Spike with a glare and holding up a finger. "Don't answer that."

Spike couldn't help it—he laughed. God, but she was brilliant when she was this angry.

"I'm sure you'll tell me what's so funny once this is over," she ground out between punches. "And it *won't* make me want to stake you."

"Wouldn't dream of it, Slayer." He tilted his head, watching as the vampire from behind made to grab her wrists and pull her hands around her back, knowing all the while that he needed to get moving if he meant to run but finding his feet unwilling to budge. *All* of him unwilling to budge, because Buffy was here, and these particular wankers were proving more difficult to put down than the average fledge. And as he was the reason they were here, the reason *she* was here, the thought of leaving her like this had his dead heart twisting.

Life had been so much simpler before he'd come to Sunnyhell. Back when the only thing he'd feel upon hearing a slayer had snuffed it was the small twinge that he hadn't been the one to deal the blow.

Spike was stalking forward before his mind could catch up with him, balling his hand into a fist and gritting his teeth in the expectation of pain. He caught Buffy's eye over the shoulder of the vampire in front of her, took in her grimace, and let himself admire that she had the wherewithal to look *that* pissed at him while inches away from becoming a footnote in her watcher's dusty journals. Then he sighed, tapped the vampire on the shoulder, and greeted him with a punch when the ugly sod turned around.

The vampire went down. And there was no pain.

Spike started, whipped his head back up to Buffy, who was staring at him, ignoring the vamp who still had his mitts tangled around her, her jaw hanging open.

No pain.

“Looks like demon is on the menu,” Spike crowed, and just like that, everything changed.

Everything.

He had fought her now more times than he could count—taken swings she’d blocked, others that had landed, felt all the fury of her hands and feet, memorized her habits and the patterns that shaped even her most spontaneous moves. Never, though, had he fought by her side. Well, not unless one was counting that business with Angel, and he wasn’t. That had been scattered and disjointed, not like this. Not with her at his back, relying on him to catch the blows she missed, to leverage her knowledge of the way he fought into a weapon of its own. It hadn’t been her tossing him stakes when she was done with them. Like it was nothing. Like they were a team. And Spike, for the first time in what felt like an eternity, got to experience the rush of shoving something lethal into a heaving chest. Got to feel that bloody thrill of surviving another fight, besting another enemy, and he would get to keep doing that, because *of course* the army blokes didn’t give a fuck if a vampire attacked a demon. Of course they didn’t.

He might be chained up, but his leash had some length to it. Just enough that he could snap his jaws at other critters.

How long would it have taken him to realize this if he hadn’t lit out of town?

Then it was just the two of them, him and the Slayer, panting in the aftermath of the skirmish. Buffy from exertion, Spike from elation. He knew a lecture was coming, that she’d let him bloody have it for having tried to escape but he was too buzzed to care, and not in the mood to listen. So when he heard her inhale, instinct took over again.

He dropped the stake, whirled around, and kissed her.

And that was it. Everything else slid into place for him, and he no longer cared. His life had changed on a turn before and it just had again.

It didn't matter if he was a traitor to his kind—he could be a traitor who had this.

And there was nothing better than this.



It went about as well as he could have expected.

Better, even, considering those few blissful seconds during which Buffy had kissed him back. But they had been only seconds. Seconds after which she had shoved him away, given him a confused, searching look, then stormed off. Back toward the motel, apparently uncaring now whether or not he made an escape. Unlucky for her, he cared very much, so he trailed after her.

In all the time since the spell, the few occasions Spike had let himself wonder what might happen if he decided to throw caution to the wind and snog her, he'd always arrived at the same conclusion. Punch to the nose, perhaps a stake to the chest, ashes to ashes. That she'd respond by snogging him back had been too ridiculous even for his own sappy imagination.

But she had. Fuck, she *bad*. And he was a man with a new lease on life—one he'd decided he wanted her to be a part of. Sure, just a few minutes ago, he'd been willing to leave all behind, but that was how quickly things changed, and he'd long since learned to stop fighting them.

Plus, he was tired of deluding himself.

Spike let himself back into the motel room, his heart in his throat. The clothes she'd been wearing littered the floor, trailing to the loo, and the shower was on again. She was buying time—he knew it. That was all right. As it turned out, he had all the time in the bloody world. She was worth the wait.

Lucky for him, though, Buffy apparently wasn't keen on a long shower. She emerged just a few minutes later, all wet temptation wrapped in a towel, and though she paused when she saw him standing in the middle of the room, he could tell she wasn't surprised. More hesitant, a thing she'd never been around him. As though she, too, knew something had changed forever.

Then, finally, she blurted, "You kissed me."

"Yeah."

"Why... Why would you—"

"Just found out I'm not as toothless as we thought." Spike gestured at the door behind him, though he didn't take his gaze off her. "Got caught up in the moment."

Buffy nodded, doing a job of keeping her expression impassive. "And...that was all it was?"

"Why?" he asked. "Were you hopin'?"

"What? Don't be gross."

"Gross, am I?" He took a step toward her, drew in a breath, inhaling her as much as he could. "I was there too, remember? Felt the way you—"

"Shut up." Her skin, already flushed from the shower, went a deeper shade.

"Nothin' wrong with wanting me, Slayer."

"Shut up! You were trying to escape."

To anyone else, that might have seemed like a change of subject. To him, it sounded like a plea. And again, that impossible thought swelled. That thing that couldn't be true, that he was barmy for entertaining. But she was standing here, wasn't she? In a bloody towel, looking at him in a way that begged explanation.

If he wanted her honesty, perhaps he should give her some of his own. Her and himself, because he wasn't fooling anyone.

"Was tryin' to give you what you wanted," he said.

"What I wanted?"

"The chance to pin it all on me. The chase."

"And I should believe you, why?"

Good question, that. She shouldn't. He didn't even know if it was true. Not anymore. Only it felt true, more so than leaving for his own bloody pride ever had.

There was no getting out of this unscathed now. He could either lie or lash out in a mad attempt to break her before she could break him. Or he could say *sod it* and throw everything on the table. Make what happened next her decision. She'd at least know where he stood.

It'd be a bloody brilliant way to go.

Put like that, there was only one option.

Sod it.

Spike closed the remaining distance between them, seized her by the shoulders, and dragged her to his mouth.

He'd had it wrong back in the cemetery, thinking there was nothing better than learning he could hit without experiencing pain and steal a kiss without catching a punch. There *was* something better—there was this, and this was everything. Buffy against him, entangling herself around him, her body still warm from the shower and nothing but a damp towel separating her from his hands. It was better because it was truly her—Buffy battling him with her mouth, chasing his tongue and nipping at his lips, kissing him like she meant to leave a mark. Like she was as starved for him as he was for her, and the thought that she might be had him trembling when he tangled his fingers through her hair and cupped the back of her head. When he groaned and rolled his hips, his cock straining against his jeans and Buffy there thrusting back with all her warmth and her softness and her pure bloody *good*.

The towel began to slip, and he worried that when it did, she might snap back to her senses. Shove him back or pop him in the nose or just have it over with and stake him good and proper, and maybe he'd deserve it, but he couldn't stand the thought of coming this close and not having more. And since fortune favored the brave, Spike tugged the towel down the next second, dragging his mouth over her collarbone, her breasts, and then captured one of her perfect rosy nipples between his lips and gave it a good tug.

"Unh," Buffy whimpered, rolling her head back.

A hint of delicious slayer musk hit his nostrils, emblazoning him with the sort of awareness she couldn't explain away. She was wet—soaked, actually. She wanted him as much as he wanted her, and that knowledge was intoxicating.

Especially when her fingers sank into his hair. "Spike...this is...insane."

He fought the urge to laugh. He'd left *sane* a few turns back the other way. "Mhmm," he agreed, loving the way she gasped when his mouth rumbled around her. "We've cracked, you and I. Might as well enjoy it."

She didn't respond for a second, and when she did, it wasn't with

words. Rather, Buffy shoved his duster down his shoulders, then pulled the borrowed T-shirt he'd gotten from the morgue over his head and pitched it toward a corner, her eyes bright and uncertain but the rest of her knew what she wanted and thank his lucky stars, it was that part that seemed to be in charge at the moment. Then her hands were on him, all that warmth and life exploring the contours of his arms and chest, shaking as though it could possibly mean to her what it meant to him. It didn't, but a bloke could pretend. *He* could pretend.

"You hate me," she said hoarsely as she turned her attention to his belt. "You hate me, I hate you. That's the way it works." The whip of leather through the denim loops sounded oddly illicit against the otherwise still air, the slide of his zipper even more so. "We shouldn't do this."

"Even if I can't get you outta my bloody head?" Spike demanded, then *Christ*, the Slayer's hand was around him. Squeezing and tugging and so hot he thought he might just combust and bugger all if he gave a damn. Especially as long as she kept doing that, pulling along his shaft, her thumb caressing the head on the upstroke. "Fucking hell, Buffy..."

"You can't?"

A whimper scratched at his throat as he rocked into her hand. "Can't what?"

"Can't...get me out of your head?"

Oh right. Spike pressed his brow to hers, shaking harder still, transfixed by the sight of her small hand wrapped around him—a hand he was more used to seeing in fist-form, flying straight for his nose, breaking and smashing and causing nothing but pain, now stroking his cock in the slightly fumbling way of girls who didn't quite know what they wanted but knew they wanted something. Unless his facts were wrong, it had only been twice for her, and both experiences had left her wounded. Yet here she was. With him. Trying.

If he hadn't loved her before, this would have been the moment he fell the rest of the way.

"Since that spell," he said, ran his palm across the nipple still wet from his mouth, before he slowly slid his hand down her stomach. Felt the way she shook with every inch of flesh he touched, then her encouraging gasp when he parted the slick folds of her pussy and slipped a finger inside of her. No polite testing, no waiting—just into molten heat

that clamped around him at first blush. A growl tickled at his throat, but he shoved it back. “Wanna know why I took off? It was to get away from you—from wanting you. Wanting *this*.”

Buffy’s breaths came harder, her pulse louder, but she didn’t speak. So he went on.

“Turns out it’s too late for me, Slayer. I’m gonna drown in you and I can’t stop.”

She squeezed him so hard it would have hurt—should have hurt—but all it did was make him groan at the thought of what it would be like when he sank inside of her. “I think,” she said, still in that strangled voice. “I think I don’t want you to stop.”

“No?” Spike brushed a kiss against her cheek, nibbled a path back along her chin until he had her mouth again.

“I... Spike...”

“Don’t tell me the Slayer’s been havin’ naughty thoughts about yours truly.”

Her brow furrowed like it did when she was in battle, making his dead heart twist again. He rumbled a little growl, pushing another finger inside her and damn near losing his grip on his remaining control when the silken walls of her pussy clenched tight. The thought of all that strength, all that hot wetness strangling his cock, was almost too much for his head—as though he could feel it pressing along the inside of his skull, suffocating under its own intensity. He skated his teeth down her neck and along her shoulder as he pulled his hand back, his drenched fingers slipping out of her with a wet sound, and then she mewled and nodded and rolled her hips and whispered, “Yes, dammit, is that what you wanna hear?” before he pushed back into her, his thumb finding her clit this time. Buffy jolted and gave a throaty little cry and tightened her grip around his cock almost as an afterthought, as though she needed something to ground her and was holding on best she could.

“More,” Spike murmured before catching her earlobe between his teeth. “Tell me more.”

“It’s so embarrassing...”

“Think we’re a step or two beyond embarrassing.” He kissed his way back to her mouth, and she was there, ready and desperate for him. All that fire and anger and resentment, Buffy fighting him the way she did

with her fists, now with frantic pulls of her lips and even more frantic whimpers at her throat. He wasn't going to last, having her cunt around his fingers and his cock in her hand, and fuck, if they were really doing this, they'd do it the right way.

Spike broke his mouth from hers with a gasp and stumbled back far enough that he lost his hold on her, and she on him. "More, Slayer," he snapped before he could help himself. "Or I won't give you what you really want."

It took Buffy a couple of seconds to find her footing, but when she did, she narrowed eyes that had gone dark. "And what's that?"

"Think we both know the answer there." He winked and wrapped his own hand around his prick, trying not to react when his fingers—warm and wet from having been inside of her—met his cool skin. "You tell me you've wanted this as much as I have. Me. This cock. Tell me you've been cravin' it, or this ends here."

The fight he loved so much returned to her then, fierce and brilliant and so beautiful he could weep. But it didn't last—her gaze dropped the next second, followed the strokes of his hand up and down his shaft, and glowed with hunger she couldn't hide. Not from him.

And Christ, she better never hide from him again. Now that there was more than a space between them, he could see her properly. The full picture, Buffy bare to him. Her smooth skin, flushed with excitement. Her hair, still damp, hung loosely around her shoulders. Her rosy dewdrop nipples hard and waiting for his mouth. All of her, the softness and the strength, the girl and the warrior, ready to fuck or fight, whatever he threw at her.

He'd never stood a chance, he realized. Not against her. From the second she'd danced her way into his life, he'd been lost, his heart just waiting for the rest of him to catch up. He could try running but she would just follow, if not in person then in every other way. Buffy would chase him no matter how much space he tried to put between them. She would chase him, and he would want to be caught because knowing her was worth the pain of loving her.

Then he didn't care if she admitted it or not, he had to touch her again.

She must have seen that in his face, that understanding, or maybe she

was just at the end of her own tether—either way, Buffy launched herself at him the next second, and now she was all hellcat. Raking her nails down his chest, along his arms and up his neck as he swore and worked to kick off his boots, finish the job of shoving his jeans down his legs. Bloody hard with Buffy trying to climb him but he didn't care. Never been one to step back from a challenge, especially when her name was Buffy Summers. Spike caught her mouth again, snarling when she scraped her teeth along his lips, hauled her properly into his arms, relished the burn of her skin against his, then tossed her onto the mattress hard enough the bloody thing gave a whine of warning—one he barely heard, more interested in the way her tits bounced.

But he didn't look long. As fabulous as her breasts were to watch, they were even better when under his tongue. He pounced, caging her in beneath him, pressing against her softness and her warmth and that essential *Buffy* quality he'd been searching for his whole bloody life without realizing it. There was so much of her he wanted to explore but he wasn't sure how much time they had, or how much she'd give him. If later, he could bury his head between her thighs, if she'd let him learn the parts of her he was only now getting to see.

"Not gonna be nice and gentle," he warned, holding her gaze as he seized his cock and teased the head along her fiery cunt. "You want nice and gentle, ask me for it next time."

"There will be a next time?"

The question, and the way she said it, was possibly the only thing that had a chance of breaking through the lust-filled haze he was swimming in. It would have been one thing if she'd spat it out, snarled with challenge—the audacity that he'd think she'd let this happen again. That she was even letting it happen now. But there was no bite in her voice, more tremulous amazement. He'd had it wrong before—*this* was the moment he would have fallen all the way. Or maybe that was just his life now, falling in love with her again and again, having that moment constantly redefined.

"Oh baby..." Spike dipped his head and kissed her again, felt the vibration of her whimper as he pushed inside the hottest, tightest pussy he'd ever known. And despite what he'd told her, he couldn't help but just hold himself for a flash, savor the exquisite feel of her pulsing around

him with all her fire and strength—this most remarkable girl he couldn't keep and would never deserve, this girl to whom *a next time* sounded a novelty.

"I get my way, Slayer," he growled against her swollen lips, then hissed as he drew back, her vise of a cunt clenching around his cock, making him fight for every inch in the best way possible, "the rest of your life will be made up of our *next times*."

Maybe that was saying too much—probably it was, but for now, he didn't care. Couldn't. Not while staring down into her wide, wondering eyes, watching her watch him when he rolled his hips and speared his cock into her once more. He planted his hands on either side of her head and took her mouth again as he began to move inside her. What happened after this was over was a question for another day, for this was a moment he was determined to live within. The way she felt, the way she burned, the rich, warm scent of her filling his nostrils and his throat. Then there were the soft gasps he earned with every thrust—as though she were caught off guard. It went fast, of course, because all good things did, that primal need of seconds before seizing him all over again. Overwhelming him inside and out, until he had been reduced to little more than pure instinct. Not just thrusting but pounding, pounding so hard the bed frame shook and thumped in rhythm against the wall, filling his ears with its steady cadence, which was offset by the wet smack of flesh and the small gasps that spilled from her lips. And Christ, there was so much of her to explore and he wanted all of it all at once. Wanted to soak her into his every sense. He ran his tongue down her throat, across her collarbone, over her breasts—first one, then the other, sucking and biting and teasing her nipples and growling every time she rolled up to meet him. Tentative at first, as though she didn't trust her body, then with growing confidence and *god*, if that wasn't a privilege to watch. The uncertainty melting into something that was more her.

"That's it," he whispered, not realizing he meant to speak until the words were out. She had an arm curled around his neck and both legs around his waist, hugging him with her ankles to pull him harder into her. "That's it, Slayer. Don't hold back. I want all of it."

"Be careful what you wish for," she retorted, tugging him down for another kiss. He loved the way she kissed—had missed that the most of

everything else the spell had cost him. How she'd seemed hungry for him. Hell, not just hungry, but ravenous. No one had ever kissed him like that. And he was so lost in that, in the way she battled him with her tongue and body in equal measure, that he was caught completely unawares when she put that marvelous strength to its proper use and flipped him onto his back.

"Oh god!" She threw her head back, looking every part the goddess, and started undulating in rhythm.

"You're perfect," Spike rasped, palming one of her breasts and stroking his thumb over her nipple. He swallowed and hissed as she rode him, her hair swaying around her face, the weak light in the room making her seem damn near ethereal. His cock, slick with her juices, being swallowed again and again by the most beautiful pussy he'd ever seen. "Fucking perfect."

Buffy steadied herself with her hands on his chest, gave her hips a swirl. And he started talking. Not really sure what he was saying, not trying to keep up, just letting whatever crossed his mind spill from his lips. How she looked, how she felt, how much he'd wanted this—wanted her—and how he was ruined as a result. That it should have been simple, straightforward, but that he'd known from the second he saw her that something in him had changed forever and there was no going back. All the while staring at her face, taking in the way his words hit her, how she tensed and trembled, how she clamped hard around his cock, squeezed him damn near to dust in the most brilliant marriage of pleasure and pain he'd ever known.

He was right. She was perfect. And the thought of never having *perfect* again, that the next time she'd asked him about might never come, about made his chest shatter. There was no going back, though, and he knew it. He just had to make sure she did too.

He palmed her arse, dug his fingers into her skin, and worked her harder up and down his cock. Felt the base of his spine begin to tingle, his balls to throb, his gums aching with the pressure of his fangs. She was growing tighter and wetter by the second—her need as tangible as his own. Chasing a high with the same gritty determination that had stolen his heart from the beginning. He dragged a hand over her sweat-damp thigh to nudge her clit every time she sank onto him, soaked in the way

her eyes widened and the little, surprised ‘O’ she made with her lips. And then—*fuck, yes*—she choked out a sob and trembled hard, her pussy pulsing and choking his cock, and he couldn’t hold back if he wanted to. Couldn’t have stopped. He’d been telling her the truth when he’d said she was drowning him, and he’d never been happier to die. Spike grasped her by the back of her head and drew her down to swallow the last of her orgasm as he bucked, jetting his own release into her. Felt her tremble anew around him when he did, as though she were as lost as he was.

Fuck, he *hoped* she was. It would be nice not to be alone in this.

They lay in a tangle for a time, Spike dragging in gulps of air that tasted of her and him and them together. Thinking about how it was they’d gotten here and not seeing it, but also seeing nothing else, nor what the next day might bring. All he knew right now was Buffy was in his arms, panting into his chest, surrounding him still with her warmth and light, and somehow the burn didn’t hurt. It just made him want more.

He would always want more.

“Spike.”

He couldn’t help but grin. Her voice was a tad hoarse, and that was because of him. “Yeah?”

“You...you really meant what you said about another time?” Buffy lifted her head, though it seemed to take some effort, and met his eyes. “I haven’t had the best luck with those.”

There it was again, that twist in his chest. The one that bore her name. He could tell her now, he supposed. Give her the words, let her know just how much of him was hers. He could, but then she would have everything she needed to destroy him, stake or no. He wasn’t sure he was ready to give her that sort of power. So, instead, he worked his throat and nodded. “As many times as you want, love.”

“That might be a lot. You kinda ruined my Christmas.”

“Did I?” Spike hesitated, then drew his hand around her head so he had her cheek against his palm. “Wager there’s some way I could make it up to you,” he murmured, running his thumb over her lips. “Turn this whole holiday around for you. If you’ll let me.”

Buffy held his gaze, dragging her teeth over her lower lip. “I like presents I can enjoy all year. One-and-done is kinda lame.”

His breath hitched. Was she saying...

"And I like knowing where my presents are at all times," she went on, still looking at him, though he could tell it was costing her something now. "I-if I have to go try to find it because it decided to take off, well, I'm going to be cranky."

"What if I fancy you when you're cranky?"

"This is the kind of cranky that comes with a stake. Doubt it'd be your thing."

"Guess I'll have to stick around then."

"I think you owe me."

He couldn't help it—he grinned, his lips pulling so wide it nearly hurt. "And one doesn't want to be indebted to the Slayer."

"Very much with the no."

She talked a good game, he'd admit, but he knew her too well to miss the uncertainty in her eyes. The part of her that was soft and still tender from the times she'd entrusted it to others. If there was a road ahead for them, it wouldn't be an easy one.

But god, every step would be worth it if she was still at his side when they made it to the end.

"Looks like you're stuck with me." Spike lifted his head to kiss her and almost bloody melted when she responded with enthusiasm. When the tension in her body relaxed, the second he felt her start to believe. His cock swelled once more, and she groaned and wiggled her pert little arse, but before she could begin moving in earnest, he seized her shoulders and rolled her over.

The second he slipped out of her pussy, Buffy pulled away with a gasp, blinking up at him, her brow knitting in confusion. "What? I thought we had an agree—"

He kissed her again. "Stuck with me," he whispered against her lips. "Which means I want me a taste."

"Taste?"

Spike flicked an eyebrow, nipped at her mouth, then began a slow, nibbling slide down her body.

"Oh." Buffy breathed out, then hissed and arched as he licked and stroked, and was ready to part her thighs in welcome by the time he settled between them. Letting him close, letting him see exactly what he

did to her. All wet and pink and perfect. “I think... I think I’m okay with that,” she said at last.

He chuckled as he stretched one of her legs over his shoulder. “Thought you might be,” he said, and dragged his tongue from her clit to her opening. “Now let a man eat in peace. Got me a bell to ring.”

A sound that was half-sigh, half-giggle erupted off her lips, unlike anything he’d ever heard from her before. Soft and playful and full of something that he felt instantly he’d spent his years trying to find, even if he hadn’t heard it until now. Until that very second. The certainty hit him with such power that he was trembling when she tangled her fingers through his hair and rubbed herself along his face. “I am”—she whimpered and rolled her hips again, digging her heel into the small of his back—“so not good with the taking of orders but...exception. I can make one. This time.”

Spike gave his head a shake and earned another of those delicious moans. “I *did* ruin your Christmas.”

“Uh huh.”

“Any way I can make it up to you?”

There was a pause, then Buffy grinned, opening her eyes and meeting his own. And perhaps he was a fool to hope, but hell, he hoped.

It couldn’t mean to her what it did to him. Not yet. But that look made him think that maybe it would, someday. If he was very lucky. If he did everything right.

“Yeah,” she said, her voice soft. “Try.”

Spike held her gaze, held all of her, and smiled.

That he could do.

II
VALENTINE'S SLAY

❧ I ❧

IT WAS SUPPOSED TO HAVE BEEN A FLING.

Furthermore, a flung fling. Over in maybe two weeks before they returned to trying to kill each other.

Buffy bit down on her lower lip to keep the cry inside, the one Spike had been trying to coax out of her for what felt like hours now. Ever since they'd stumbled back into his place, joined at the lips and shedding clothes as they tumbled over one another to get to the bed he'd been good enough to snag for just such an occasion. Once there, the pace had slowed—seriously, snails could take notes—and Spike, the least patient guy on the planet, had set out on a quest to drive her as loopy as his ex by using only his lips and tongue, but not in the places she wanted them used.

It was one of his games. He had a lot of them, and they'd been playing the hell out of them for nearly two months. And she loved them. Every single one, which was quite a big surprise when she would have insisted she wasn't into games at all before Christmas.

Before her already screwy world had decided to get screwier.

"That's it, baby," he murmured, his breath—stupid thing, he didn't even need to breathe—caressing her parted flesh like a soft kiss. He chuckled when she shivered, rewarded her clit with the smallest of licks

—seriously, she knew all of Spike’s licks by now and this one was teeny tiny—before turning to nip at her inner thigh with blunt teeth. “The more you hold back, the sweeter it’s gonna be.”

She squeezed her eyes shut the second she felt them start to wander. Watching Spike as he teased her with his tongue was one of the most surefire ways to lose this game—a game she was suddenly very determined to win, as, despite her affinity for games, she had proven quite the abysmal player. Part of that was undoubtedly due to not realizing she was playing until Spike announced the stakes, which usually happened about three seconds from her giving him whatever he wanted and then some. The rest was knowing that losing the game was a lot like winning in that she never felt like she’d lost anything, but it was the principle of the matter. Spike couldn’t win all the time. It just wasn’t possible. Plus, she was the Slayer, which meant winning was in her blood and hadn’t she kicked his ass enough times for that message to sink in?

She’d offer to do it again if she didn’t know it would just turn him on.

“I know what you want,” came his voice again, low and rough with his own arousal—seriously, his voice alone did things to her that defied logic—before he licked a path along her soaked flesh from the mouth of her pussy to her clit. He stopped just short of giving it more than a cursory nudge, though, and chuckled when she mewled and arched her hips off the mattress. She knew if she could just rub herself against his face the right way, he would give her one of his devastatingly sexy moans and she would finally have won one for herself. It had to happen one of these days. “You know you want me to give it. All you gotta do, love, is—”

“Bite me.”

“I’d be delighted. Would you like it here...?” He trailed his fingers over the expanse of inner thigh he had just been kissing. “I could make it so no one would see what a naughty slayer you are.”

“Spike—”

“Or here?” He sucked on the junction where her leg met her pelvis, something that should not have been sexy at all but was, and not only because he thrust two fingers into her as he did it. “Don’t mind makin’ it clear that this pussy is all mine.”

Another thing that shouldn’t have done it for her but did—Spike

was crazy possessive. Crazy possessive the way *she* was crazy possessive, in that she didn't like it when she saw him grinning at the new bartender at the Bronze whenever the skank filled his order, or the way he winked at the girls who tried to entice him onto the dance floor while Buffy was off making sure she still looked *utterly shaggable* despite sweating like a sweaty human-person all over the place. She *really* didn't like when they ran into demons who asked what happened to the hot blonde piece they'd seen him with last, and had been known to snap necks perhaps a little too enthusiastically as a result. And Spike ate it all up, because he was evil and that's what evil people did—they relished in the misery of others, and if it wasn't *miserable* that she found herself getting jealous over stupid Harmony, then she didn't know what was.

Honestly, that Spike was the same way was pretty much the only balm there was for that particular wound. And being on the receiving end was kinda nice, especially since her previous boyfriend had done the brooding-sulk thing whenever he'd felt threatened, rather than the in-your-face-grr thing that he *totally* could have done but had opted not to for *reasons*.

So, yes, whenever Spike snarled at some well-meaning coed for trying to buy her a drink, Buffy preened a little and got a little extra with the PDA. Another thing her previous boyfriend had discouraged, but Spike seemed to eat up. The more she touched him, the more he leaned into it, as though she could never touch him enough.

And honestly, that was how she felt, which was crazy because this was supposed to be a well-flung fling. A fling discussed in the past tense, though hopefully not often as she intended to employ the temporary insanity defense if her friends became too preachy when reflecting upon *that one time Buffy had boinked the undead for about six weeks*.

She really had thought it was a fling. That, in fact, had been the very *last* thought to cross her mind before she'd given in back in that stupid Podunk town Spike had marooned himself in over Christmas. She couldn't quite reconstruct the mental argument that had gotten her there, but enough of the pieces were left that she saw the leaps she'd taken. The one thing she remembered crystal clear was that thought, the fling thought, right before she'd found herself trying to climb him like a

jungle gym as they'd played a game of who-can-get-who-undressed-the-fastest.

A fling wouldn't hurt, had been the thought. After all, Buffy was a girl owed a good fling, particularly after having her heart ripped into pieces that were then thrown into a blender. And the fact that Willow's spell had backfired in such a way that she'd gotten intimate, firsthand knowledge as to how Spike kissed was hardly her fault, nor was it her fault that she *couldn't* just forget no matter how much she tried, and that her nights had been filled with all sorts of naughty dreams about how that spell might have gone just a little bit differently. If she hadn't had to run out for supplies on behalf of her blind watcher, for instance. Or if Spike had come with her, how they might have stolen down a dark alley on the way there or back and gotten to know each other in the biblical sense. Or if Xander and Anya hadn't burst in with their demon problems, how Spike might have made good on his whispered suggestion that they sneak off to the bathroom so he could feel for himself just how wet she was thinking about their upcoming wedding night.

No, after all that, a fling with the object of her fixation definitely didn't sound like the worst idea she'd ever heard. If anything, she could enjoy the ride while it lasted, see if she could get some additional information out of him regarding the commando guys, and once he was out of her system, kick his pale butt to the curb. Or stake him. Maybe stake him, as Buffy had been certain this was the sort of temporary insanity that left no trace of itself behind.

It had been over a month, though, and Buffy wasn't flung out. Far from it.

She was pretty sure she was in love with him.

In fact, she was more than pretty sure. Buffy knew herself well enough to know the signs. There was the fluttery feeling she got whenever she thought of him, how snippets of some dumb thing he'd told her would filter in and out of her head throughout any given day and she wouldn't realize until someone—usually Willow—asked her why she was smiling like a crazy person. There was the way he always insisted on accompanying her on patrols, how enthusiastic he was about throwing himself into fights, and how that enthusiasm was kinda contagious. The same way Faith's had been once, only without the undertones of a power

struggle. No, Spike was more than happy to defer to her whenever the occasion arose. She was the Slayer, after all. She knew what was best. He was just the lowly vampire she'd enticed into being her sex slave, and if he could hurt demons as a means of serving his mistress, all the bloody better.

And that was wrong. It was all wrong. Buffy knew it—she knew it even as she crooned and sighed when he skated his teeth across her skin, when he twisted his wrist and hooked his fingers inside of her, stroking her where she'd never been stroked before, making her gasp and buck and run her fingers through his hair to hold him exactly where he was. Or better yet, direct him back where she wanted that mouth of his. Growl at him—he thought her growls were cute—when he laughed and blew on her clit rather than sucked on it. Told her she was fire and he was hers and he loved the way she trembled around his fingers. How she smelled when she got like this—musky and decadent and all for him. How he'd get her to beg, how much he loved that he didn't need to breathe because it meant she could squeeze his head with her thighs as much as she liked and it wouldn't kill him, just make him harder. And he was always hard for her. Always. Couldn't get enough.

Neither could she, and that was the problem. No matter how often she had him, Buffy wanted more. Not just sex—and no one could blame her if that were the case, considering how out-of-this-world-fantastic it was—but all the parts and pieces that made him Spike. The patrols that were suddenly fun, the stupid little fights they'd have over nothing, how he had offered to eat her professor—in the non-sexy way, she'd checked—after her essay had scored her a lousy C+, how he leaped in with knowledge she hadn't known he possessed when discussing things like literature and philosophy, and how he wouldn't just roll his eyes and insist she was an idiot when their interpretations over text differed radically. How he, and only he, had taken her seriously after the earthquake, believing she had a right to be nervous that the world might end even though there had been no signs.

He didn't make her feel dumb. And that was, she was discovering, a refreshing change of pace from her previous relationships. Which probably said more about her than she was comfortable admitting, but it was true and there was just no getting around it.

Just like there was no getting around the fact that she was stupid in love with Spike. The fling that hadn't flung. And all she could do was wait it out, hope each day that she awoke that today wasn't the day that he'd break her heart.

Fortunately, that day wasn't today. In fact, there had yet to be a day when Spike seemed anything less than ecstatic to see her. He'd greet her with a kiss, give her a wink, tell the others when it was safe to look, then whisper something absolutely filthy in her ear that made her warm with the need to both jump his sexy bones and hit him for making her blush in front of her friends. Her friends who, by the way, were being uncharacteristically awesome about the whole thing. Granted, there had been an initial blowup when she and Spike had been caught making with the foreplay, but afterward—when she'd gotten everyone alone—Buffy had sworn this Spike insanity was nothing but a fling brought on by the stupid spell Willow had done, and seeing as that hadn't been her fault, everyone staying off her back until Spike was out of her system would be really swell. In return, she'd promised not to bring up any of their romantic choices, of which a lot could be said if they wanted to open that door.

As it turned out, they had not wanted to open that door.

"Dunno how you do it," Spike murmured after he'd licked another path around her clit. "How you taste better every day. Would've sworn this cunt couldn't get any sweeter, but here you are, provin' me wrong. Damn thing is I know it'll be even better tomorrow. And the next day, and the next..."

Buffy blinked and rolled her hips and mewled. "Spike—"

"Makes a fine study, don't you think? And I'm the lucky bloke who gets to prove it."

The unspoken *for now* was, of course, unspoken, but she heard it anyway. Even though he somehow managed to keep it out of his eyes when she looked down at him. Out of his grin, too, which was chock full of what she wouldn't let herself believe was adoration. Perhaps a dumber girl could. Someone empty-headed like Harmony; someone who hadn't seen firsthand just how much Spike did and always would belong to Drusilla.

“Come on, love,” he coaxed, and ran his tongue over his teeth. “Give me what I want, and I’ll return the favor.”

He couldn’t—not really. That was okay, though. Not his fault. She’d known it going in. It was her own dumb luck to have fallen in love with another vampire, especially one who could never love her back.

So instead, she fisted his hair and thrust her pussy against his mouth, and whimpered, “Please, Spike. *Please.*”

She opened her eyes just in time to see his entire, stupid-gorgeous face light up, transforming him in ways little else could. “Gave in quick, Slayer,” he said, draping her leg over his shoulder and settling. “Baby not in the mood to play tonight?”

“Just fucking eat me,” she snapped, perhaps a bit harsher than she’d intended.

Spike grinned wider still. “I’d be delighted,” he replied, then licked his way between her folds, being sure to dip his tongue inside her, then up until he had her clit sucked between his lips.

Something else she’d learned about herself—there were some games worth losing.



HE WAS SITTING in front of the telly, waiting for night to fall, when he settled on a plan.

A good plan. One that, unlike the vast majority of his plans, was going to work.

For one thing, he was determined to stick to it. No jumping the gun. No rush of impatience. No bloody self-sabotage.

For another, he actually cared about this plan. Wagered it might, in fact, be the most important plan he’d ever come up with. It certainly had the most riding on it—nothing less than his heart was at stake. And that was the thing about plans. They had to really fucking matter before he was interested in seeing them through. Pissant concerns like some ritual feast or torturing the stuffing out of his grandsire didn’t matter a lick, and whatever went wrong, he could improvise.

Telling the Slayer he was in love with her, on the other hand, could

mean the difference between blissful happiness for the rest of his days or crawling into the bottom of a bottle and staying there until he rotted.

He'd been back and forth on it for some time now, if it was even worth mentioning. They had a good thing going, after all. Better than good—a bloody *brilliant* thing going. More brilliant than he could have ever imagined. In the time since they'd gotten back from their impromptu holiday, life had been downright jolly. He'd upgraded from the tub the watcher had insisted on keeping him chained up inside, gotten himself a nice little flat with the remains of the Amara treasure, where he'd spent many a happy hour waiting for Buffy to pop by after class. Nights were occupied fighting side-by-side with his lady, working up an appetite as he watched her contort her artwork of a body into all sorts of fun shapes in the name of the good fight. She got her kicks, too—had stopped protesting that the fight made her all hot for him after he'd shoved her against a mausoleum wall and fucked her pretty little brains out.

That had been a good night. Buffy all flushed, her blood rushing, her eyes bright. She'd looked at him, radiant and beautiful, and he'd lunged for her mouth and all but tackled her to the soft cemetery ground. Would have, had the military gits not made one of their sweeps. One of them, the one that fancied Buffy, had caught a glimpse of Spike's hair and taken aim, and the Slayer had seized his hand and they'd been running. Laughing like bloody idiots, darting this way and that, before Spike had tugged her into a crypt—the one he'd previously thought to make his home before he'd had a reason to be all respectable-like—and tried to keep her mouth as occupied as possible so they didn't make much noise.

Well, they'd made noise. A lot of it. But the army wankers had either realized they were outmatched or hadn't been brave enough open the door or couldn't track to save their bloody lives—whatever the reason, it hadn't mattered. And Buffy had learned that she actually didn't mind being shagged in unusual places. Found it a bit of a thrill, point of fact.

Of course, it wasn't all just shagging and fighting, much as he'd like. There were also the insipid Scooby meetings, which he spiced up by seeing how many times he could get the Slayer to blush. And there were the evenings spent at the Bronze, twirling her around the dance floor, watching her get tipsy off two sips of whatever he shoved under her nose

and always making that face that no sane man could find anything but adorable.

It was more than he could have hoped.

It was also undefined. And while he would have loved to have not given a fuck—to just close his eyes and enjoy the ride however long it lasted—he'd never been that sort of bloke where love was concerned, even if sometimes he wished he was.

But that ship had bloody well sailed. He'd had his chance to make it out with his heart more or less intact and he'd made the decision to stay, and while he certainly wouldn't complain about where the path had led him, not a single bloody step had been simple. Not his flight from Sunnyhell nor the crash, not Buffy showing up to play his white knight against her better judgment. Not even the brilliant way they'd fallen into each other—it had all been risk and guesswork, and yeah, the reward was sweeter when something truly valuable was on the line, but part of him had been on edge the entire time. Waiting for this to be taken from him—for Buffy to realize who she was slumming with and come to her senses. To break his heart the way he knew she eventually would.

His money had been on that first morning together. She'd wake up all in a tizzy, the pretty words of the previous night forgotten, particularly those that had hinted she wanted him to stick around. If he was lucky, she'd just pop him in the nose and feed him some line about how he was dust if he told anyone he'd gotten between the Slayer's thighs. If he wasn't lucky, well, he'd never leave the motel, and maybe that was for the best, considering what a miserable failure of a vampire he'd turned out to be.

But she'd done neither. Instead of serenading him with her own Buffy brand of insults, she'd lifted her head off his chest, looked around as though to ground herself, then found his eyes and damn near startled him to dust with her soft smile.

"Hey."

He'd swallowed. "Mornin'."

"So last night...definitely happened, huh? Not just a dream?"

"Only if you want it to be."

She'd considered that for perhaps the longest moment of his life. Perfectly still, her brow furrowed, her eyes fixed on something he

couldn't see. Playing it all out, no doubt. The insanity of it—of them. Easy enough to leave all behind now that the morning had come. But then the longest moment of his life had passed, and she'd turned back to him.

"It wasn't just you," she'd said.

"What's that?"

"You said it was the spell. That you wanted this since then." Buffy had hesitated, trembling a little. "I've been feeling that too."

"You have?"

"Yeah. And it...wiggled me out."

"Why?"

"It's you."

"Thanks ever so."

"Spike, you just told me that you fled town specifically because you were so freaked that you were feeling non-homicidal things for me. Check your legs 'cause I don't think you have one to stand on in this case."

She'd had a point there, loath as he was to admit it. So he hadn't admitted it, just kissed her to change the subject before she'd changed her mind. And she'd melted into him, his impossibly soft Slayer, and one taste hadn't been enough, as he'd known—and still knew—it never would be. She'd become his drug, and every second he stole with her just left him ravenous for more.

Thankfully, Buffy had felt the same, for she'd moaned into his mouth and rolled with him when he'd slid between her legs, all warm and wet and soft and perfect. All his, as long as she'd have him and longer.

"Sore at all?" he'd rasped, brushing hair from her face and trying to keep from driving into her like some bloody caveman. From the pleasant ache in his own muscles, owing to the intense sport that was keeping up with a slayer, he thought it only polite to ask. After all, her body wasn't trained to enjoy punishment as was his.

"A little," she'd replied before tugging on his lower lip with her teeth.

"Fuck, pet, tell me to stop."

Buffy had shaken her head and hooked one of her perfect, shapely legs around his waist. "Just be gentle."

He hadn't known it was possible to fall *more* in love with someone

until that moment. Watching her eyes widen, her lips form a perfect little *O*, color flushing her cheeks the second he'd slipped his cock where he wanted to be. Holding her gaze as they'd moved together, as she'd clenched those bloody fantastic muscles around him, whimpered and clung and pulled him down to her mouth. She was full of such passion, his slayer, and she poured it into everything she did. He'd seen that from the start, craved it the way he craved blood, and had known that night as sure as he did now that being inside of it was worth anything he had to sacrifice. His pride, his reputation, his past and future glories, whatever they might be. Buffy was worth everything.

Yet still, despite her talk about wanting him to stick around, Spike hadn't expected that to last. It had taken some time to get the parts to fix the DeSoto, it being an antique and all, and it would have been easy for her to decide all the shagging they'd done in that little motel room had taken the edge off whatever it was she felt. But the Slayer was nothing if not full of surprises, from the shy smile she'd given him as they'd checked out to the way she hadn't hesitated before sidling up next to him for the drive home.

"Remember that this thing doesn't have seatbelts," she'd said, resting her head on his shoulder. "And some of us might not survive being thrown through the windshield."

"Now there's a plan," he'd replied.

Buffy had pulled back enough to glare at him, and he'd snogged her before she could jump into the lecture. Brilliant diversionary tactic—one he intended to employ as much and as often as possible.

They hadn't talked about what they would tell the others when they returned, or even what it was they were doing. His slayer, brave as she was in so many respects, was a timid little thing in others, scorned a time too many and gun-shy. He hadn't minded then. What was there to mind? He had the girl. She'd been at his side when they'd finally returned to the watcher's flat, and she hadn't put up a fight when, after excusing herself to the loo to wash up, he'd followed hot on her heels. Well, not *much* of a fight. There had been a small protest in her eyes when she'd turned, one he'd chased away with his mouth, and then she'd promptly forgotten where she was or why she should care, and that had been bloody grand until the door had been thrown open and they had been discovered, he

with his hand down the front of her pants and she with hers tangled in his hair. Spike reckoned one of these days his ears would stop ringing from the scream Harris had released—full bloody volume, too, no consideration for sensitive ears—but if they didn't, who cared? He still had Buffy.

Granted, while they hadn't discussed what they would tell the others, being caught necking had dinged her confidence. She'd had herself a right nice little panic, spouted a bunch of things a mile a sodding minute, talked herself right up to the ledge then back again. And, at the end, she'd sucked in a deep breath and marched out to face the music. Confirming—once all the hysterics stopped—that yes, she was involved with Spike, and no, she wasn't under a spell, and no, she would not be taking any questions. Her chums, whom Spike had expected to throw a right little riot, had all ogled at her for a few seconds before exploding into speculation that she'd backslid as a result of Angel's skipping off to LA and Spike was filling the vampire-shaped void. An accusation that Spike might have risked a headache to address had Buffy not promptly exploded on them.

But that had been the end, more or less. After reining herself in, Buffy had tugged on Spike's hand and led him out for a patrol, where she'd ranted herself up into a nice little frenzy—an experience all on its own. Never mind the sheer pleasure he got in fighting alongside the Slayer, watching her pummel some poor sod rather than admiring her fist as it crunched into his nose, but he'd gotten an earful about how she hadn't known how to tell them, or even if she had planned on telling them, but at least it was out and maybe it would be like tearing off a Band-Aid. Intense and painful in the doing, but less pain down the road. Once her mates got used to the idea.

And they had, amazingly. Whatever Buffy had told them when she'd gotten them on their own had convinced them to back off. Even her watcher, though Rupert wasn't above shooting Spike the occasional glare whenever they were in proximity. Over the past few weeks, Spike had been testing the waters a bit to see how much he could get away with—holding Buffy's hand when they were out together, stroking Buffy's hair during the little Scooby meetings she insisted on dragging him to, kissing her forehead or her cheek or lips whenever he made to leave a room.

Little bits of affection left as bloody breadcrumbs for her mates to follow and hopefully understand that this wasn't ending anytime soon and, more importantly, he was going nowhere. In the meantime, Spike had been playing it as casually as he dared—stealing time with her whenever he could and while trying to decide if this little slice of paradise he'd managed to carve out for himself on the sodding Hellmouth was worth jeopardizing by bringing love into it.

Thing was, he was rotten at hiding things like love. Fuck, he didn't *want* to hide it. Buffy might not see them the way he did, and wasn't it better to know that now? Could be she was just having fun with him—god knows she'd never had fun with anyone else—and reveling in the thrill of having tamed yet another vampire, only this one without the safety net her first and great bloody love had given her. Sure, there was the chip they'd learned about in the time since, but the chip was just a leash on a bloody Rottweiler. Didn't change who he was underneath, and he knew Buffy knew that, even if they never talked about it.

No, the deeper he got, the more he needed to know what this was for her. Or at the very least, he needed her to know what it was for him.

And seeing as Valentine's Day was coming up, the timing was bloody near perfect.

So that was it—his plan. Take the Slayer somewhere nice, prove to her that he could romance her just as well as he could fuck her. He had everything set, more or less. Found a place he could take her dancing, get the mood right. Show her he was more than just a good roll between the sheets, even more than someone she could count to be at her side when the chips were down. That he was someone who could be everything she needed him to be and more.

Right, so he was a sentimental sod and a bit of a romantic sap. That's what the bloody holiday was for, wasn't it?

He'd approach it casually enough, though. Mention it while they were on patrol tonight. Say, that nancy couples' holiday was just a couple of days away and he had a mind to celebrate the marvel that was two enemies being more hellbent on destroying each other through sex than the old-fashioned way. That'd get him a giggle and an eyeroll—probably at the same time—and she'd call him whatever barnyard animal she'd decided he was this week, put up the hint of a protest, before deciding

the best thing to do was humor him. After all, his ideas tended to work out in her favor.

She wouldn't have to know how serious he was about it until the night itself. Until she was so swept up in the romance of it that a thing like learning he was in love with her was the perfect end to the evening and the perfect beginning to something else.

He could do this. He could. He *would*.

Spike was so lost in his thoughts, hopeful and soppy though they were, that when the knock came, it honestly surprised him. He jerked upright, pulling his gaze off the telly he had only half been watching—bloody hard to focus while his mind whirled with images of how all his plans might play out for him—and glanced at the door, every instinct on alert. It was too early for Buffy, the sun having only set a few minutes ago and this being one of the days she had a late class. Plus, whoever was on the other side didn't have a sodding heartbeat, which put her about as far out of the running as she could be.

He rose to his feet, keeping his glare on the door and plucking up the blade he kept placed between the remote and whatever he was drinking on the end-table. Someone had chosen the wrong flat. "Whoever's here, sod off if you aim to keep your head attached."

"Is that Spike?"

The voice was deep, male, and unfamiliar. Spike tightened his grip around the blade's handle. "Who wants to know?"

"Look, man, I wouldn't be here if it weren't important."

"Yeah, that means a whole lot to me considerin' I don't know who the bloody hell you are."

"I'm like you."

"I highly doubt that."

"You got out, right? Of that place? That lab?"

He hesitated at that, tilted his head. Right, well, that was interesting. "What's it to you?"

"I promised her I'd find you if I got out. She said you'd help."

She? *She*? Spike scowled, then rolled his eyes. Only one *she* he could think of that would be thick enough to send someone his way. Hell, if the pillock hadn't managed to lead every Initiative soldier to his doorstep, it'd be nothing less than a miracle.

"Not interested," he said. "Why don't you bugger off?"

"Come on, I promised."

"Yeah, and what do you care? You got out, didn't you?"

"I only got out because she got me out."

Fuck it. He wasn't going to have a conversation through the bloody door. Whoever it was wasn't human, and that meant it was open bloody season if he said something Spike didn't like. Most vamps would've burst inside without bothering with things like knocking, as it was.

So, blade still gripped tight in his left hand and tucked out of sight, he opened the door.

The bloke on the other side wasn't in a mind to be subtle. He was all fang, dark hair sweeping into his yellow eyes, his cheeks sagging with a quality Spike had come to associate with a vamp who had been a bit rounder but lost weight all at once. He didn't look familiar in the slightest, but he didn't need to—the smell was enough to give him away as someone who had recently been an unwitting guest of a secret underground lab. No forgetting the way the sterile stink of the place lingered in the throat.

"You are Spike, right?" the vamp asked. He was a twitchy bloke, kept trying to steal glances over his shoulder.

"I'm Spike. And if you don't get to the point fast, you'll wish you were back under the scalpel."

The vamp brought his hands up, his eyes going wide. "Look, I'm here because she told me I had to find you. That you're the only one who could help."

"Yeah? She also happen to mention that I don't give a toss what trouble she lands herself in? Bitch isn't my problem." He hesitated, then shook his head. "How the bloody hell did *Harm* get you out, anyway? What'd she do, flash her tits? Not that they aren't nice tits, mind, but not the sort a man risks his neck to save, even if he isn't taken."

"What? I don't get it. Flashing tits?"

"Or however it is she did it," Spike said, waving a hand. Though for the life of him, he couldn't think of how else Harmony would have managed to rescue anyone, unless it had been by accident. Wasn't like she had much more than those two IQ points to rub together. "Told her

it was just a matter of time before she got fitted for her own collar. She can rot down there as far as I care.”

The horror that consumed the vamp’s face would have been downright hilarious were it not so bloody bewildering. “No, man, you can’t leave her down there. She said I’d be dust before the sun comes up if I didn’t make sure you came to get her out.”

And the chump had believed her? Fuck, he deserved to dust just on that alone.

“Yeah? And who’s gonna dole out the punishment?”

“Someone called Miss Edith.”

Spike’s face fell. All of him did.

“And mister, I really, *really* don’t want to meet her.”

SHE WASN'T READY FOR THIS. SHE WASN'T READY FOR IT TO BE TODAY.

"I'm sorry," Buffy said faintly, her voice sounding far away from the rest of her. Lucky voice. "Could you...could you say that again?"

Spike huffed and turned hard, sparing her a glare before showing her his back. He'd been pacing for a few minutes now—ever since he'd burst into her dorm room, wild and untamed and talking nonstop about Drusilla, and also either unaware or uncaring that he dug the knife in a little more with every word.

"Would it kill you to pay attention for once in your life?" he snapped at her after he turned on his heel for the return trip down the stretch of floor he was insistent on wearing out. "Your army boys have Dru. They're probably doin' god knows what to her now as we speak—cuttin' her up, stickin' things in her cranium. Bloody hell, Buffy, she won't survive in there. I need you to get her out."

The panic in his voice, the urgency, paired with his wild eyes and the platinum tufts of hair sticking up in all directions, were weapons in their own right—sharp and jagged and lodged firmly in her chest. It was beyond unfair, she knew, to be focusing on her own hurt at the moment, to be caught up in what this meant for her, but she couldn't help herself. "How do you know?"

“I already told you—she sent some tosser my way with a message.”

Yes, he had said that. It was the first thing he’d said, actually. He’d barreled inside, a man possessed, rambling that a vamp had swung by his place to tell him Drusilla was in trouble. Not just in trouble but captured. By the same wankers who had nabbed him, put the bug zapper in his head, and she wouldn’t survive that, his Dru. She wouldn’t and he had to get to her now. He was the reason she was in town. Had to be. Had to be she’d come to her senses and decided she wanted him back. And he had to help her. Couldn’t leave her like that. Not after everything.

All the while he’d talked, Buffy had been trying to keep herself together. Not lose face. Goddammit, she hadn’t been ready for today to be the day everything ended—the day he broke her heart. But since when had a silly thing like her readiness ever mattered? Never, that’s when. No reason the story should change just because she was in love with a different vampire this time.

There were some lessons she was apparently doomed to repeat until nothing of Buffy remained. The tender parts of Buffy, at least. The parts that made her feel human.

“Spike,” she said, surprised when her voice came out all smooth and not wobbly, “you’re making me dizzy with all the pacing. Can you stop?”

He could, as it turned out, only not without aiming yet another glare at her. “So what’s the plan? How do we do this?”

“Do this?”

“Yeah. Mount up the rescue. Your mates—they’ll chip in, won’t they? Your lot’s good at this stuff. You’ll work out how we get in there and get her—”

“Wait a second.”

“We don’t *have* a bloody second!” He swelled, his eyes flashing yellow the way they did when he was especially close to letting his fangs burst through. She’d only seen it happen a couple of times, and both of those times had been when he’d had her pinned beneath him. Most memorably, the time he’d been pounding into her with such fury that they’d broken the bed. Literally, the bed had broken and dipped to the right, and he hadn’t slowed down, just kept fucking her until she’d tipped over into pure euphoria. “The last time a bunch of righteous wankers got hold

of her, they nearly killed her. Took a bloody ritual and your ex-honey to get her back to full strength, point of fact, so forgive me if I'm not too keen on wasting time."

Buffy's throat tightened. She needed to focus, needed to think, but all her stupid mind could do was circle back to the reality that everything was over. That even if Spike was wrong, and Drusilla wasn't in the care of the Initiative, this was the end of the fling she never should have flung herself into in the first place. She'd never really succeeded in fooling herself, had never been so delusional as to think he could be hers, but there was knowing and there was Knowing and one of those knowings came with a capital K. She'd known but now she Knew.

Thing was, while she'd always had a firm grasp of the truth in her head, her heart had been sucker enough to get involved. She could talk a good game, but everything Spike had given her these last few weeks had been enough to make some small part of her wonder if perhaps she wasn't alone in her stupid, life-ruining feelings. The way he touched her, the way he looked at her, hell, the way he said her name—all of it had been so easy to get lost inside. To make her forget that everything in Spike's world revolved around Drusilla.

And Buffy couldn't be in a relationship with someone she was in love with when he was *this* in love with someone else. Maybe if she hadn't been such an idiot and caught feelings along the way, but she *was* an idiot and she *had* caught feelings and there was no point torturing herself.

But she couldn't afford to think about this as a woman about to lose the guy who wasn't quite her boyfriend. She had to think about this as the Slayer. And as the Slayer, what would she say if any other vampire asked her to rescue someone who was likely responsible for more death and mayhem than the combined efforts of everyone who had ever been featured on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted? That much was simple.

"No."

Spike stared at her as though he didn't understand. "No," he repeated.

"No."

"No, as in..."

"No, as in I'm *not* going to break into a government facility to help

set free one of the most dangerous vampires on the planet. Have you forgotten that I'm a vampire slayer?"

He didn't reply, rather studied her with increasingly hard eyes, shock settling into fury. But what the hell had he expected? Vampire slayer risks life and limb to save the life of a deranged psychopath just so she can kill again? Why, exactly? Because the vampire slayer in question happened to be screwing said psychopath's neutered ex? The same neutered ex who would likely be a footnote in her personal history the second everything was over? What was in it for Buffy except for more heartache and a guilty conscience to boot?

God, she was such an idiot. An idiot who had managed to fall in love with two vampires, one of which didn't even have a soul. She and Spike had gotten equally good at pretending they were something other than what they were.

"I know what you are, Slayer," Spike said at last, his tone icy. "Just thought I might mean somethin' to you after all this time."

"You mean that you might be able to convince me to break your psychotic girlfriend out so she can continue with the killing and torturing of innocent people."

She shouldn't have used the g-word. She heard it and Spike heard it and she knew what came next. He didn't disappoint.

"Jealous, are we?"

"No," she snapped as her cheeks flamed red hot, hating her human body for its humanness. How he could tell exactly what she was feeling and when she was lying just by looking at her, by sniffing or listening to her heart. How just being in the same room together gave him all the ammunition he needed to make it really hurt.

"You are." Spike stepped toward her, and for the first time since before Christmas, she really wished he wouldn't. She needed him gone—far away. As far away from her and her stupid girlish fantasies as possible. But Spike had never once done what she needed him to do. Not when they had been enemies and certainly not as lovers. He wasn't about to start now. "You're jealous, and you're gonna take that out on her."

"I am not taking *anything* out on anyone," Buffy spat, and with thankfully a decent amount of conviction. Enough that he stopped walking forward and blinked at her in surprise. "What I'm doing is my job."

Drusilla's a killer. A *slayer* killer, and I let her go before. I'm not about to risk being caught or arrested or whatever just so she can get back to doing that."

"I wouldn't let her come after you—"

"Way to miss the point!" She shot to her feet, jolted there as though a live wire had torn through her body. Maybe it had. All she knew was she couldn't sit still anymore. "The fact remains that she's a killer, no matter who she comes after. You're asking me to rescue someone I'd have to stake just for existing. In what world does this make sense?"

The room plunged into a frostbite chill. "Lemme get this straight," he said, starting toward her again, his steps slower this time. "I get this chip out, you put a stake in me? Just like that?"

"That's not what I said—"

"I'm a killer, Slayer. Done in double the slayers Dru has, by last count. I might be muzzled, but that doesn't change what I am."

Buffy willed herself not to look away from him, though all of her screamed to do just that. These were all things she'd been thinking in some fashion or another—or, more accurately, trying like hell *not* to think. Hoping she would never have to all the while knowing the better of it.

It wasn't like it had been with Angel, knowing that he had done horrible things but able to compartmentalize those crimes as belonging to a version of himself who wasn't around. The living embodiment of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde kept separate by virtue of a curse with a really specific escape clause. Spike was the same vampire who had crashed his way into her school one night with the intent to kill her. The same vampire who had, not too long ago, approached her with the sun beating down on them, smirking around his fangs and taking potshots at her love life. Nothing had changed and everything had changed, and somehow, she'd fallen in love with him anyway. The guy who had and maybe still did want to kill her. All because she'd been dumb enough to think she could keep herself from becoming emotionally entangled.

"I know what you are, Spike," she said in a low, trembling voice. "Believe me, that's the one thing I can't ever forget."

He didn't say anything for a beat. He didn't need to. It was all in his eyes. "That it, then?"

"Is what it?"

"This, you and me? Are we done?"

"Is...is that what you want?"

"Do you really think that?"

"I don't know what to think. But you have to know how hard this is for me. What you're asking me to do. It's everything I'm against. *Everything*. I'm not in the business of saving vampires."

"Only when you are. You make exceptions to your own sodding rules all the time."

"Yes! For vampires I lo—care about. And it's not the same and you know it. Angel has a soul."

Spike rolled his eyes. "Here we go."

"And you have a chip."

"A chip *they* shoved in my cranium. You think I like this? You think I wanted any of it?"

Buffy had lost control of her lower lip. Hell, she'd lost control of her whole damn body. "It's the reason you're here, though," she said, blinking back the sting in her eyes and promising herself that whatever else Spike thought was his to claim, he wouldn't see her cry. She felt pathetic enough as it was. "If you hadn't gotten the chip, *we* never would have happened."

He didn't insult her intelligence by arguing with her, though god, she was pathetic enough to wish he would. Instead, he shook his head and let out a breath, looking far more pensive than Spike had a right to look. "Maybe not," he said. "We'll never know, will we? And that's not even the sodding point, Slayer. You'll bend your little rules left and right when it's somethin' important to you. Just wagered I might be important enough to qualify."

"Do you really think I haven't bent my rules for you already?"

"Not much of a sacrifice, is it? You know I'm on your leash. Haven't so much as nibbled on anythin' other than that dainty neck of yours for months."

"Yes, because *that's* the only thing that matters. No, let's not talk about what this is doing to me."

His expression hardened again. All of him did. Just not in the way she was used to—there was none of the warmth that had become her addic-

tion, none of the playfulness or the glow of what she'd been foolish enough to think might be...if not love, then certainly fondness. Just the vampire she'd known not too long ago. The one who had championed her death. "Didn't realize it'd been such a bloody hardship," he said coolly. "Here I thought you wanted me around."

"I did. I... I thought that's what you wanted too."

Another beat, in which he remained impassive in ways Spike simply *wasn't*. And that was beyond frustrating. He was her walking mood ring, the man with the nonexistent poker face, the guy whose every thought was telegraphed in a thousand different ways and never subtly.

"All I've been able to see for months is you," he said at last, sounding somewhere between reflective and resentful. "You got in my head and wouldn't leave. Made yourself right at home, changed everything I thought I was. Can't undo that. Damage is bloody well done where I'm concerned, no matter how it goes. But Dru was my world. She's the reason I'm here at all. The reason I didn't snuff it in the gutter some nameless chump that no one would have cried over. She made me who I am, and I'm not about to let her rot away. Might not have a soul but I have a bloody heart, and I won't just sit here while those butchers tear apart someone I love. Whether you help me is your choice. But if you won't, I'll go at it alone."

Buffy inhaled so deeply her lungs gave a whine of complaint. There it was. *Love*. Spike loved Drusilla. Present tense. There hadn't really been any question, but if there had, he'd just given his answer. The rest was on her.

And what was the rest? Only everything she'd just told him. The decision she would have to live with, one way or another. Whatever she and Spike had been to each other didn't matter. That chapter had ended and no, she hadn't been ready for it, but it had to happen at some point. That was the nature of flings.

It wasn't Spike's fault her stupid heart hadn't gotten the memo. She'd known the entire time exactly what he was. That was why he should have been safe. No major risks, just fun. Experimental fun. The type she should have in college. And if some of that fun came at the expense of

doing something she knew she shouldn't, well, all the better. God knows she'd earned something to call her own.

Only it had gotten harder to bear with time, particularly as she'd fallen in love with him—the knowledge that he would always want someone else. Buffy wasn't sure how long she would have been able to live with it, touching him and knowing it wasn't her touch he craved, but she'd been willing to fool herself and keep fooling herself. Every day, if that was what it took. Except she couldn't anymore, and leaving Drusilla to rot in the Initiative wouldn't change that. The only thing it would change was how Spike looked back on this period of his life. How he remembered the few stolen weeks he'd shared with his mortal enemy before the woman he truly loved had returned.

Buffy was going to lose him anyway. Hell, he'd never been hers to lose. And she'd known that. She'd known it—she just hadn't been prepared for that knowledge to land as hard as it had, and certainly not tonight.

And despite everything, she also knew that refusing to save Drusilla wasn't the right thing to do. Forget everything she'd said a moment ago, for that *had* been jealousy, and never mind all the arguments she could practically hear Giles making as though he were standing in the room. Buffy could use the right words and tap into all the reasons why Drusilla deserved whatever she was suffering—she could break the scenario down to its nuts and bolts and piece something together that, on paper, was rational in a bloodless way. She could do all of that because others had been doing that to her since the second she'd become the Slayer. Dissecting her existence to its scraps, separating her calling from who she was, because *who* she was didn't matter.

But that wasn't Buffy and it never had been. Debating numbers and what-ifs and being ruthless just for the hell of it was the Council's specialty, and exactly why she no longer answered to them.

She wouldn't stand by arguments that could have just as easily spilled from the lips of anyone without a soul—arguments she never would have made had the circumstances been different. Had it been anyone other than the man she loved asking her to rescue the woman *he* loved. She wasn't that person.

She wouldn't let loving Spike change who she was, turn her into

someone she wouldn't recognize. No matter how much she might want to. No matter how much the alternative hurt.

"This is her last chance," she heard herself saying. Not realizing she intended to speak until her lips were in motion. Decision made, then.

"What's that?"

"I get her out, and she never comes back to Sunnydale," Buffy replied. She directed her gaze to the floor. It was easier than looking at him. "I mean it. She shows her face around here again, and I'll dust her."

"She won't."

"And you know this how?"

"Came here for me, didn't she? Not gonna be much point in stickin' around once we get her out."

Apparently, that was all the end of their relationship warranted. A verbal shrug. They'd had their fun, sure, but it was all over now.

Must be one of those perks to being soulless.

Buffy locked her jaw and forced herself to nod. "Okay."

"Buffy." His voice had softened into the low rumble that she loved. It never failed to set her ablaze, or hadn't until now. Now, when all she wanted to do was cry—when she was applying all her focus on not breaking down in front of him, not giving him that last small victory. "I know this... Fuck, I'm sorry. I should've—"

But she held up a hand, not trusting that she could stomach to hear his *should haves*. "Let's just get this done," she said, her throat already raw and she hadn't even gotten to the sobbing part of the breakup. Her body had flared up with remembered pain, understanding that what she'd put it through just a few months ago was about to recommence like crazy, and already the fight was gone. She'd lived through hurt like this once before, and she could again, but she couldn't think of it right now. Couldn't be Buffy. Not when Spike needed the Slayer.

"Where do you reckon we start, then?" Spike asked, looking at her now with that warmth she'd been idiot enough to mistake for actual affection. "The others—your chums?"

"No. At least not yet. I think we start with Riley."

Instantly, the temperature in the room seemed to plummet, and god help her, she had no idea why. She *would* know why if he hadn't just told her that he was going to run away with Drusilla the second she was free

again, but he had, so as far as she was concerned? Zero room for his petty jealous boyfriend bullshit. Yes, Riley was the largest and the sorest of the relationship sore spots they had encountered since Christmas, but he was also literally her only link to the Initiative and therefore the best way inside. That he was also convinced that Buffy was his soulmate was completely beside the point.

Though it was a very pointy point. Riley had persisted on pursuing Buffy until only recently, swearing it would only be a matter of time before she gave in. Finally, she'd told him she was seeing someone else—someone who, yes, knew about her being the Slayer and also did some demon hunting on the side. Actually, it was that Spike guy who she hadn't been engaged to, funny enough. What, had he thought she'd just pulled that name out of a hat?

Disgruntled though he'd been, Riley had backed off after hearing that Spike was in fact real after all. He apparently had no trouble accepting a no if it meant respecting some anonymous guy's territory.

Throughout all this, Spike had turned into a surly grump anytime she mentioned Riley. Rolling his eyes, muttering under his nonexistent breath, taking every opportunity he could to say something disparaging—the full nine yards. And yeah, Buffy had dug it, because it was nice to be wanted that much. To not be the only person in a relationship plagued by insecurities that sometimes manifested in overly dramatic huffs. Even if she hadn't been able to fool herself completely that this thing with Spike had any lasting power, she'd felt secure enough in how territorial he was to believe that it was more than sex to him. That the fun they'd had together had actually been genuine.

But that part was over, so there was no reason for Spike to glower at her the way he was now.

“Smallest sign of trouble and you go runnin' off to Captain Card-board, is that it?” he said, bracing a hand on either hip, his eyes narrowing into slits.

“Excuse me?”

“Awfully quick to pull that name out of a hat, is all.”

Buffy opened her mouth, closed it, swallowed, and shook her head. “You have *got* to be kidding me right now.”

“With what?”

“You are seriously, *seriously* going to pull the jealous boyfriend crap after what I just agreed to do for you.” She crossed her arms and glared right back at him, annoyance quickly overriding her surprise and—*thank god*—that awful, broken feeling that she knew was waiting for her at the end of this. Her life made so much more sense if she was pissed at Spike for being an ass. If she could hold onto *this* until he was out of town, all the better. It’d guarantee he’d never see her break.

“Just don’t see why he was at the top of bloody mind for you, is all.”

“Uhh, maybe because Riley’s the Initiative’s poster boy, and that’s where we need to go?”

“So your brilliant solution is to ask the one bloke with a yen to put the hurt on anything non-human to bust a vampire out of his special prison. And what do think he’ll expect in return?”

“What the hell does it matter if it gets Drusilla out?” she shot back, her cheeks beginning to warm. Hell, all of her beginning to warm, and not in the gooey way she liked. “That’s what’s important here, right? *Her*?”

Spike stepped toward her, his eyes dark and his nostrils in full flare mode, and her stupid body—which had become used to just leaping at him whenever he got like this—ignored her brain’s SOS messages and began doing that tingling thing, which just no fair at all. “Think we got a wire or two crossed, Slayer,” he said. “I dunno what you think this is, but—”

But because life sometimes had sitcom timing, that was the moment someone decided to bang a meaty fist on the other side of the dorm room door. Hard, thunderous knocks that stole the air from her lungs and doused the flicker of *something* that had sparked to life when Spike had started toward her. Buffy nearly groaned but managed to bite it back, and almost immediately wished she hadn’t. If anyone was worthy of a groan...

“Buffy? It’s Riley,” came from the other side of the door. Because of course it was Riley. Just the Powers at work, continuing with their mission of denying Buffy anything even resembling a break. “If you’re in there, I really need to talk to you.”

God, just shoot me, already.

“Oh, Riley, is it?” Spike practically snarled. “Isn’t this tidy? You two have a date planned?”

“What? Don’t be ridiculous.” Though, she thought as she stomped her way toward the door, if she’d known to expect her relationship with him to go up in flames today, maybe she *would* have considered having Riley show up just to be petty. Well, probably not, because getting Riley *off* her case had been difficult enough the first time, and no matter how upset she was with the stupid situation she found herself in, she really didn’t want to go another ten rounds of *Why I Don’t Want to Date You* with him. Still, it was nice knowing Spike was about to experience a taste of his own bitter medicine. “Maybe he also has an ex-girlfriend he wants me to rescue. Seems to be the night for it.”

“Buffy—”

But she wasn’t listening. She was through listening to him for the moment. “Riley,” she said as she threw the door open, “this really isn’t the best—”

But for all the notice he gave her, she might as well have been a ficus tree. Instead, Riley shoved past her, his eyes wide and wild and his face a mask of panic. He was also in military garb, which at least helped identify the sort of help he needed.

It wasn’t until he whirled around, though, that Buffy realized she’d made a strategical error. Riley hadn’t been around Spike all that much, not since they’d all joined forces to save the world following the last apocalypse, and that had been very much by design. After Riley had remarked about how familiar a certain vampire looked, Buffy had determined to keep the two of them as far from each other as possible to avoid any connection of any dots.

And no matter how upset she was with Spike and the situation, she would *not* let Riley turn him back into a lab rat.

For the moment, though, it seemed Riley hadn’t realized anyone else was in the room. He barely even twitched in Spike’s direction. “I wouldn’t have come to you if it weren’t urgent,” he told her. “There’s a situation at the Initiative.”

God, he didn’t know the half of it. But considering her best plan for getting Drusilla out involved Riley, perhaps it was better to listen and do

what she needed to help. Then, at least, he'd owe her a favor. "What kind of situation?" she asked.

"It's this vampire we brought in." He brought up his hands in anticipation of an argument. "I know, I know. *Vampire*. Just one. But she's different—I've never seen anything like her before."

"Yeah?" Spike asked loudly, making Riley start and twist to face him. "You don't bloody say? What's the lady done?"

Riley just stared for a moment before the confusion on his face hardened into recognition. "That's Hostile Seventeen. Why do you have Hostile Seventeen in your room?"

"I go where I please," Spike snapped, evidently determined to be as unhelpful as possible. "Got more right to be here than you do."

Buffy fought a groan. "Spike—"

"Spike?" It came out a squeal. "*This* is Spike? You dumped me for an HST?"

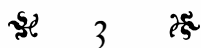
"The lady dumped you because somethin' better came along."

"Oh my god, will you both just *shut up*?" Buffy pressed her fingers to her temples, though it was no use. The headache that had spontaneously blossomed there just gave a cheerful throb and continued to pound away at the inside of her skull. "Considering the two of you are here asking me for favors, the least you can do is not make me want to put a stake in *both* your chests." She waited for a second, sure that would garner a heated response from one or both of them, but when she dared to look, she found them taking turns between glaring at her and each other. Inhaling deeply, she gathered her bearings the best she could and focused her attention on Riley. "What has this vampire done?"

For the longest beat, Riley didn't answer, just glowered at her like she'd run over his grandmother. But then he cleared his throat and said in a low voice, "Well, I thought it was weird, but maybe it's not."

"Just tell me. Is her name Drusilla?"

"I don't know what *its* name is," he spat. "But she's asking for you."



SPIKE WAS BEGINNING TO THINK HE'D BEEN PLAYED. HE HADN'T SAID as much, though, and wouldn't until he knew for sure. Not with so much on the line. But for the life of him, he couldn't conceive of a reason why Dru would ask for Buffy, particularly if she also meant for Spike to come riding to the rescue. It made bugger-all sense and worked wonders to chase away the panic that had threatened to consume him the second her little messenger boy had shown up on his doorstep.

Of course, now he had to contend with Captain Cardboard and the drippy way he regarded the Slayer. His whole life had been spent trading one hell for another. No reason loving Buffy should change that.

"Asking for me," Buffy replied dully. She threw Spike a look he knew well—the one begging translation. *Tell me what the crazy lady means, please.* Fuck, if he had a nickel... "Why is she asking for me?"

"If I knew that, I'd tell you," Finn replied through clenched teeth, also shooting Spike a glare. Also one he knew well. "When were you going to tell *me* you were involved with the undead?"

"I wasn't aware who I date is any of your business."

"I thought you were a vampire slayer! Isn't there some, I dunno, *rule* against fraternizing with the enemy?" Finn whipped around

so he could wow them equally with the full power of his farm boy glower. “He’s an animal.”

“Yeah, in all the ways she fancies,” Spike agreed with a smirk, unable to help himself and knowing he should. “Turns out she needs a little *animal* to help her hit those high notes.”

“Spike, please don’t make me dust you on principle,” Buffy said, her cheeks going that brilliant red he loved so much. Though he had to admit he preferred it when he’d coaxed it out by whispering little dirties in her ear while she squeezed her heavenly cunt around his prick. Something he very much doubted he’d get to experience tonight, thanks to whatever Dru had cooked up.

“I can’t believe you dumped me for an HST,” Finn said again, this time with more than a bit of sulk in his voice. “I really thought better of you.”

“Well, I hate to disappoint, but *wow* with the inappropriate timing,” she fired back. “Would you please just tell me what the hell is going on in the Initiative so we can get there and—oh, I dunno—stop it?”

He looked like he wanted to argue, and bless him, he probably did, but whatever working brain cells he had left must have bumped together and caused some friction, for the hulking sod shook his head and stepped back. “Fine,” he said, his tone clipped. “Like I said, we’re not dealing with an ordinary vampire here. At least no vampire like any I’ve seen. She...” He paused to regard Spike with another glare. “Is it necessary for *it* to be here?”

“Yes,” Buffy replied without missing a beat. She crossed her arms. “And can it with the *it* crap.”

“He’s really done a number on you, hasn’t he?”

“I cannot begin to tell you how very over I am with conversations like this one. You came to me for help—”

“I came to you because a psycho vampire asked for you!”

“Yes, and that same psycho vampire is likely Spike’s girlfriend, so odds are, having him close by is going to be a big part of the plan.”

Spike opened his mouth—not sure what he meant to say but wanting the chance to say it all the same—but Finn plowed right on ahead without bothering to check for traffic.

“So your vampire boyfriend has a vampire girlfriend?”

“In so many ways, Riley, shut up. Or if you’re not going to shut up, at least tell me something useful.” But something had shifted behind Buffy’s eyes—a flicker Spike doubted he would have seen were it not for the fact that he knew her as well as he did. His slayer wielded so many things with proficiency that would shame the most hardened of warriors, but the one thing she lacked was a reliable poker face. It was one of the many pieces that made up Buffy Summers that he absolutely adored—how much she told him without saying a word. And paired with what they had been discussing before the wonder soldier had decided to barge in, Spike realized something he should have from the offset.

Buffy didn’t realize that rescuing Dru had bugger all to do with wanting her. Just loyalty, was all. Sure, he’d always love her in some fashion, but not like he had before. That love had changed like the rest of him—couldn’t help but change when he’d realized he was out of his gourd in love with the Slayer. But somehow that much had been lost in translation. Might also account for the way she’d reacted when he’d asked her to help him bust Dru out in the first place. How she’d snapped at him, made a load of excuses that hadn’t sounded like her at all.

She’d been jealous, yeah. But also heartbroken.

And maybe because he was a soulless prat—probably *exactly* because he was a soulless prat—Spike felt something inside him lurch with hope.

If Buffy was heartbroken over him, did that mean...?

“—came over the comms that there had been a slaughter at the bus station,” Finn was saying when he clued back into the conversation. “Suspected vampire activity. We assumed at least three, given the degree of carnage and the precision of the kills. All signs indicated that we were dealing with creatures that had been alive longer than the average HST we bag and tag around here.”

Spike snorted but tried to pass it off as a cough when Buffy turned her glare on him. He didn’t think she’d bought it.

“When was this?” Buffy asked, returning her attention to her overgrown admirer.

“Last night. We expected to spend the evening hunting them down.” Riley drew in a deep breath and shook his big, lumbering head. “We had just established the perimeter markers for each of the recon teams when she... She just walked in.”

"She...walked in," the Slayer echoed, her eyebrows shooting up. "Drusilla just walked into the Initiative."

"She'd done something to Colonel Haviland," Finn said. His tone had taken on a defensive, blustering quality that Spike ached to poke fun at, but something told him to hold his tongue. "He wasn't himself. He escorted her into the facility and ordered us to drop our weapons."

Buffy blinked, clearly unimpressed. "And what did you do?"

There was a pause. A flash of color stole up Finn's neck. "Well, he's a commanding officer and he gave us an order."

"You actually dropped your weapons."

"It was Colonel Haviland—"

"Being led around by a lunatic. You didn't think to question this?"

"Buffy, when a commanding officer gives an order, you follow it."

"Well, there's my tax dollars hard at work." She blew out a breath, one that made the few strands of hair dangling in front of her eyes jostle against the light. "So let me get this straight. Drusilla—"

"I don't know that that's its name."

"Well, I do," she bit back. "Drusilla waltzes into town and right into the Initiative without you or any of your other goons doing a thing to stop her. She uses her mind mojo on your commanding officer, gets you to disarm yourselves—"

"We were—"

"I'm not done. She gets you to disarm yourselves, then... I'm guessing she had Colonel Has-No-Brains command you to let out one of your other science projects so that he can run and tattle to Spike." Buffy waited for a second, crossing her arms and narrowing her eyes. It was fun, watching a six-foot mass quiver under her glare. "Cause I'm willing to bet you've plugged all the security holes. The vamp Spike mentioned didn't sound like the type who was smart enough to mastermind his own escape."

The red had faded from Finn's skin. If anything, he was getting paler by the second. "She has some sort of... I don't know, *mind* power," he replied in what was undoubtedly a defensive whine. "She's... Buffy, I've never seen anything like it."

"I have," Buffy replied. "Or...I've heard of it. She used it on Giles once." She let out a breath, then turned to Spike. The fire wasn't gone

from her eyes, nor the hurt he'd seen there earlier, but both had taken a back seat. He'd have to remember to tell her how hot seeing her like this got him when they were on the other side of it. "So, sounds less like a 'rescue Drusilla' mission and more like a 'rescue people from Drusilla' mission. Any idea why she sent you the undead telegram?"

Spike lifted a shoulder, glanced to Finn. "Might just want some company," he replied. "Could also be what I was sayin' earlier. She's come back for me. Decided this was the best way to get my attention. She's never been the grovelin' type, Dru, but she likes her grand gestures."

Buffy firmed her jaw and nodded, but not before he saw her flicker of hurt. The same she buried in a hurry before it could blossom into anything more substantial. "So she's holed up inside the Initiative, wants to lure you there... I'm guessing 'grand gesture' in insane-o vamp's case would be..."

There was only one reason he could reckon Dru would willingly waltz into the bloody Initiative then extend him an invitation. Get him riled up and ready to do whatever he needed to bust into the one place he'd vowed never to set foot inside again. The answer was clear as bloody day, though he didn't want to voice it. Also didn't need to because Buffy was too smart not to arrive at the same conclusion. He watched as that happened, caught the slight drop in her face, theory cementing into knowledge.

"Did you tell Drusilla about the chip?" Buffy asked, keeping her gaze on him. Her voice didn't waver, and her expression didn't change, but he both heard and saw the things she wasn't saying. And though he knew he shouldn't, Spike couldn't help but bristle.

The girl really had no sodding clue, did she?

"How, exactly?" he replied, somehow managing to keep from snapping at her. Ought to get a medal for that. "Not like we're pen pals or anything."

"She obviously wants you there for a reason. You think it's a grand gesture. I think removing the chip would be pretty grand as far as gestures go."

Yeah, so did he, but it didn't mean rot. There were any number of ways Dru might have learned about his handicap. Some vamp might have split town and run his mouth. She might have gone out to eat one night

and snatched up a chatty someone who had blabbed all the Initiative's precious secrets. Or, here's a thought, she'd been hit by one of the bloody visions that had plagued her throughout the course of their relationship. Little memo from whatever sods fancied themselves masters of the bloody universe announcing that Spike was now a cautionary tale for others. Be good, kiddies, or the big bad humans will wire you up and turn you into a pathetic shadow of yourself. And be lucky if that's all they do, 'cause at least he'd gotten out with his life and all his limbs attached. More than he could say for many of the other poor gits who had wound up government lab rats.

But even if that were true, it didn't mean jack. And it certainly didn't mean whatever Buffy thought it meant.

"What do you want me to say, Slayer?" Spike replied, spreading his arms. "Could be right. Could be she had herself a vision and got inspired. You're actin' like I asked for this."

"But it's what you want, right? The chip gone?"

Fuck, were they really going to do this in front of the boy? He might love Buffy with every last grain of his existence, but that didn't make her any less bloody insufferable when she got some barmy idea fixed in her noggin.

And what did she want him to do at the moment. Lie?

"You're damn right I want the chip gone," he spat out, forcing himself not to falter when she flinched and looked away. "Been bloody upfront about that, haven't I? But I didn't ask for this. Didn't even know she was in this sodding hemisphere until two hours ago. And I thought these prats had her locked up, so do us a favor and don't pretend like this has anything to do with me."

"Are you deficient?" Buffy snapped back. "She sent a personal invitation specifically to *you*. It has *everything* to do with you."

"No, that has to do with her. What *she* thinks is gonna work to romance me back. It has bugger all to do with how I feel about what the army berks did to my head." All this, of course, assuming that they were right in thinking that was Dru's intentions, which in itself was a dangerous thing. Spike had spent more than a century catering to her every whim, no matter how mad or twisted, and he would never assume he had the foggiest idea how her mind worked. He'd admired it, relished

in it, cooed and coddled it, but he'd never understood it. Do one thing one day and earn one of her sly grins. Do the same bloody thing the next day and suffer her wrath. Her unpredictability had been one of the things that had drawn him in the most. Every second had been an opportunity for a new adventure.

Still, he thought he had it right this time. Not much else made sense, and Dru's madness was known to have its method from time to time. And he'd be lying if he said he wasn't flattered. If part of him didn't acknowledge how much easier his life would be if he could get the bloody chip removed and fall back into the existence from which he'd been so unceremoniously banished. Make like the last year or so hadn't happened and go back to playing the doting lover of a mad princess.

But it had happened.

More than that, *Buffy* had happened. Buffy with her golden hair and her awful puns and her dancing eyes and her warm skin and her fight and her good. That awful, awful *good* that drew him in, burning so bright there should be nothing left of him but dust. Loving her was sick and twisted and wrong and also inescapable. *She* was inescapable. His heart had been lost from the start—it had just taken the rest of him a minute to cotton on.

And he knew she needed to hear this—all of it. Now that he realized exactly what it was he was seeing when he looked at her, the hurt and heartbreak that should have been obvious from the start, he had to find a way to convey exactly what rescuing Dru was and exactly what it wasn't. Only preferably without the hulking human who had been salivating over her for weeks standing by as witness. Spike had had a plan before all this. A good plan. Nice and romantic-like. Something that would make Buffy see him as more.

This was supposed to have been the one plan that worked. He wasn't about to give up on it. Not when it was the most important one.

"Look, it doesn't matter why she's here, all right?" Spike said, calmer. Doing his best to ignore the increasingly huffy Finn, whose stare had taken on a physical weight. "We just gotta go in and get her out."

"Get her out?" soldier boy barked. "No. That is not the deal. We need to *take* this bitch out. Buffy—"

Buffy held up a hand, her tight jaw betraying her impatience. "We're

getting her out. Then Spike is going to make sure she never comes back. Isn't that right?"

Spike nodded. "Can't imagine she'll have much reason to come back. Won't be anythin' for her here. Not me, at least."

"But she's a vampire." Finn was staring at Buffy as though she'd started breathing fire. "She's a vampire and you're a vampire slayer. You're going to let a vampire walk?"

"Riley, do me a big favor and back off. This doesn't concern you."

"Oh, I beg to differ. I am incredibly concerned."

"Well, that's what's going to happen. Deal with it or don't—I don't care. Just don't get in my way." Buffy looked back at Spike, her eyes hard and her expression resigned. "You either. She asked for me specifically. I'm guessing that means I can expect a party when I get down there."

"Haven't the faintest, Slayer."

"You lived with her crazy ass for a hundred years and you have no clue?"

"Not exactly the easiest bird to predict." Though, now that he gave it some thought, he supposed he had an idea or two. None he was keen to share at the moment, though, considering the common theme was Buffy's head on a serving dish. While he didn't think the Slayer would welch on her agreement to get Dru safely out of Sunnydale, she might not be as charitable about it if Dru had extended the invitation as a means of ensuring she'd be there to kill.

Hopefully, he could talk her down if that were the case.

If not...

"Whatever," Buffy said, putting her back to him and heading toward her bed. More specifically, to the suitcase full of weapons she kept tucked underneath it. It had always been a bit of a rush, fucking her in that bed, vampire that he was, knowing that her tool kit was within easy reach. She'd known it, too. Given him a wicked little smile more than once, tightened her legs around his waist, and muttered that they better not break *this* bed, because that might not end well for him.

"*Willing to take my chances, Slayer,*" he'd panted back. "*Would be a bloody brilliant way to go.*"

He wondered if she was thinking about that as she pulled the suitcase free. Thinking perhaps those days were behind her. And god, he couldn't

wait to get her alone again. Those little doubts of hers were going to be a thrill to exorcise.

"I can't believe you're on the vampire's side in this," Riley muttered. "I thought I knew you, Buffy."

"That's your problem." She heaved the suitcase onto the mattress and threw back the lid, revealing the assortment of stakes, blades, crosses, and vials of holy water tucked away inside. Much like Buffy herself, her weapons chest was a thing of beauty, and not even the thought of what was to come could keep Spike from letting out an appreciative sigh as she began collecting the things she thought she might need. All without even a tremble.

How often had she done this? Fought like this? Shoved all else down and gone into battle with her head held high even if the rest of her was breaking? How many times had he been the reason?

No more. No more after tonight. The Slayer was magnificent, and she was all his. More importantly, he was all hers. And she'd know it before the night was over.

"Okay," Buffy said, turning to face them as she slid her favorite stake into her back pocket. "Let's get this over with."



SPIKE KEPT LOOKING at her funny. Not the normal funny, either, which was seriously screwing with her head. And right now, she could not afford to have her head screwed with because she was about to willingly walk into the most head-screwy and heart-screwy situation she'd ever been in, all the while trying hard to keep herself cool and composed until it was safe to feel her grief. It was like he knew that, too, and was waiting for her to slip up. Make a mistake. Or maybe just beg him to forget about Drusilla the way Drusilla had so easily forgotten about him because the mortal enemy he'd been fucking had been dumb enough to lose her heart.

Well, he could just keep waiting. Buffy had already given him too much of herself. She wasn't going to break down or cry or do anything except exactly what she'd told him she would. Crying could come later.

With ice cream. Lots and lots of ice cream.

And depending on just how much simpering she had to watch Spike do over Drusilla, she might be coaxed into letting Willow try out some of her nastier curses on him.

“What can we expect when we get there?” she asked Riley once they crossed into Lowell House.

“Aside from a mad vampire who’s hypnotized my commanding officer and god knows how many others since I left to get you?” He spoke in a flat, disaffected voice that she figured she was supposed to find insulting, but she didn’t. If this was what it had taken for Riley to stop looking at her with rose-colored whatever, then maybe all the pain would be worth it. Well, probably not, but a girl could dream. “I don’t know. I’d assumed when we came back, there would be some sort of plan.”

Spike clapped him hard on the back as they stopped in front of the mirrored entrance to the Initiative. “Just accept that she’s never gonna shag you, mate. You’re embarrassing yourself.”

“Touch me again and lose the hand,” Riley said without flinching. “And stand back.”

Miraculously, Spike kept his mouth closed as the mirror slid back to reveal the sterile white panels of the military elevator. He further kept his mouth shut when Riley leaned over to the speaker panel and announced who he was for clearance or whatever, instead rolling his eyes and bouncing on the balls of his feet. Then they were plummeting however-deep into the earth and there wasn’t much more time to think. Whatever was going to happen would. As soon as those doors slid open.

She really should have looped in the others. Or at the very least, have left Willow a note. Not that she would have known what to write, aside from *Initiative* and *Drusilla*, but it would have been something, and something was definitely better than nothing when entering situations she wasn’t sure she could get out of. And like it or not, this was one of those situations. There were monsters and psychotic ex-girlfriends and military people who already had a reason not to trust her waiting on the other side of that door, not to mention she was in the process of getting her heart ripped out. She’d leaped in with barely any information and no plan to speak of.

Yeah, if she did survive this, she imagined Giles would have words.

The door slid open, revealing the sterile and eerily empty expanse

that comprised what she'd come to think of as the main area. Riley stepped off first, his shoulders rigid and his jaw hard. Whether he'd been expecting a welcome party, though, she couldn't say, and she didn't have time to guess. Buffy set off after him, working her throat and trying not to whip her head around in every which direction, but her gut was churning, and her heart had started to thump at a pace, and none of this was right.

"Where *is* everyone?" she hissed before she could stop herself. "Did you know about this?"

"How the bloody hell would I?" Spike retorted, not bothering to keep his voice lowered. It practically boomed through the quiet.

"Not you," Buffy snapped at him. "Riley."

"I didn't know," Riley replied in a flat tone that she couldn't read. He didn't slow down or spare her a glance either, just walked with purpose toward the corridor that she knew from her past trips led to the containment area where the HSTs were incarcerated. "But after what I've seen today, nothing much can surprise me."

God, she hated the sound of that. Buffy flicked her gaze over her shoulder to Spike, who arched his eyebrows as though to say *let's play this out*. And though it was so incredibly not the time, she experienced another one of those chest pangs, for she knew his looks. They had started doing that coupley thing where entire conversations could be had without saying a word, and that was all going away. Everything was going away after this was over, and he was more than all right with it.

Because, yes, she was in fact the stupidest girl on the planet.

And this was so not the time to have this particular mental conversation.

"Riley," she said, not sure what she meant to do aside from get his attention, but he'd rounded the corner into the science wing without slowing down. Stupid tall guys and their freakishly long legs. She was the Slayer—she should get super speed or something on top of all the extra strength, specifically for occasions like this. "Will you—"

She was going to say *stop*, but then he'd, well, stopped. Stopped as in *abruptly*, so abruptly she nearly collided with his oversized back. Would have if a cool, familiar hand hadn't wrapped itself around her wrist to pull her to a halt, for her attention suddenly snapped from

Riley's annoying too-tall shoulders to the hall she'd once walked down as an initiate. The hairs on the back of her neck rose to attention, alarm bells sounding somewhere deep inside her head.

Something was wrong. Like, way wrong. And it took an embarrassingly long second before she realized it was the cells. That the demon-occupied cells that lined the walls weren't occupied by demons anymore.

"Oh my god."

"Yeah," Spike drawled from behind her. "Can't say I don't like what you've done with the place."

Buffy's heart began to thump at a pace that made her lungs wheeze, the rest of her left just to stare. As though the scene would change the longer she studied it—morph back the way it was supposed to be, return to making sense. Because this? This made *zero* sense. Drusilla was just one vampire. An insane vampire with crazy psychic powers, yes, but still, just a single vampire at the end of the day. Not the sort of brilliant strategist she'd come to expect in, oh say, soulless Angel. And not capable of bewitching multiple people, at least not at the same time. And definitely not at this magnitude.

But the faces staring out at her from the other side of the glass were real. There were men she recognized—men she'd spoken with. Riley's friends Forrest and Graham were in a cell together, the former glaring at her as though all this were her fault, the latter a bit dazed and concerned but otherwise *there*. Neither look was one she would associate with the effects of whatever mind mojo Drusilla possessed. In fact, everyone on the inside of the cell looked...normal.

There had to be some sort of explanation.

"What the hell happened here?" she asked before she could help herself.

"I told you," Riley replied, his tone cool and detached. "A commanding officer gave us an order. We followed."

"We? So how come you're not behind the glass?"

"Slayer," Spike said, but too late. Her brain had decided to kick in and start doing some legwork, registering exactly what sort of situation she'd willingly walked inside. Riley was reaching into his jacket, and she knew what would be there when he pulled his hand back. Just as she should have known from the start—why Riley had shown up at all, there

to collect her, pass on a cryptic message from her vampire's insane lover. And no, she might not have any idea the full extent of Drusilla's powers, but she should have known something was off. Perhaps she would have if she hadn't been so busy focusing on her own stupid love life.

"I had no choice, Buffy," Riley said in a voice that was and wasn't his own as he turned to face her. "She has my men."

"Oh, this is delicious." Spike tugged on Buffy's wrist, pulling hard enough that she stumbled back into his chest. A place she had been what seemed like a thousand times now, a place that had become familiar—become *home*—and her brain was suddenly at war with her heart. Her stupid, telling, thumping heart that was going to pound its way right out of her chest and take her along for the ride. "She got in your head too, did she? Guessin' there wasn't much there to hollow out."

If Riley heard, he gave no indication, just kept his gaze focused on Buffy. "I don't want to," he told her, bringing the handgun he'd withdrawn to eye-level. "But it's you or them, and you're the one fucking a monster."

"Soldier boy's gonna have a hell of a migraine when all this is over," Spike muttered, tightening the grip he had on her. "Been a minute since she's gone this deep. Can't really say I'm sorry to see it."

None of that made any sense. Buffy turned, or tried to, and whispered a fierce, "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

But she thought she might know what it meant. What all of this meant. The men behind the glass, the strange look on Riley's face, Spike's words feathering her ear, both observation and forecast. She'd had it right from the start. Whatever this was, it was Drusilla. Drusilla showing off her powers, going for the grandest of grand gestures. Not enough that she waltz back into Spike's life, but she needed to pack it up as well. Shove all the people who had been mean to him inside their cages so she could clear the way to give him what he wanted most of all.

Then there was movement at the corner of her eye, dragging her away from Spike, from the strange play Riley was now putting on. And there was only one person it could be. But Buffy was slow to turn anyway, because she didn't know what happened next. She'd let herself get into a situation where she couldn't see an outcome, wasn't sure how she would fight her way to freedom, or what would be left for her on the other side.

She'd walked in here with Spike. There was no telling how she would walk out.

Buffy didn't know what was worse—that she felt Spike tense when he realized his lover had entered the room, or the way he almost immediately relaxed. No, not relaxed. *Warmed*. The breath she felt tickle the hairs on her neck, the one that came out almost a happy sigh. As though the sight of her was balm for the...well, not the soul, but whatever it was that kept him in motion. Made him the man and the vampire he was. And she didn't want to look but she had to, as this wasn't going to stop happening just because it would be more convenient if it didn't.

So Buffy did what she could to steel herself, hardened her jaw, and raised her gaze to their host.

Nearly two years had passed since she'd last seen Drusilla—two years that had so much packed into them they might as well have been two decades. But her memory was faithful in its preservation. The same large, beautiful eyes, the same ruby red lips, flowing raven hair, all combined in one runway-model package that just happened to be completely insane. At once, Buffy felt very much like the girl she'd been when she'd seen Angel meeting with Drusilla in a local park—completely inferior in every way. A child playing dress-up and hoping the man in her life wouldn't spot the difference.

This was the woman Spike was in love with. The one who had shattered his heart. The one he'd been trying to win back, in one way or another, for almost half the time that Buffy had known him.

And she'd done this for him. All for him.

"Good doggie," Drusilla said, her eyes bright, her smile as insane as the rest of her. "See? I knew you knew how to fetch."

Spike's hands were at Buffy's shoulders. She hadn't felt them move there but felt them now, squeezing her hard enough she wasn't sure whether he meant to reassure or hurt. And a thought—a terrible thought that she hated herself for having but had anyway—rose to the surface. The sort of thought that would kill whatever strength she had that was keeping her upright, but she'd been in a situation like this before, hadn't she? She'd loved the wrong man and he'd used that love to lure her into a trap meant to end her life. And sure, Spike wasn't Angel by a long shot, but he was still a vampire. More than that, he was still a vampire very

much in love with Drusilla. The only thing he'd wanted more than a reunion with his insane ex was the chip out of his head, and it looked like she'd delivered.

But before Buffy could think any more of those awful, poisonous thoughts, Spike was talking.

"Quite the production you've got goin' on here, pet," he said loudly. "Easier ways to get a fella's attention."

Drusilla released a giggle that was part schoolgirl, part mad scientist. "Don't you like them?" she asked, nodding at the people-filled cells. "Nummy snacks to make you nice and whole again. You didn't think mummy would let you starve, did you, my love? And the Slayer we can have for dessert."

"That what this is, then? Your way of makin' it up to me?"

"You promised me, William. Promised you'd make pretty ribbons of her insides."

"And you promised you'd stop shaggin' the locals."

"This isn't a negotiation," Riley said, jabbing at the air with his gun as though desperate to remind everyone that he was there. "Here's how it's going to work. Hostile Seventeen, you follow *it* to the operating lab. Buffy, you get in a cell. The last one—we kept it empty for you. What they do with you after is up to them. The important thing is my men go free."

It probably wasn't the appropriate time to laugh, but Buffy couldn't help herself. "Well, and they say chivalry is dead."

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

No, he looked insane, which was probably a side effect of the mind voodoo or whatever Drusilla had worked on him. She decided not to volunteer as much. "Riley, you're not thinking clearly," she offered instead. "There is no way you're going to—"

Riley brought his arm back and pressed the nozzle of the gun under his chin. "You're going to get into the cell we have for you," he said without breaking eye contact. "Do you understand?"

Buffy's heart dropped—it seemed all of her did. He couldn't be serious. "Riley—"

"What, that what passes for a threat these days?" Spike demanded, his voice higher than normal. If she didn't know better, she would have

thought he was nervous. But she did know better—or at least, she did now. There were only a few ways this could unfold and most involved her not making it to tomorrow. “You blow off your own cap and save us the trouble?”

Riley cocked the gun, not blinking. Not reacting at all to the vampire at her back. “Get in the cell, Buffy. Or I swear I will pull the trigger.”

There was a very long beat in which everything seemed to slow down and speed up at the same time, the way it always did when she was in the middle of a fight. Her mind racing ahead to map out her options, tell her when to duck and when to swing, choreograph the next step and the ten that followed, though not neatly. Not tidily. She couldn’t anticipate every move, had to allow for spontaneity to stay alive and stay ahead.

She could fight Riley, but she couldn’t move faster than a bullet. She couldn’t get to him before whatever power Drusilla had him under convinced him to make good on his threat. He’d die and it would be her fault, and she’d be left with Drusilla, whom, somehow, she’d never fought before.

Drusilla and Spike, her brain warned. *Are you ready for that?*

She supposed she’d have to be, when the time came. But that time wasn’t now. It wasn’t at the expense of Riley’s life—not while she had the power to save him.

Buffy stepped forward, raising her hands. “Okay,” she said. “I’m going.”

“You’re *what?*” Spike spat, rounding on her so fast he made her head spin. Because he was suddenly there in front of her, not at her back, his chest heaving with those stupid unnecessary breaths, his eyes searching, and everything else seemed to fall away. There was so much there on his face, in the way he looked at her, in what he was and wasn’t saying, and god help her, she didn’t know how to read a word of it. If she was looking into the eyes of her lover or vampire who had been trying to kill her for nearly three years. If he was trying to tell her goodbye or that he would figure something out or anything in between. She didn’t know. Tonight, she didn’t know anything.

“I’m going,” Buffy said, holding his gaze. “Riley?”

“Thank you,” he replied in a clipped voice, as though all of this was her fault. Maybe it was. “Follow me.”

He turned awkwardly without lowering the gun and started walking toward Drusilla, who cackled in mad delight when Buffy did as she was told. He kept it there until she was on the other side of the glass, lingered for an awful moment during which she thought he might just pull the trigger anyway. Make her watch, helpless, as he crumbled into a bloody heap outside the cell gate.

She had no way of knowing if she'd just traded a quick death for something much worse.

And judging by the look on Spike's face, he didn't know, either.

HE WOULD NEVER CLAIM TO BE ABLE TO GUESS WHAT SHE HAD UP HER sleeve. Spike understood her, yes, at least better than most, but one of the things he'd loved about Dru from the start was how impossible she was to predict. This was no exception. Fuck, one need only look at everything that had happened tonight for evidence of that. He'd fallen for her ploy hook, line, and sinker, from the second that gormless git had shown up on his doorstep, to Captain Cardboard shoving his way into the Slayer's dorm, to the lot of them storming the sodding castle. She'd wanted him to think she was in trouble so he'd come running, and he—pitiful, pathetic William—had obliged her.

And now...

He had no fucking clue, and he was shy about venturing a guess seeing as all the calls he'd made thus far had been laughably wrong. Take her at her word and she intended to both liberate him from the indignity that was the chip in his head and the other indignity that was the Slayer in his bed. Right thoughtful of her, considering she was the one who had bloody well driven him there in the first place. Taunting him with talk about how *covered* he was in her, making like the breakdown of their relationship was his fault when they both bloody well knew *she* had been the one chatting up new demons to shag right under his nose.

When they both knew she'd been right.

In truth, Spike hadn't given much thought to what might happen if Dru decided she wanted him back. That had just been a closed chapter after he'd come back to Sunnyhell a second time, and especially after the chip. Or after the spell. Definitely after realizing the bitch had been right and he was in fact lost for Buffy. Would just bloody figure that she'd turn up now, ready to welcome him back with open arms after the damage had been done and he was lost for good.

And he was. Lost. There was no question of it, no second thoughts, no bloody hesitation. It had occurred to him, standing in that row of cells and staring into the mad eyes he'd once been happy to fall inside, that everything he'd wanted could be his again if he played this right. He could coo his way back to Dru's side for good, jump through the hoops she'd set up with aplomb. Even let her kill Buffy and hope that maybe he'd manage to become the man he'd once been if he no longer had to live in a world that had her in it. It'd be simple and, to a degree, comfortable. The life he was meant for, the one that made sense.

Only that was as far as the thought had gotten—not a whisper of temptation, not something he did more than acknowledge as an actual possibility, the way running out to play in the sunlight was an actual possibility. A path he could take if he intended to destroy himself along the way, because that was exactly what it would mean. Dru had been his salvation, but Buffy was his liberation. He'd played by society's rules as a man and by Angelus's rules as a vampire. As Buffy's, he could do whatever the fuck he liked and sod the rest. That freedom had been terrifying at first—had been what prompted him to flee town back in December, all to escape the sickness that was loving Buffy. Knowing, understanding, on a gut level that some part of his life had ended for good. Worse than that—the part that made sense, because there was nothing less sensible than being over the bloody moon for the Slayer.

But in the time between, he'd gotten over it. Realized just what it was she'd given him—a chance to well and truly be his own man. Somewhere between the simpering fool Drusilla had found one night in an alley and the monster she'd helped create. Something well and truly his own.

And Buffy's, of course. But even that felt different, knowing he belonged to someone. Knowing that he had given himself willingly,

chosen her as much as she'd chosen him, this miracle of a woman who hadn't molded his love for her into a weapon. Who treated him like an equal, even when she was furious with him.

Sorry way to repay her for that, getting her involved in this. Not realizing from the start that Dru would know exactly how to get him to come running, or questioning Finn when he'd said she was asking for Buffy. Not immediately recognizing the symptoms of a bloke who had fallen under Dru's spell, too focused on his own primal worry and even more primal jealousy. Now the Slayer was locked up and whatever came next was up to him.

Bugger.

"Do you like your surprise?" Drusilla asked, tugging at his hand and giving him the sort of coy, playful look he once would have crossed oceans to earn.

It was weird, smiling at her and not feeling the sentiment behind it. Not experiencing the tickle of delight that came with being the man she doted upon, even if only until the next whim took her. The muscles in his face knew the moves, his brain knew the words, but they existed almost outside of himself. A shadow from another time. "Like it? The berks who wired me up and the Slayer all on a platter. Best present a man could ask for."

She squealed her delight and bounced on her heels, then reached for him, an almost tender look on her face. "These silly tin soldiers couldn't keep you caged," she said, scaling her nails down his cheek. Like everything else she did, he felt the touch resonate somewhere deep inside him. Familiar and comforting, but also wrong as it had never been. The realization was the definition of bittersweet. "No one muzzles my boy."

"So what's the plan here?" he asked, giving his head a shake. "We get the chip out, then make a run for it?"

Drusilla poked out her lower lip, dragging him farther down the labyrinth of Initiative halls. She seemed to know where she was going, which was troubling on its own, considering that her unpredictability in her madness was matched only by her ruthlessness in those times she was truly lucid. It had been that way ever since Acatlha, it seemed. Ever since he'd beaten Angel over the head with that crowbar.

"Oooh. You want to leave? I was hoping you would make me pretty

pictures with their insides,” she replied. “All those nice dollies I saved for you.”

“Right thoughtful, that was. Will need somethin’ to whet the appetite.”

“And the Slayer. You never did what you said you would.” Drusilla stopped walking and crowded up against him, batting those large eyes into his face, bright with both desire and challenge. He’d be a fool not to see it. An even larger one to pretend it wasn’t there. “She had you, my William. I saw you dancing for her, giving her all the pearls that used to be mine. Wanting her to be your new princess.”

He snorted. Buffy was a lot of things, but *princess* was not on the list. She wasn’t the heroine in his or anyone’s story. She was the bloody knight riding in to slay the dragon, seize back the kingdom, and in general save the day. Sure, she *was* royalty, but not in the way anyone but the lucky bloke she decided to keep would ever understand. Buffy bowed to no one.

“Can promise you, love,” he said, “nothin’ I want less than to make the Slayer my princess.”

“It’s not too late?” She raised a hand and reached over as though to touch him but didn’t, just frowned and let her fingers dance above his chest, as though she were afraid of contact. “I can’t feel you, my sweet. You’re closed. Cut off from mummy.” Dru paused then slowly lifted her head, pinning him with her gaze. “I can’t see you.”

Spike’s throat went tight and he willed himself not to blink. There was a trick to it he’d learned without even realizing he was learning anything at all. A sensation in his very skull when he felt her begin to poke and prod, try to whisper into his mind so she could thumb her way through it the way she did everyone else. It hadn’t taken much, just understanding what that sensation meant and what she could pull out if she fancied. How much she could see if he let her in deep enough. And though he couldn’t say exactly how he was able to shut her out, he knew he could because he had. Because learning to lock his head down had been a part of loving Dru for so long, accepting that she would try to break inside whenever she fancied and being prepared when he didn’t want her to see the things that were floating at the top.

“My poor boy,” Dru cooed a moment later. The frown had receded,

thank fuck, replaced with something a thicker man might call compassion. She stepped back and affected one of those pouts that used to drive him wild. "There you are. Lost in the woods. Alone for so long."

"Right, yeah, hasn't been a bloody picnic."

"All those nasty little wires in your head, whispering their lies. Telling you you're not a bad dog." She cupped his cheek, let her nails trail along his skin, then invaded his space once more. Flooded him with her sense of home and familiarity, again making his chest twist with all the things they weren't anymore. Though he wasn't sad—not really. It was more a sort of acceptance he hadn't seen sneaking up on him, even when he should have. Even when he'd been in the thick of preparing his big night with Buffy, when he intended to finally lay it all out, let her know what a bloody goner he was. What all he was saying goodbye to, and how there was no going back.

The woman who had made him pressed her lips to his, and it felt wrong. Cold. Not Buffy.

But he had no choice but to give her the kiss she expected. So he did. Anything to alleviate her concerns that something was wrong. That his heart wasn't in whatever came next.

It was the right move. The doubt had vanished from her eyes when she pulled back, all smiles and anticipation once more. She tugged on his wrist and he fell into stride beside her, listening as she prattled on about pixies and what she'd learned from the stars. Telling him enough to fill in the blanks for the things he'd been able to guess but hadn't known for certain. The pearls she'd seen Spike giving Buffy—"with bits of my William stuffed inside"—he reckoned confirmed that she'd gotten a memo from whatever cosmic wanker was in charge of flooding her head with visions that Spike was about to slip away from her forever. And though Dru was not averse to sharing, it was only when it was her idea. Any other circumstance, should she ever get even an inkling that some bird had caught his eye, she'd accuse his heart of turning black and kick him out of their bed until her tantrum had ceased. He'd spent many a night begging her to open doors she'd slammed shut, telling her again and again that she was the only woman in the world for him. That even if he had looked, he hadn't wanted. He was just a man, was all. And men were foul creatures not fit to lick the dirt off her pretty, pointy heels.

Thing was, Spike couldn't remember actually looking at anyone else when he'd had Dru. No good telling her that, though. When she knew something, she *knew*.

And she'd known this.

Nice, he supposed, to see what it had taken to win her back. All this time, all he'd had to do was get over her for good.

"It'll be quick, my sweet," Dru cooed as he helped himself onto the operation table. "Don't worry. You won't miss the party."

But as the doctor whose mind she'd hijacked moved forward, Spike couldn't help but worry. For even if he'd managed to keep her out of his head, it was always possible that she had been prepared for him to do exactly what he'd done.

That was the thing with Dru's visions. Sometimes they told just a part of a story, a snippet, and other times they gave the full bloody ending away.

Spike blinked up into the face that had given him new life and wondered idly if she was about to have the last laugh. It was a hell of a thing, putting oneself completely at the mercy of someone else. Particularly someone like Dru. There was no other way forward, though. Not without killing her. And as much as that would clear the path for him, the thought was one he still couldn't abide. Not like this. Not without making sure there wasn't a way to get her out and Buffy safe. Have his cake and eat it too.

Though something else occurred to him. And like everything else, it was something he supposed he'd known for a while. Felt down to his bones—a piece of himself he hadn't wanted to know but couldn't ignore all the same.

His plans went wonky whenever Buffy was concerned. If this one did too—this bloody stupid plan he was piecing together as he went—then he might be faced with a decision he'd rather not make. One he'd already made in his heart.

If it all went to shit, he wouldn't hesitate to bury a stake in Drusilla's chest to save the woman he loved. He'd hate it and himself, likely hate her a bit too for making him love her enough to do it, but in the question of who walked out of here alive, the first answer was Buffy and

always would be. The others were expendable if it meant she got to fight another day.

He knew that better than he knew anything else. Even himself.
And he could only hope that Drusilla didn't.



DRUSILLA TALKED as the doctor worked, some of it nonsensical enough Spike would find himself wondering if she hadn't parted ways with this phase of her reality. Wouldn't be the first time one of the voices in her head had gotten her nice and turned around while she was trying to accomplish something. But then she'd say something too grounded to dismiss and dash his hopes that she'd been properly distracted. Her plans for Buffy's family, for instance. How they might display the Slayer's corpse to drive dear old mummy right out of her head and what a laugh that would be. Too bad the little sister wasn't around just yet, but the bed wasn't made and her bus hadn't arrived. When Spike had intoned that Buffy didn't have a sister, Dru had scolded him for forgetting the girl before breaking out into giggles that the poor dear would never exist now. Not without the Slayer to keep her safe.

It was enough to make Spike nervous, which he didn't wear well. Particularly where Dru was concerned.

The procedure itself was, perhaps, the most bizarre experience of his lifetime. He didn't trust either his former ladylove or the Initiative gits enough to let them knock him out for the removal; even if he had to fight with half his skull missing, he'd rather have the opportunity than dust with his eyes closed. Dru hadn't thought much of this, just hummed and agreed and threatened to make the surgeon's newborn son her next dolly if things went wrong. Let no one ever say she didn't know how to properly motivate a fella.

Then it had been time to get on with it. He'd pressed his back to metal, fixed his eyes on the dull, clinical ceiling with its offensively bright fluorescents, and tried not to move as he felt his head being sawed open. He'd heard somewhere that there were no nerve endings in the brain, that the tissue could be poked and prodded by surgeons without a bloke being any the wiser, but he hadn't really believed it until that point.

Sounded like a load of bunk that evil gits like him would spread around just to enjoy the inevitable fall. Turned out it was the sort of bunk that was true, which he found somewhat worrying—this idea that something could go wrong on a bloody dime and he wouldn't even get the courtesy of realizing that anything was off before becoming a man-sized vegetable.

After what seemed like an age, he felt the prick of a needle threading its way through his skin, heard the doc say everything had gone well. Dru cooed in the corner, clapping and bouncing a bit on the balls of her feet. The sound of her joy warmed over him as it had so many times, only now with a bitter pain. A burning fondness he knew would never die completely, no matter what happened over the next few minutes—or days, weeks, or years—but detached in a final sort of way. Whatever she had been to him, she wasn't anymore. He'd left that version of himself behind and found new purpose.

Still, didn't mean saying goodbye wasn't painful. It was truly the end of an era.

"Ooh, look at you." Drusilla sauntered near, her eyes bright with a combination of childish wonder and monster's delight. She brought up a hand as though to touch his face but didn't, rather let her fingers dance just over his brow. "My dark prince made whole again."

"Thanks to you, dove," he replied, and let his gaze drop to her lips. "All thanks to you."

She cackled and leaned in to bite at his lips, now pressing her hand against his stomach. "Mmm. Poor dear, so hungry for so long. We must find you something sweet to eat."

"Now that you mention it, yeah, I could do with a nibble." He took her mouth with his before she could respond again in a bid for time and devoured her the way he always had. Lips and teeth, feeding her low moans, all the while his brain spun and spiraled.

Right. So, he'd gotten this far. Probably wouldn't hurt to see if the doc had done a decent job and his collar really was off. That'd earn him another few seconds. Then all he had to do was suss out how to get Buffy out of the bloody cage she'd been shoved inside without Dru throwing a right fit and coming at him with a stake.

If such a way existed. He was starting to think it might not. Not with her mind mojo stretched across the whole sodding facility. Should the

fight come down to just the two of them—just him and Dru duking it out—it would be hard but even. Less even if she sent all her little brain-dead lackeys to do the heavy lifting for her.

Not that he much fancied the idea of brawling with Dru. She was stronger than most realized, sure, but he knew her the same way he'd known slayers. The same way he knew Buffy. Dru hadn't spent the years since she was turned honing herself into the sort of warrior that could take down giants. No, her brand of chaos was unpredictable and untargeted—subject to change on a whim or whenever a wild hare caught her fancy. It was how he'd bested her before, when the fight had been with Angelus, and she'd realized that Spike had no intention of letting the world get sucked into Hell.

Or, if he were being honest with himself, letting her *daddy* get his way.

Trouble was that if she was in the right frame of mind, beating her wouldn't be enough. She could be single-focused when she tried. She could channel the worst bits of Angelus into herself, find a new obsession. She could keep coming and keep coming and keep coming, and not stop until he made her stop. Until the choice was let her kill him and Buffy or stake her, himself.

Fucking hell, this was a right mess.

Spike broke away from her lips and despite himself, he couldn't help but be somewhat chuffed to see her eyes glazed over. No one had ever snogged her the way he did, he knew—Angelus hadn't been much for snogging—and Dru was a woman who enjoyed a spot of real romance from the men in her life. It got her hot in all the right ways. Time was he'd have turned and snapped the doc's neck, hefted his lady onto the makeshift operating table, and shagged her raw before worrying too much about what to do next.

But not now. He could play his part to a point. There were some things he knew Buffy would never forgive.

"Let's go have ourselves a slayer, shall we?" he murmured instead, keeping his voice low and suggestive and stealing another glance at the blank-faced Initiative doc who had just undone all his wiring. The one doctor, for all the other soldier lads were caged up, same as Buffy. All of them but Finn. And there—*there* was a thought. One better than those

he'd had before. A couple of men was a far cry from a whole bloody herd of armed pillocks who knew where to aim their stakes.

"Oh ho, hold on then." Spike stepped back and let a slow grin spread across his face. "Maybe I oughta start with an appetizer. Work up to the main event. Don't wanna be so famished I don't savor it, now do I?"

The good doctor didn't so much as twitch. He was well and truly under.

"Not much sport to this, is there?" he went on, closing the distance between himself and his would-be prey. "Almost takes the fun out of it. *Almost*." He threw Dru a wink as the bones in his face shifted, then lunged forward.

There was a second right before he tore his fangs into the sod's throat that he braced himself for the familiar explosion of stars behind his eyes. That skull-cracking pain to tear through his head, all of it for not. But that second passed and the pain didn't come. Nothing came but the rush of blood. Rich, delicious, human blood, in his mouth, on his tongue, between his teeth for the first time in an age. And once that hit, Spike didn't have to fake his moan, didn't have to put on a show. Just drank and drank and drank some more, his hands around the doctor's arms, holding the man upright when he started to sag. These last few months he'd started to wonder if it was all in his head, the way humans tasted. If it was the thrill of the hunt that he loved more than the juice itself, if losing *that* had been the reason nothing he ever guzzled from a bag ever hit the spot. He knew now that he'd been full of it. Telling himself stories to make up for what was lacking in his diet. There was nothing on this—absolutely nothing. And no way he was going back to slurping up swine once all was over. He and Buffy would just have to come to an understanding, was all. Find an option that would keep him properly fed in such a way that her good, moral sensibilities remained nice and unoffended.

It took everything in him to pull back the second he felt the doc's heart start to slow, the second he hit that sweet spot where life and death was decided. Any more and the bloke wouldn't get up again unless he sported his own shiny pair of fangs. Spike just had to hope he'd done enough to fool a woman who could read what was in a man's head, never mind his heart.

“Stay down,” he whispered before stepping back and releasing his grip. The doc dropped to the floor, a dead weight in everything but truth, and didn’t move. Spike stared at him for a second, this man Buffy would die for if given the chance, but only for a second. He couldn’t let himself dawdle. He had a slayer to unchain.

“Now that was tasty.” He met Drusilla’s eyes again, made a show of licking his blood-smeared lips, and grinned. “But I don’t wanna fill up on the bread. What do you say we move onto the main course?”



BUFFY WAS USED to things going wrong, to life blowing up in her face in truly spectacular ways, to ruminating over the decisions she’d made and how she’d gotten there and seeing the turn-offs she’d somehow missed while in the heat of the moment. The place she should have pulled the reins and veered hard to the left rather than plowing recklessly on ahead. Second-guessing and relitigating her worst choices had pretty much defined the last three years of her life, so at least she was in familiar territory.

She had no idea how long it had been since Drusilla had led Spike away. An hour. Two. Maybe twenty minutes. Time on this side of the cell seemed abstract and meaningless, such that she wondered how Spike had ever managed to sit still long enough to come up with an escape plan that had actually worked. The cells weren’t soundproof—she could hear the low murmur of conversation among her neighboring captives, even caught a few mentions of her name here and there, but had made the concerted effort not to listen too hard. Not wanting to know what was being said about her, whether or not the soldiers were free of the mind voodoo Spike’s insane girlfriend had cast over them. Needing to think instead about what came next. What avenues were available to her—how to get out so she could keep fighting.

Not how stupid she’d been from the start. With Spike. With Riley. With all of it.

Buffy pressed her eyes closed and drew in a deep lungful of air. It seemed impossible to her that just that morning, she’d been in happy relationship mode. Or, if not happy—*happy* wasn’t a thing that existed

when you knew the rug could be yanked out from under you at any second—then content. She and Spike had always had an expiration date—she'd known that going in. Accepted it even after she'd realized she'd made the mistake of falling in love with him. There would be an end and an after, and she would have to be ready for both.

She thought she had been, in her own naïve way. But then she'd never envisioned anything like this.

And now, what were her options, exactly? What did she think would happen once Spike's chip was out? Who would she see when she saw him next? Would any of the man she loved be left behind?

The thought alone made her stomach twist. How in the world had she let herself get here again? How had she convinced herself any of it could be different this time?

The soft padding of approaching footsteps reached her ears, and her stomach gave a dramatic somersault. She knew the weight and cadence of those footsteps the way she knew the beats of her own stupid girlish heart. Which started breaking the second she realized the tinkling sound that accompanied them was that of Drusilla's mad giggles.

"My, my, my, this is a treat," Spike drawled heavily, and Buffy couldn't keep her eyes closed anymore. Didn't have the luxury of pretending what was happening around her wasn't happening. And what she saw was a page torn from a memory.

Spike stood on the other side of the glass, one hand at his side, the other holding one of the military-grade tasers she had learned her way around back before she'd ended things with Riley. Quick and effective, and lethal—Walsh had told her—depending on the setting and the target. She remembered this particularly well, for when she'd relayed it to Spike one night as he'd stroked his fingers along the tender parts of her he'd so recently teased with his teeth and tongue, he'd muttered something about a rumor he'd heard courtesy of his fellow prisoners. That some soldier had mucked with the setting enough that rather than just flood a vamp with electric shocks, it had set some unsuspecting prisoner on fire. Up and gone before he could even manage a scream.

The harshness in his voice as he'd relayed this had been one of the unnecessary reminders of what he was. What he would do to the Initiative boys in kind if ever given the chance.

Now here he was. *God.*

And to complete the picture, Drusilla was hanging over him like an overgrown shawl, stroking his belly and nipping at his neck, a mad grin stretching her face. Only it wasn't mad—mad would have been better. Preferred. Mad would have given Buffy at least the option of pretending that the skanky ho didn't know what she was doing. But she did know. She did because she was Drusilla, Angel's creation, made in his image, and as such, she knew just how to twist the knife to make sure her victim felt every inch of blade before she began to bleed. There was triumph in those twinkling black eyes and face-stretching grin. She had won and she wanted Buffy to know it.

Spike eyed her up and down, dragging his tongue along his teeth, the affection and concern—everything that had been more man than vampire—missing from his gaze. Like when they had opened up his head to remove his chip, they had scooped out the parts of him that had ever viewed her as anything other than a trophy to mount on his wall.

"Question is," he said, "so many places to start. Let us know if you have a favorite, pet. More than open to taking requests."

"How about holding up your end of the deal," came a voice from her right, his left, and Riley shuffled back into view, his jaw firm. He didn't so much as spare Buffy a glance. "You got what you wanted. Now my men—"

Buffy had forgotten how fast Spike was when he moved, and how lethal. One second, he was standing opposite her, looking darkly amused, and the next he had flashed into action. Fangs bursting into his mouth, fist launching at Riley's face, and then there was the thunk of flesh slamming into flesh, and Riley went tumbling to the floor in a tangle of limbs. Spike whooped and rocked back on his heels, grinning his delight as Drusilla let out a hard cackle and clapped as though the entire exchange had been a bit of dinner theatre.

Buffy stared at Riley where he had fallen, willing him to get up. He didn't. He was out cold.

"Been achin' to do that for a bloody age," Spike said, and when she managed to pull her gaze off her fallen ex, she found the vampire who owned her heart studying her with intent. "Bet he tastes as dull as he looks. Not even worth biting, far as I'm concerned."

“Spike—”

“Save your breath, Slayer,” he snapped, lifting the gun again, and with the careful proficiency of someone who had been handling this sort of weaponry for a long time. The sight startled her almost more than the words did. “Don’t have many of those left. Wouldn’t want one to go to waste.”

She inhaled sharply enough she felt it stab inside her. Her legs started to shake—all of her did, but god, no, she wouldn’t do this again. Wouldn’t cry. Wouldn’t plead or try to reason.

Her life he could have. Not her dignity.

“So that’s it,” she said, pleased when her voice didn’t tremble along with the rest of her. “You got what you wanted.”

The grin returned, but it didn’t meet his eyes. “Everything. My princess knows me well.”

“Shall we tie her up?” Drusilla asked before nipping at his ear. “Could play with her a bit.”

Spike didn’t so much as twitch. “I’m through playing.”

It happened again—another blur of movement. Another quick flash. And then Drusilla was on the floor beside Riley, her smile replaced with open-mouthed shock and betrayal, neither of which she could voice for the electrical charges running roughshod through her body. Spike stood over her, his cheeks sucked in and his brow pinched in concentration, staring at her as she screamed and convulsed. He swallowed and flinched when she began to claw at him, but he didn’t look away. Didn’t let up on the trigger, either, until Drusilla’s eyes had fluttered shut and her mouth had fallen slack. Until she was prone and still.

And then a lot of things happened. Things Buffy didn’t understand. How she could be watching this from her side of the glass one second and in Spike’s arms the next, the familiar texture of the leather under her cheek, his lips on her brow, his voice filling her ears with words she barely heard and couldn’t process. How in just seconds everything had flipped once more, the world that she had hated but known made strange all over again. Spike running his hands over her head and down her arms, trying to get her to look at him as though looking at him would help make sense of the noise explosion going on between her ears.

“Don’t do it right off,” he was saying once words started taking shape again. “Think a half hour ought to give you plenty of time.”

Buffy blinked, shaking her head. “What?”

Spike nodded at the cell behind her. Made her aware again of the people watching this spectacle and maybe understanding it more than she did, what had happened and how. How it was she had been a prisoner and wasn’t anymore. That Spike, *her* Spike, had come back at the last second. Or maybe he’d never left. Was that possible?

“I’ve got to take her,” Spike went on. “Know it’s... I know what it is, love. What you’d want me to do, especially after... But I can’t. She’s...” He shook his head and worked his throat, then met her eyes again.

And it was him—her Spike. The one she had chased to a stupid town called Mistletoe what felt like a thousand years ago. The one who had kissed her after discovering he could hit other demons. The one who had lit a fire in her belly and under her skin that she had felt compelled to pursue even knowing how stupid it was. How dangerous. The past couple of hours had been nothing but emotional whiplash but here he was again. Looking at her as though she should have known—or as though she did. As though this had been the plan all along.

It had been, of course. The moment he’d burst into her dorm room. Finding Drusilla here as they had hadn’t changed that for him. What was casual betrayal among vampires? Foreplay, probably. And that was a thing Buffy didn’t want to think about.

She was tired and wounded, and Spike was going to leave with Drusilla. Why not? The chip was out. Everything could go back to the way it had been before.

Except her.

“Thank you,” Buffy said, glancing at Riley, whom Spike could have killed but hadn’t. That meant something. Meant that, whatever they’d had, it had been worth preserving this much. Maybe also that he’d actually leave her a better man, if that was possible. That he’d think of her before sinking his fangs into anyone. It didn’t quite make up for the fact that she was letting him go, sure, but the thought was a balm, nonetheless. “For not making it worse.”

“Did what I could,” he said again, lifting a shoulder. “Mean it, Slayer, give them a minute before you start lettin’ them loose. I’ll get her as far

outta here as I can. Mind mojo should wear off just fine, but I've seen it go wonky. Seen her drive a man mad by lettin' go like that."

Buffy licked her lips. The concern in his eyes was real. It made everything worse. "Okay."

Spike nodded, hesitated, then cupped the back of her head to draw her to him, take her mouth in a kiss that was both soft and fierce. Much like they had been.

Which made it a fitting way to say goodbye.

"I'll make it right," he said against her lips. Then he was pulling back, away, gathering Drusilla's limp body into his arms.

And it was over.



GOD, SHE HATED THIS PART. AND NOT TOO LONG AGO, SHE'D PROMISED herself she'd never go through this part again. It just wasn't worth it, no thank you, next, and check please. Even after she'd had her little I'm-in-love-with-another-vampire epiphany and surrendered to the inevitability that was a repeat on the broken heart express, she'd thought—stupidly—that she'd know how to handle it. After all, she'd been here before. Knew the sights, the scenes, had taken the tour so many times she could give it in her sleep.

That was if she did sleep. She hadn't much after Angel had left her both railroaded and abandoned, and what little sleep she had managed had been fraught with dreams that left her sobbing or furious or both. Buffy didn't see much reason to believe surviving the Spike breakup would be any different.

In fact, she thought as she turned up the walkway to Revello Drive, it might be worse. For while she had known the relationship was doomed, they had been in the bloomy part. The very beginning. The end had been there on the horizon, looming the way all endings did, but too vague to worry about just yet. It had been enough that she'd known they'd get there eventually. That all the hurt and pain would slam down on her *eventually*.

Eventually being...not now. And not like this. Not literally having to watch Spike cart the woman he truly loved off into the...whatever vampires substituted for sunsets in these metaphors.

It was that thought that had her pointing her feet in the direction of home rather than the dorm. The dorm was too complicated, would come with too many questions that she didn't think she could answer just yet. Not without sobbing her way through it, at least, and Buffy so didn't want to cry tonight. She could feel it welling—the tangle of emotion that begged for physical release. That awful pressure in her chest, behind her eyes, that made her head feel both heavy and empty at the same time and threatened to breach whenever her mind dragged her back to those last minutes. And since her mind was a special kind of jerk, those last minutes were the only ones it was interested in.

She could tell Willow the truth. That Spike had heard Dru was in town and rushed off to her rescue. That he'd jumped at the chance to scrape his way back into her good graces, whatever that meant, gotten the chip out in the process and essentially reverted to the monster they had known before...except he hadn't.

That was the part that killed her—or threatened to. The part her mind wouldn't let go of despite knowing it should. Spike ending things had been a given; taking up the mantle of enemy again less so, though she supposed that was her own naiveté talking. She hadn't given much thought of what life post-whirlwind-romance-with-her-nemesis would look like *with* said nemesis. Just that it was an obstacle she'd have to face when the time came. Whether Spike would stay in Sunnydale or take off again had likewise been up in the air. She hadn't wanted to think about it, so she hadn't. It had been enough knowing it was coming.

And Buffy felt she could have survived it if he hadn't changed back at the end. If he'd kept up the pretense, been the evil bad guy—someone she could hate. Sure, she'd feel like even more of an idiot than she did at the present for falling for any of his crap in the first place, but then she'd be free to skip the hurt part and embrace her anger. Be the Slayer and not the woman, think with her stakes rather than the hollow space in her chest.

Except he had turned back to himself at the end—or back into the Spike that she'd come to know. Looked at her through the mask he'd

chosen to put on and assured her, in his own way, that she hadn't imagined whatever they'd had. That she hadn't fallen in love with a phantom. That the Spike she'd been with these last few weeks, the one she loved, existed, which meant she'd lost something real.

And god, that hurt most of all.

Buffy wrapped her arms around herself as she turned onto Revello Drive. She wanted a shower and sleep in that order, but she also didn't want to alert her mom that she was there—too many questions requiring painful answers—so she decided her best bet was to remain quiet. Hope that exhaustion carried her quickly into a dreamless sleep and she wouldn't have to worry about things like explanations until she had more distance between herself and the moment that had broken her heart.

She didn't notice until she was under the trusty tree that had served her so well in high school that all the lights in the house were out. And that, once inside, she couldn't hear the hum of the television downstairs or her mother padding around in her room. Familiar pangs of worry began to hit and stayed with her until she traipsed her way into the kitchen and saw the calendar pinned to the refrigerator, the words *LA Gala Opening* circled in red under today's date.

Well, that was nice. An empty house and no one expecting her anywhere until sometime tomorrow. It was as though the universe had known tonight was the night she was going to lose the thing she'd never had and wanted to compensate her for her trouble.

Buffy turned and headed back up the stairs, stripping her clothes as she went. Having no one else in the house meant she could make as big a mess as she wanted without needing to explain herself. Sure, there'd be stuff for her to clean up in the morning, but that was a problem for Future Buffy to worry about. Present Buffy just wanted to get under the spray as quickly as possible so she could fall face-first into her bed and sleep the sleep of the freshly dumped. Hope she didn't have to share her headspace with dreams of Spike—or worse, Spike and Drusilla—and that morning would come in a thousand years, or maybe ten minutes. Also that she could wake up with zero memories of how she'd spent the last few weeks and zero feelings about Spike, wondering where he was, what he was doing.

If he was sparing her any thoughts at all, and what shape those thoughts took.

Yeah, amnesia sounded pretty good right about now.

And the universe owed her one.



SPIKE WAS HONESTLY STARTING to think the simpler solution might have just been staking her, because Drusilla was doing her bloody best to make this as messy as possible.

In a way, though, it was flattering. Would have once made his dead heart pulse with delight. Dru being sour about their breakup, seeing as now it was his turn to do the actual breaking, had a pleasant sort of chime to it. And maybe he'd find time to enjoy it once he had some distance from the whole affair, but right now, he was brassed. Dru had worked herself into a right little snit. For all the visions she enjoyed, she somehow hadn't foreseen waking up bound and gagged in the DeSoto's trunk. Or any of it. Anything beyond the vision that had brought her back to Sunnyside in the first place, desperate to keep her dark prince on his dark hook so he could wiggle to her dark delight until the end of time.

No, actually get over her and the lady was offended.

He did drive like that for a time, listening to her beat against the inside of the trunk while wailing about how he was lost to her. How he'd let the milk spoil and ruined tea with the king, or some other rot; he hadn't been paying as close attention as he had in the past. Eventually she started pounding her fists in earnest—the ropes had never stood a chance in holding her, so this much wasn't a surprise. Would be just like her to power through the whole sodding trunk and go spilling out onto the freeway, cursing him all the while, and that would make this whole exercise sodding pointless.

His first thought had been to get her to Mistletoe at the least—far enough from the sodding Hellmouth she'd be properly turned around, but a nice place for her to fill her stomach before she started her life anew. That idea hadn't lasted, though. All it had taken was imagining the

look on Buffy's face when he explained where he'd left a pissed and hungry vampire of Dru's age and power, and Spike had realized he was better off leaving her somewhere less charitable.

Somewhere like the middle of the bloody desert.

Only problem with that was the sun would eventually peek its nasty head over the horizon. Yeah, dusting Dru might have been the easiest solution to his problem—might even feel nice after what she'd put him through—but it remained something he knew he couldn't do. Not now, at least. Not without setting the score straight. Something he intended to do once he found a suitable place to drop her.

It took two hours of driving, maybe three, before he found such a spot. A hilly stretch spotted with trees which, in the daylight, would provide plenty of places for a vampire of Dru's caliber to hunker down in the shade. Might strike others as cruel, but it was their kind of cruelty. The kind she and Angelus had battered into Spike's blood and bones. Hell, were he around, ol' Pops would find it a laugh.

And it was right. The way Buffy would want it—or the way she could live with it. Knowing he hadn't put anyone in immediate danger of falling under Dru's fang. A small bit of comfort for everything he'd made her suffer through.

Doubtful he could be back to her before sunup, anyhow. And fuck, that grated.

Spike was ready to spring back when he opened the trunk—ready for Dru's enraged roar, for her to lash her claw-like fingers at his face and throat and whatever other extremities she could reach, her lips twisted into a snarl and her eyes forming daggers, and everything about her pouring out loathing and hatred and betrayal. All the things he'd vowed to never earn from her. All the things he had.

Times changed.

"Rage all you like, pet, this is where the ride ends for you," he said, fighting her slapping hands to seize her wrists. "And be happy for it. Could've left you in a rougher spot."

Drusilla didn't respond with words—she seemed beyond them at the moment. Just released another of those deep, guttural cries and slashed at him anew. And maybe that was better. It wasn't like he was aiming for

a prolonged goodbye, or a goodbye of any sort, really. There wasn't much to say to a woman you were about to maroon in the bloody desert. Also no need to explain to her that was what was happening. People took for granted the things Dru understood without explanation, seeing nothing beyond her insanity, or refusing to believe there was anything behind it.

Still, it was momentous, this thing that was happening. Parting ways on his own sodding terms for once. That was one of the benefits of being the dumper, he supposed—everything was according to his script. And she did deserve something, didn't she? No matter the way things had ended between them, the *during* had been some of the best times of his life, an adventure the likes of which he would never relive. And it had all brought him here, for better or worse, to the man he was now.

She had brought him to Buffy.

And for that, despite the pain and suffering that came with loving Buffy, he wouldn't have it any other way.

"Dru," he said, or tried to say. Her screeching wail drowned it out. "Darling—"

"Ruined," she spat into his face, trying to jerk her arms free, but Spike had been here too many times before. Too many nights spent trying to calm her down, get her to the end of another fit, help her keep from tearing at her own skin until the rage had run its course. "She's ruined you forever. You stink of it. You stink of the sun. It's all over. Won't come out. Won't ever come out—"

"*Dru.*" This one was louder, more forceful. "This is it. You hear me?"

"—won't come out to play ever again."

"You're right," Spike spoke over her. "It is over."

"You wore a mask," she hissed, and finally succeeded in tearing one arm free. He wasn't quick enough to duck away before she buried her nails into his cheeks and scraped away several fine lines of skin. The scent of his own blood bloomed in the night air around him. "You kept your face from me and now you're all chained up. All chained up with no place to go."

"Bit late for that particular show, but you would've been a fan," Spike replied before he could help himself, then sobered. "I'm sorry, pet. Never would've believed I'd be here... But I had it wrong. This whole time I had it wrong. And I reckon you knew that."

That seemed to reach her. Dru lowered her arms, the snarl slowly fading off her face. Her eyes, filled with so many things, also began to clear.

"You're covered in her," she said, her voice trembling. "I saw it. Saw her glowing, saw you glowing with her. Thought there might be a chance. Thought I could tempt you back to the shadows with me."

"Well, if you'd aimed to keep me, pet, you might not have tossed me out on my arse or mucked about with bloody chaos demons." There wasn't much he could do to keep the bitterness out of his voice, despite the fact that the pain itself had all but faded. That initial betrayal, though, her method of breaking his heart, was something he wagered would stick around forever. No matter what she was to him or he to her at this point—at the time, she had been his everything, and she had thrown it in his face.

"No," Dru said softly, the sound somewhere between a moan and a wail. "It was always the Slayer, my sweet. Always. Then, now, and forever and ever. You have been hers from the start."

Spike opened his mouth, but he had no reply. It was true. For better or worse, and he understood that now. Beyond just giving into the sensation, beyond accepting his love for her as inevitable, part of him had been with Buffy since she'd blown his bloody life apart. He'd carried her with him to Brazil and back, kept her close to the chest, unwilling to part ways with even her memory during the times he'd been trying to rebuild whatever he and Dru had once shared. Buffy might not have been the one who had broken that down, but she was the reason it had remained broken. Something in her had spoken to him from their first minute and he'd heard it across hemispheres.

It had just been a matter of time before the rest of him caught on.

"You come back to her town and she'll kill you," Spike said. Better to stick with the facts—say the things that needed saying and have that be the end. "I won't help, but I won't stop her. You hear me?"

Dru's lower lip trembled, but she nodded all the same, flashed him the doe eyes as she had so many times before. And for an instant, he experienced a pang for the man he'd been. The one who would have dropped everything, swooped in to nibble her back to a smile before gutting the pillock who had dared make his princess frown. It had been

brilliant, being her knight. It had been everything and he was saying goodbye to it. More than a century of knowing exactly who he was and being right cozy in his own bloody skin. No doubts. No misgivings. Just pure carnage.

The path ahead wasn't nearly as straightforward, and he could still veer off course if he fancied. The chip was gone and the world was his again. All he had to do was take it.

In the end, all he ever felt was that pang. Not regret for the decision he'd made. Just the last hurrah of the bloke Dru had come to rescue from himself before he became something else.

"Thank you," Spike said, and took her face between his hands to kiss her forehead. "For all of it."

Drusilla blinked up at him, a tragic little smile stretching her lips, and nodded.

And that was that. Goodbye. He put one space between them, then another, and another, sand sliding under his heavy boots. The car door opened and he slid behind the wheel, a man reborn.

And more than a little desperate to beat the sun back to his lady.

He had a bloody Valentine's date to make.



BUFFY STILL DIDN'T KNOW why she'd let Willow talk her into coming along to the Bronze tonight. She wasn't even sure why she'd decided to go back to campus today at all, only that waking up to an empty house the morning after losing the man she loved had been more depressing than she'd expected. Something about the quiet and how it left her with nothing but her disjointed thoughts—cruel *what ifs* and crueler flashes of what two reunited lovers might be doing because her brain hated her and wanted her to suffer. A few minutes of that had made her crave the presence of others. Noise to fill the empty spaces Spike had left behind.

Things had gone pretty much as she'd expected upon arriving on campus. Willow had been concerned at first, then shocked, then leaped hard into standard best friend girl-crisis mode. Insisted that they get out and stay out as long as they could, take in a few movies, indulge in retail

therapy, all the while cramming themselves full of junk food and indulging in general man-bashing. There had been offers to find Spike and stake him in her honor, a slew of unkind but probably true things said about Drusilla, and the tantalizing suggestion that her budding witchy powers could use a test, and what better test than cursing a couple of evil, heart-smashing vampires?

It had been good, probably. Thinking up creative curses that would actually do damage to an insane vampire had provided an effective, if short-term, balm to the gaping hole in her chest. Except that hole was still there at the end of the day, and the end of the day meant nighttime and the realization that the hours wouldn't be spent on anything fun. That for the second time in as many years, Buffy was facing a Valentine's Day alone because the vampire she'd fallen in love with didn't love her back.

And seeing as she'd been idiot enough to let this sentiment fly aloud, Willow had insisted on concluding at the Bronze for an anti-Valentine's Day night, complete in her new I-don't-need-a-guy-to-be-happy ensemble, which consisted of black, black, and more black. No wallowing in sadness and ice cream for them. Just because both Spike and Oz had proven to be sucky boyfriends with wandering eyes didn't mean they would sacrifice good music, half-priced appetizers, and a bartender who had a tendency to look the other way on the most romantic night of the year.

So Buffy had allowed herself to be dragged to the Bronze, alongside Willow's new friend Tara. Anya and Xander weren't in attendance, of course, having coupley plans of their own, which was just as well, as Buffy wasn't sure she was to the stage of her breakup where she wanted to endure Xander's unbridled glee at the news. That much could wait a couple of days. And the Bronze itself might not have been a terrible idea were it not also incredibly coupley, hazard of being the one cool place in town. Willow kept getting lost in conversation with Tara, only snapping back every few minutes to make sure Buffy was doing all right. And Buffy having nothing to say at all, her mind being somewhere very very else.

Wondering where Spike was right now. If he and Dru were enjoying a romantic evening of their own, whatever *romance* looked like for them. If

they'd had sex yet and how many times, and if Spike had called her any of the things he called Buffy. If he'd spared her any thought since leaving town. If he missed her. If he would *ever* miss her.

All thoughts she shouldn't think but couldn't help, sick with love as she was.

She couldn't help that, either. After all, she had no one to blame for any of this but herself.

Buffy had gone into the relationship with her eyes wide open. She would always maintain that—no matter how dumb she'd become over the course of her time with Spike, she had known that it was going to be a short-lived thing. Had wanted it to be short-lived, even, because expecting more from a soulless vampire was a sure-fire way to find herself disappointed at best and six feet under at worst. She hadn't thought she could fall in love with him so she hadn't guarded herself against the possibility, and by the time she'd realized the danger she was in, it had been too late. Damage done. Heart gone. Bye bye heart.

Still, even then, she hadn't fooled herself. Hadn't let herself believe it would ever be anything more than a fling based on their mutual inability to keep their hands off each other, and just planned to enjoy it while it lasted—however long that turned out to be.

And even knowing that—even knowing the fleeting nature of Spike's attention, the fact that the odds were already stacked high against them, and that it had been insane to throw herself into this from the get-go—Buffy hadn't anticipated being here. Spending Valentine's Day freshly dumped and brokenhearted, watching as happier people basked in the glow of their normal relationships, exchanged kisses and copped feels without a care as to who might be watching. She hadn't thought Spike would take her out to dinner or anything conventional, but it had seemed possible that he might bring her someplace like this—get her on the dance floor so they could drive each other crazy before they raced back to his place and into his bed. Not so different from other dates they had gone on after she'd discovered he enjoyed dancing as much as she did, but also not *nothing*. Something like a Valentine's date without putting a label on it.

Granted, that was probably where it had gone wrong—moving any aspect of the relationship out of the bedroom. Going on dates with him,

letting him twirl her around a dance floor, laughing when he caught her off guard, scheduling patrols so they could tackle Sunnydale's nightlife together, keeping a stash of girl stuff at his place—he hadn't even blinked when she'd suggested it—and essentially entwining her life with his so much that they had become an honest-to-god couple. It shouldn't have been possible, so why would she even worry about something as asinine as falling in love with him?

Once it had happened, though, and once she'd realized it had happened, there had been a choice involved. A choice to amputate the limb before the infection spread or succumb to the sickness with eyes and arms wide open. Though she would like to blame the path she'd chosen on the fact that her brain had already been compromised by the fever, Buffy knew that was crap too. It had felt good giving in, and not much in her life was like that. She'd wanted to be selfish for a change.

Well, the joke was certainly on her. Seemed it always was.

Buffy sighed and lowered her gaze to the glass Willow had brought her from the bar. Willow, who was doing the whole "men suck" Valentine's Day a lot better than she was, given that her friend had barely been by the table except to check in every half hour or so. She and Tara were... somewhere now, having disappeared again after Willow had delivered to Buffy the pink concoction that tasted like liquid candy and all the more dangerous because of it. The temptation was certainly there to finish this off and order three or four more, fog up her head well enough that she'd stop picturing Spike and what he might be doing right now, but that was not the best idea. Hangoverville was a place she very much didn't want to visit, especially considering she'd probably be visited by Riley at some point to clear up what had happened at the Initiative the day before. That the debrief hadn't happened yet was in itself surprising, but then they had a mess to clean up themselves.

There hadn't been many casualties, though. Only a few men Drusilla had nibbled on and the doctor who had performed Spike's surgery, who had been downright delirious from blood loss but oddly insistent that Spike had instructed him to play dead in an effort to save his life. In the confusion, she'd managed to slip out, but it was only a matter of time before she'd be called in to tell her story.

She just hoped she could get through the thing without crying.

Buffy was contemplating how long it would take her to secure a bottle of water when she felt it—that telltale tingle at her neck, as tender and familiar as his hand on the small of her back. For a wild second, she thought she was imagining things—there were any number of vampires who could be at the Bronze tonight, trying to make easy prey out of the sad singles who had been coerced by well-meaning friends to turn up. Except her body had stopped responding to Spike as though he were *any other vampire* a while ago. She knew the way he felt. How he made *her* feel. How every inch of her responded whenever he was near.

Then he was talking, his voice washing over her with its low, soothing timbre—the same she’d been certain she’d never hear again—and something inside her wrenched.

“Know we didn’t have anythin’ in stone, love, but I was hopin’ you’d swing by tonight.”

Buffy turned slowly in her seat, trembling. Even with all her senses working in tandem, what her body and ears and all else were telling her, she still half-expected to be greeted with a big empty nothing, her mind having decided Drusilla had the right idea and just quitting with the sense-making altogether. But no, he was there, standing so close her skin damn near buzzed with awareness. He even looked a little dressed up—well, dressed up for Spike. Black jeans and a black T-shirt to match, with a red open dress shirt over that and his trademark duster.

And a smile. It was small but there, boyish in ways Spike rarely was.

“What...” She swallowed around a throat that had grown thick. “What are you doing here?”

“Anywhere else I should be?”

“I thought... Where’s Drusilla?”

“Dunno. Might’ve made it as far as LA by now. She doesn’t look it, but she can really move when she fancies.”

None of this made any sense. “You don’t know where she is?”

“Didn’t stick around to see what direction she headed,” he said. “More important things to do, like get back here. Wasn’t about to miss our first Valentine’s Day if I could help it.”

Buffy just stared at him, willing the words he was saying to penetrate the fog that had settled across her head. How he could be here after what had happened last night—how he’d looked at her, the chip being

gone, the words he'd said. *I'll get her as far outta here as I can and I'll make it right.* There had been a kiss, too, one that had lingered on her lips long after he'd gone, and it had all been goodbye. Every bit of it.

But he was standing in front of her now, still smiling, and she felt so dumb she could have screamed.

"Why aren't you with her?" she blurted instead. "You got what you wanted, didn't you? She came back to you. And the chip. The chip's gone. Why would you ever come back here? Everything turned out just as you wanted."

Some of the light left his eyes and that wasn't fair. Nor was the frown that settled across his lips, as though she were the one not making sense, and she so did not appreciate that. Not after the day she'd had. Not after last night or waking up this morning to the reality that it *was* reality. Not after every agonizing second that had been her life since he'd barreled into her dorm room and demanded she aid and abet the rescue of the woman he loved.

"Bloody hell," Spike muttered, stepping toward her. He searched her face, her eyes, dropped his own to her lips with such familiar hunger the urge to scream rose again. But then he shook his head and a somewhat hysterical laugh bubbled off his lips, and everything about him seemed to crack. "Was real, wasn't it?"

"What was?"

"Saw a bit of it last night. Thought... Fuck, I dunno what I thought." He raised a hand to her face as though to touch her but stopped just short of his fingers grazing her skin. "That maybe I wasn't foolin' myself. Seemed a bit too good to be true, all things considered. Didn't know if I was in my right head about it."

"What are you talking about?"

"Here I thought it was bloody obvious. Haven't been hidin' it all that well, 'cept the last two days." Spike gave her another laugh, and there was no mistaking it now, the crack in his voice or the sudden shine in his eyes. "Buffy, I'm in love with you."

A dull ringing filled her ears, drowning out the thump of the bass coming from the stage and the hum of conversation raging around them—drowning everything out except him. Spike. The man who had left her last night, who had barreled into her dorm in a panic because the woman

he loved had been captured by the Initiative. Who had shattered her without trying, and despite everything, without meaning to. The fact that he was here at all was too much for her, but he *loved* her?

"No," Buffy said, shaking her head, clinging to the truth she knew. "You love Drusilla."

"Sweetheart—"

"No. *No*. I was there. I saw it—saw you. You came in because she was in trouble... You *told* me you love her. That you couldn't leave her there because you love her. I don't know what you're trying to do now, but—"

"Right, fine, I love Dru," Spike barked. The words sounded as though they cost him something. "Can't deny it. She made me who I am. Will always have a soft spot for her, I wager. But it's not like that. It's nothing like it was before. Not even a bloody fraction—"

"You *left* with her. I watched you go."

"Told you I had to take care of it, didn't I?" He released a breath, tore a hand through his hair and paced a step back before nearing once more. "I got her out of town, love. Far away from here as I could while still beatin' the sun back. Left her in the bloody desert and told her if she ever showed up here again that you'd kill her and that I wouldn't stand in the way. Meant to come to you straight off but the house was as far as I got. Poked around for you today but you were bloody nowhere."

For the second time in two days, he was reshaping her worldview. Rearranging the pieces he had scattered to form the picture that she'd thought she'd lost. "Willow took me out," Buffy said dully, trying to keep up with her spinning head. "To get my mind off..."

"Because you thought I'd scarpered. That it was over."

"Yeah," she said, the word barely a whisper.

Spike just studied her, that awful, torn look on his face. She didn't often watch him struggle to find words and didn't know what to think in seeing him do so now. Everything was so confused, and nothing made sense. That he was here at all, never mind the things he was saying, especially after everything yesterday. After the certainty and the despair and the firm knowledge that it was over, whatever they were, had been, or could ever be.

But he was here, looking at her like that. That unique combination of things that Spike managed to pull off no matter how large the dichotomy.

Frustration, desperation, and annoyance all went together well, but didn't make sense when paired with warmth and longing, the things she'd somehow become used to seeing on his face. All these versions of Spike living under the same skin, surprising her and not, catching her off guard, making her fall in love with him when he was the last person in the world she should love.

"I thought you were done," Buffy said hoarsely. "With me."

Spike shook his head hard, sucked down a shuddering breath and closed the distance between them. "I'm a prat," he said, and this time when he reached for her face, he didn't stop until her cheek was against his palm. "Heard she was in danger and I lost my head. But it was never about wanting her or goin' back. There is no back for me where you're concerned. Known that for a minute, too."

"How long?"

"It's why I took off at Christmas. Get away from it—from you. The poison that is loving you. Knowin' you could never..." Another harsh laugh escaped his lips, and he pressed his brow to hers. "Spell woke me up. Red's spell. Made me see what I should've known from the start."

"Christmas?" The word came out half-question, half-squeak. "That's why you... Why I had to go to that town to get you?"

He nodded, moving her head along with his. "Knew I was bugged. This sodding chip was bad enough, but that I'd gone soft? That I'd lost my heart to you? Bloody torture."

Some of the heaviness in her chest began to lighten. "Gee, thanks."

"Can't tell me you don't get it."

No, she couldn't. But she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of admitting as much.

"Fuck, Slayer, why do you think Dru was in Sunnyhell to begin with?" he went on. "She left me because she knew how I felt about you. Took me a while to piece it together but once I saw it—"

"But she came here to get you back."

"She came here 'cause she knew she couldn't. Maybe she regretted it, I dunno. A century later and I still can't tell you how her mind works." Spike pulled back just enough that his eyes became two entities again, all soft warmth and something else—something that had been there from the start. Something she was just now beginning to understand. "There

was a minute there in the beginnin', when I was fighting it, she could've had me back. Not for keeps, but I would've tried. Would've found out there's no one else for me after knowing you."

The parts of her that were still raw and tender gave a final whine of caution, one she had experienced so many times now she'd lost count. One she always knew she should heed but never did. Even now, gun-shy as she was, worn down by everything the last day had thrown at her, she couldn't help but soften all over.

"You could've told me," she said. At some point, he'd snaked an arm around her waist, the pressure there firm and familiar, so much that she didn't realize she was falling into him until it was too late to catch herself. And she didn't want to catch herself. No matter what happened next or how much it hurt, all she wanted was this. Her fingers curled in the lapels of his duster, holding him to her with bruising force. "Would've saved us a lot of trouble."

"That was the plan." His lips brushed hers as he spoke. "Tonight."

God, he kept throwing her off her game. "It was?"

"Had it all worked out. How I'd do it, what I'd say, what to give you to prove I meant it. What better time to tell the girl you love her than on this sodding holiday?"

"Maybe when you bust down her door and demand help saving your ex," she said, the tightness inside her chest starting to loosen at last. The rest of her starting to hope.

"Fair point." Spike shuddered, pulled her tighter against him. "I'm so sorry, love. For all of it. Just didn't realize until yesterday you might feel anythin' like what I feel, and even then... Thought there was a good chance you'd laugh me right outta your life if you knew what this is for me."

"And what is it?"

But he didn't answer with words, and that was okay because for the moment, she was done talking for now. There was more of that to come, she knew, and more that she needed to hear, but right now she wanted to feel him, embrace the reality that he was here. That he loved her—*god, he loved her*—and everything she had been riding for the past day hadn't been in vain. So she sank into him, turned into melty Buffy, and lost herself in the singular way he kissed her. In the feel of his chest under

her hands, the firm ridges of his shoulders, and finally the pronounced lines of his cheeks as she held and pulled and whimpered and became his the same way she had been since December. Only this time when the undercurrent of tension started to swell, the one that existed to remind her how provisional their relationship was, she had an anchor. She had him.

It was as though the thought grew legs. She had him. She had *Spike*.

"Mmm," Spike murmured against her lips, breathing raggedly when they pulled apart. "Slayer..."

Except Buffy wasn't ready for the kissing to be over. The energy that she had been living with the past day needed its outlet—needed it desperately, and needed it now. And when she attacked his mouth again, Spike responded with a low growl that seemed to echo inside of her and she thought maybe he understood. The strokes of his mouth became harder, more intense, his hands wandering to places that were not public-safe and she knew she should care but she didn't. All she cared about was more of that, more of his touch, more of *him*. A point she thought she got across rather nicely by entwining a leg around his and rubbing herself against the bulge in his jeans.

He tore away from her with something between a whimper and a roar. "Fuck, you drive me wild."

"It's a mutual thing," she said before biting at his lower lip. "The wild-driving."

Spike groaned and pulled her harder against him. "Feel that," he said, then snagged her earlobe between his teeth. A *ping* of pleasure tore through her without ceremony, and she had a dangerous thought, but no time to explore it. "That's what you do to me, Slayer. What you've *been* doing to me since I first saw you."

She trembled, nodded against him. "I feel it." And she did. Maybe she was drunk with relief or happiness or some combination thereof, but she was feeling bold tonight. Daring. Enough not to care where they were or who could see it when she slipped a hand between them to *really* feel him. She'd gotten well acquainted with his anatomy over the last few weeks, how it felt to tease him through the denim of his jeans while her legs shook and her heart raced, as that delicious pulsing began

to escalate. That need she experienced somewhere deep and primal that had scared her before she'd learned to give in.

It was an extreme sport, doing this with him. Any of it. Teasing his cock with featherlight touches, his skin with soft strokes of her teeth, his lips with hers, trusting him to catch her when she let the rest of herself fall. But she was addicted to the rush and not about to stop.

"It was here, you know," he continued, his voice even lower now, and seemingly connected to some string that made her insides vibrate. "Here on this dance floor. Saw you and you bloody blinded me. I haven't been able to see anything else since."

"Then you threatened to kill me."

"Course. Had to. Appearances and all." Spike pulled back just enough for her to catch his eyes again, see how dark they had grown. "Flunkies might've gotten the wrong idea if I'd done what I really wanted to do."

"What did you want to do?"

The grin he favored her with made her shake all over again. "Gotta set the stage, don't we?"

Then they were moving, pushing through throngs of the same happy couples whose existences had felt like a personal insult when Buffy had first walked through the doors. She had the fleeting notion that she might need to find Willow, tell her she was leaving, but it was there and gone, and then she was breathing in the cool night air, following Spike as he tugged her deeper into the alley where she had seen him for the first time and her life had changed forever, whether she'd known it or not.

He didn't stop moving until they were tucked in a corner behind a few crates, a place covered deep enough in shadow that it almost felt intimate. Spike whirled around then, caught her mouth with his and pulled her back, back, until her spine was pressed against the Bronze's exterior wall.

"I was here," he growled against her lips as he hiked her skirt up her legs. "Right here. Watchin' you move. How you threw everythin' into your fight. And I wanted you. Hated that I did but couldn't stop myself. Wanted to fuck you right here. Against this wall. Feel what you could do to me."

Buffy released a shaky breath. "E-even then?"

“God yes.” His brow was against hers again. “From the beginnin’, love. Just took my head a bit to catch up with my heart.”

“And now that it has?” she asked, and worked her throat. Every inch of her seemed to throb with expectation. Or maybe that was anticipation. She didn’t know.

“Now that it has, Slayer, you’re never gonna be rid of me.”

And he was kissing her again and she was melting again and everything else seemed to blink out. The hurt and uncertainty and devastation dissolving, the breath she’d been holding ever since December released, the dread that had been simmering ever since she’d realized her fling had become something more just gone. What happened next wouldn’t be easy. There were things to figure out, conversations to have—she wasn’t about to forget the chip was gone or what that might mean, but she also trusted that he knew what he was choosing. That *she* was what he was choosing. That he wouldn’t be with her if he hadn’t already crossed that bridge. He wouldn’t be here at all.

But he *was* here, kissing her and shoving her skirt around her thighs, teasing her through the soaked crotch of her panties while she fumbled to undo his belt, growling into her mouth when she finally had him free, had her hand around his cock, praising how good she felt, how hot she was, how no one had ever touched him the way she did. How much he loved her hands and her mouth and her pussy, loved her *bloody enormous* heart and that mind of hers, how she gave him everything without holding anything back. How he could feel her want and hunger, and what that did to him, knowing she wanted him as much as she did.

“Take me home, baby,” he rumbled against her lips, bunching her panties to the side. He grinned when she gasped, grinned wider still at the whimper that escaped when he rubbed the head of his cock along the seam of her pussy, cool and slick and familiar, and hers. “Put me where I belong.”

Before all this, before Spike, Buffy would have assumed she was the sort of person who wouldn’t be caught dead having sex in an alley, let alone at the Bronze. That she would worry too much about what might be seen or overheard, or what she might have to tell her mom after she was arrested for public indecency. As it turned out, she was exactly the sort of person who would have sex in an alley. Who would moan into her

lover's mouth as she impaled herself on his cock, dig her fingers into his shoulders and wrap her legs around his waist. She whimpered again when he dragged his teeth along her chin and down her neck, kissing and nibbling and whispering low for her all over again. She was hot; she was fire; she was worth every burn. She was walking in sunlight without fear of death, bright and life-giving, and yeah, she could kill him in a flash but that was part of the drug. She was his slayer and he was her vampire, all hers, and he could be nothing else because this was where he belonged. Inside of her, pounding into her, feeling her wet and slick and clamping around him, dragging him in deeper, squeezing him with that marvelous cunt, letting him feel her where she lived. Trusting him with that, with her. And maybe loving him. Maybe one day she could love him too. All that mattered right now was that she knew where he belonged.

And Buffy opened her mouth to tell him that she did, that the fall had already happened and everything else had been debris. But he kissed her before she could say anything, before she could do more than murmur his name, and started thrusting too hard for thought. So hard he knocked the breath out of her lungs and sucked it into his own, pinning her between the wall at her back and the wall that was him, the denim of his jeans abrading her thighs, the buckle of his belt jostling in rhythm, his own soft moans lighting the air between them, along with the wet slap of flesh meeting flesh. But he didn't need to breathe so he could keep talking while he teased her breasts with his teeth and nibbled on her skin. He could whisper again and again that he loved her and god how much, and how he'd wanted to tell her forever, and that he was sorry, so sorry for all of it. That he was a bad man but her bad man for as long as she wanted to keep him.

Then how badly he needed to feel it, the way she tightened and trembled and came apart on his cock. And he slipped a hand between them—the one that wasn't holding her up—and skated his fingers over her flesh until a knuckle was brushing her clit. Just brushing, because he knew how little it took, how sensitive she got, and that the slightest touch would have her falling over.

And it did. Buffy tipped her head back, that pressure that had been building hitting its peak, and she choked a sob and gave herself over. Holding onto him, the feel of him inside her, thrusting and thrusting

while she bucked and spasmed and clenched hard to keep him where he was. His mouth at her throat, blunt teeth biting into her skin, and she could feel the want there too. A need they had danced around without ever confronting, and one she knew she would one day fulfill because loving Spike meant loving all of him, even the parts that scared her. Maybe especially those, as he was with her, inside of her, pulsing and spilling and filling her with him in spite of all the reasons he shouldn't be. He was with her.

It took a moment for her legs to stop shaking enough that she trusted them with her weight. Another moment before her breathing leveled out again, one she spent with her brow resting against Spike's shoulder, reveling in the way he felt. Solid and familiar, shaken just like her. Gulping down air in that funny way of his, like she made him forget that he was dead.

Maybe she did.

She hoped she did.

"What...what were you going to tell me?" Buffy asked, dragging her head up so she could meet his eyes. And this time when she caught it—that flicker, that thing that had been there since their first night together, the piece of him she had been staring at for weeks without recognizing, her chest went tight with a different kind of tension. One that could make her drown just as easily as the last, but in a way that somehow, inexplicably, gave her life.

He had loved her this entire time and he'd been showing her just as long. She was just the idiot who hadn't seen it.

"What's that, love?" He dropped a kiss at the corner of her mouth, then along her chin, down the slope of her neck.

"You said you had it worked out. What you were going to say to prove to me you meant it." Buffy's eyes fluttered shut and her mind started to depart the scene again. Easy to do when he touched her like that. When she could feel him hard and prodding her belly, and her legs might be holding her up but that didn't mean she was ready to use them. "You said you had a plan."

Spike lifted his head, gave their surroundings a look. "Thought that much was obvious. It was this. Showin' you where it was I became yours. That I've been here since then and I don't ever wanna be anywhere else."

“Your plan was to fuck me in the alley outside the Bronze?”

“Doesn’t sound nearly as romantic when you put it like that.” There was a teasing lilt in his voice that told her he was joking—or mostly joking. Then he surprised her, backing up a step and falling serious again. “Knew what it meant, too, even before yesterday. Turnin’ my back on who I was. Bein’ the man you need, the one who fights at your side. The chip might’ve put me in the cage, changed who I was, but I’m who decides what I change into.”

There was another beat, and another, then he slowly slipped his duster off his shoulders, never breaking eye contact.

“And what it means,” he said, pushing the soft leather into her arms, “is you.”

Buffy opened her mouth, closed it, opened it again, then glanced down at the coat. “I don’t...”

“Told you where that came from, didn’t I?”

She hesitated before nodding. He had told her—that and more things she hadn’t really wanted to know but needed to know anyway. If he was going to be in her life for any stretch of time, even if she’d thought the stretch would be fleeting. No more lying to herself about who she was involved with. That meant knowing the good and the very bad.

But knowing didn’t provide clarity.

“Chip’s gone, pet,” Spike said as though reading her thoughts. “Wager that’ll be a point of contention among your mates, maybe with you too. But this...” He nodded at the duster. “Hangin’ it up, givin’ it to you... I’m not the man I was before, and that’s because of you. Not the sorta thing I aim to bugger up.”

Buffy stared at him for a long beat, her blood thundering in her temples as his words settled—as everything settled. As she understood.

It wouldn’t be easy, whatever came next. There would be fights—some with her friends, some with Giles, and probably a lot with each other. Maybe even more epic misunderstandings that would leave her or him or both of them brokenhearted...or *not* misunderstandings that would do the same.

But he was here. He knew some of what lay ahead, and he was choosing her.

"You were supposed to be a fling, you know," she said. "This was just supposed to be a fling. Falling in love with you wasn't the plan."

He sucked in a sharp breath. "Seems fair," he said hoarsely. "God knows you're hell on my plans."

"That's going to be a problem."

"Imagine so. Don't rightly care, though." Spike was still for a moment—or as still as he could be, which wasn't very. Looking at her as only he ever had. As only he could. "You...you love me?"

A new kind of warmth bloomed in her chest, fiery and intense, and different. So different from anything that had come before. "Yeah. I do."

"Christ, Buffy... Even after everythin' I just put you through?"

"What, you wanna talk me out of it?"

"God no." He breathed out again, his face brightening in a smile so big it almost hurt to look at, knowing she was the one who had put it there. No one looked at her the way Spike did, and no one smiled at her like him, either. And knowing she could do that to him, make him smile, make him happy, was its own sort of drug. Painful and beautiful all at the same time. Heady because she wanted to keep doing it and worried she couldn't, but was determined to try.

"Don't know what I did to deserve you," he said after a beat. "Probably never will. But I'm gonna earn it, love. Every day. As long as you let me."

"I'm going to let you for a long time."

Spike stepped forward, took her face in his hands again and rubbed his nose along hers. "You better believe I'll hold you to that."

"I'd be mad if you didn't," she whispered, and kissed him before he could take control. Soft and sweet and full of promise. The promise he'd given her and she back. The promise she now held in her arms in the form of a coat that represented everything he'd been before and was no longer.

It was quite a thing, what it meant to hold onto him. What it meant to trust. She wouldn't take that for granted, and there was only one way she could think to show him that.

"As for this," she said after she pulled her lips from his, gently pushing the leather back against his chest, "my closet is a gateway to

Narnia. Things go in and disappear. This is not the sort of thing I'd ever want to disappear."

He frowned, not following.

"So...could you make sure it stays safe? Gift from the heart and all. It means a lot and it...it needs to be protected. Keep it safe for me?"

There was a beat, then another, and even in the dark, she didn't miss it when his eyes went watery. "I can do that. Anything, Buffy."

And that was just it—she already knew he could.