

AFLAME



HOLLY DENISE



THIS WASN'T AS MUCH FUN AS IT SHOULD BE.

Spike affected a grin as the Slayer ducked his incoming fist, moving like the agile little thing she was. He'd give her credit—the odds were stacked sky bloody high against her, and she was still fighting her little heart out. Coming at him with everything she had. Not pulling her punches, not holding back. Hell, she'd even managed to stick him with the pointy end of her stake before she'd realized just how useless weapons were against him, and he admired that. Meant she was treating the situation with the gravity it deserved. After all, it was hardly every day a slayer fought to her own grave.

No, that just happened the once.

And if anyone was keeping score at home, Spike was again proving to be the leading cause of death among the Chosen Ones.

All things that meant this should be one of the best moments of his life. The happy result of a battle he'd been waging for two embarrassingly long years—a battle that had cost him Dru and his own bloody pride more times than he could count. Putting this particular slayer in the ground was an occasion worth savoring. Memorizing every minute, every nuance, every glimpse of worry or shock that flickered across her face. He'd need these details later when he was reliving this victory. The better to paint a picture. To remember her. Remember exactly how it felt the second he snuffed the life out of her for good.

Yet every time that thought occurred to him, what he felt wasn't exhilaration or triumph, but something else. Something that felt a whole bloody lot like sadness.

And that was pissing him off.

*She* was pissing him off and he couldn't say why.

Except he felt a rush of it when he tossed her into the lamppost, felt her wiggle her pert little arse back against him, against where his prick had taken notice of the fight and risen to the occasion, as it always did when she was around. The air smelled different in the daytime—something only a vampire would ever notice—but so did she. Sweet and fresh like the strands of golden light playing across her hair. Her skin was warmer too, kissed by the sun. Buffy as he had never seen her.

And yeah, that pissed him off. The first time—the only time—he'd have her like this and she was distracting as hell.

“So,” he said, sauntering to her. There was a fetching cut along her forehead, and it looked like he might have succeeded in splitting her lip, sending tantalizing whiffs of slayer blood into the fresh fall air. “You let Parker take a poke, eh? Didn’t seem like you knew each other that well. What exactly did it take to pry apart the Slayer’s dimpled knees?”

She glared back at him with a brilliant mixture of disgust and shame, cradling her arm. “You’re a pig, Spike.”

Right. He was the pig. *He* was the one who had fallen for the oldest bloody ploy men had been playing against women since the dawn of time.

And there it was again—that rush of fury that he had no business entertaining, spurred on by what felt like a mixture of disappointment and, if he didn’t know better, jealousy, though that made fuck all sense. Even if he kept seeing it, images of the wanker he’d caught her with the other night, the way he’d been intent on charming her out of her knickers and the soppy eyes she’d been shooting him in return. That prat who was bloody Angel in miniature, just with a pulse and lacking the refinement that came with more than two hundred years of experience in hard manipulation.

It had brassed him off that night, too. Well, first it had tickled him pink—*god*, was she ever a plank to fall for such obvious twaddle. But the more he’d thought about it, the more his amusement had started to morph into something else.

After everything the stupid girl had been through with Angel, she’d managed to come out having not taken a single sodding lesson to heart.

“Did he play the sensitive lad and get *you* to seduce *him*?” he spat before he could stop himself. “That’s a good trick if the girl’s thick enough to buy it.”

Another flash of hurt and Buffy came at him again, but her technique was all sloppy. Not at all befitting the last few minutes of her life. He wanted her to fight him like she meant it—the way she always had before. Having her like this, bruised and wounded, was taking all the fun out of it.

“Wonder what you did wrong.” Spike drawled after tossing her back to the cement steps that made up the courtyard. Buffy looked up, and he felt himself surge again with anger. She was so much better than this.

“Too strong?” He smirked and cupped himself, made sure to wait until her eyes followed his hand before giving his cock a nice squeeze. “Did you bruise the boy? Forget that he can’t take what a vampire can?”

Buffy brought her gaze back to his, her jaw set and firm, chin held high despite the corner he had her in. And that was more it—more the Slayer he knew. That fight, that challenge.

“Hope he at least got you to hit the high notes,” he went on, his smirk widening because he knew, of course, the boy had done nothing of the sort. “Though considerin’ how wound up you are...”

“Shut up, Spike.”

“Ooh, hit a nerve, did I?” He prowled forward, taking his time, for he was finally starting to enjoy himself. The beast in his chest gave its purr of approval as he drew close to where she’d fallen against the steps. “Dunno what you were thinkin’, really. It’s not like some soft college boy’s gonna have what it takes to keep up with you.”

For the way her face fell, Spike knew he’d hit another nerve, perhaps one even more sensitive than the one he’d already made merry with. “What?” he barked, unable to keep the laugh out of his voice. “You thought he could?”

“Shut *up*, Spike!”

“Or you’ll what?” He drew nearer still, waiting for her to lash out again. “Think this has already played out, don’t you? Got you right where I want you.”

Fuck, Buffy’s if-looks-could-stake glare was even more entertaining when a man was invulnerable. But bless her, she wasn’t about to stuff away the attitude. He’d be disappointed if she did. “This is what it took to beat me,” she said in a low rumble. “A ring that keeps you alive. All these years, I thought you were supposed to be some slayer boogeyvamp. Killer of two, yadda yadda. Kinda lessens the scare factor when you have to cheat to win.”

The smile slipped off his face. “I won this bloody ring fair and square.”

“And used it to do what you can’t do by yourself,” Buffy spat back, fighting to her feet with more grace than anyone else could have after the thrashing she’d taken. “You knew you wouldn’t have a chance if you tried without it.”

Spike opened his mouth, closed it. Any ninny could see what she was doing. Same bloody tactic her ex had pulled when Dru had been bathing him in holy water—provoke a response, get him to snap back, make the sort of mistake that had no do-overs. Still, even knowing that, the part of him that was forever fighting a losing battle to prove himself to the bloody world wanted to show her just how wrong she was. Rip the ring off, bloody daylight be damned, and give her the killing she had coming the old-fashioned way. A dance between them and death.

Somehow, he managed to hold back. Keep from losing his head. “See,” he drawled instead, “if you’d had a proper night’s shag at least once in your miserable life, you might not be such a raging bitch. Almost a pity to do you in like this. Everyone deserves at least one good melt before they snuff it.”

She staggered toward him rather than back, her eyes blazing and her lower lip trembling. “Shut *up*.”

“And here’s the rub, Slayer, you’ve got no one to blame but yourself. Look at the men you’ve chosen. Reckon the only way Angel ever got anyone’s rocks off was under threat of death. Darla wasn’t keen on under-performers.” He didn’t miss the splash of pain that crossed her face at the mention of her dear ol’ ex, and his bravado rebounded almost at once. Easy target, Angel, but one he wouldn’t hesitate to soundly abuse so long as doing so kept kicking her where it hurt. “Then the new lad. Anyone with an inkling o’ sense could’ve seen what he was sniffin’ after.”

There it was again, another flicker. Another confirmation the words had done what he meant for them to do. He couldn’t deny it was a bit of a rush, paying her back for all the pain she’d made him suffer since coming into his life. Watching as she finally faced some consequence for all the sodding damage she’d done just by existing. Yet at the same time her weakness was an insult, for the Slayer had no business being weak or soft. She owed him the second half of the fight, or at least to do something more than stand there looking at him as his shots landed.

As though hearing the thought, Buffy whipped up her arm and punched him hard in the nose, sending him careening a few steps back before she ran at him again. And god, *yes*, this was more like it. All rage and fury, back to dancing to *their* song. She might not have a prayer of besting him but at least she was throwing her all behind every swing,

every kick, every blow she managed to land, all those she didn't. Yes *this*. This was better.

But it still wasn't enough. He wanted her dead but he wanted to not regret it after. He wanted something he could relive for years to come, his crowning achievement. His bloody legacy. The other two slayers had been worthy opponents and all, but no slayer—those before or those who would come after—would ever compare to Buffy Summers. Her death needed to be something grand. Something unlike anything he'd ever done before or would again. Something that even she, were she asked, would admit had been the best bloody way to go.

Then, for no reason whatsoever, that tosser flooded his mind again. That unworthy git she'd let sip from her honeypot. He'd seduced her, gotten a piece of her only one other man had ever had, and even after he'd tossed her aside like yesterday's rubbish, she'd been fawning all over him. She'd let someone unworthy of licking the muck off her boots touch her, and that would be her last memory if he ended her life now. And it would be *his* last impression of her, too. Knowing all that potential, all that pure bloody fire, had been doused before it got to discover just how hot it could burn.

And then he saw it—understood. The thing that had been nagging at him since he'd first smashed his knuckles into her annoying face. The reason he wasn't having as much fun as he ought to be. Hell, the reason any part of him felt *jealous* of that wanker at all. Had nothing to do with whatever tosh Dru had lobbed at him—had to do with *her*. With Buffy.

With how he wanted to remember Buffy.

The only way killing her would ever feel earned.

He knew he was right the same way he'd known the girl on the dance floor was the Slayer that first night, and there wasn't anything to do from there but seize the insight he'd been given and act. So when she came at him next, he clamped his hands around her wrists and pulled her flush against him before his mouth, fangs and all, came crashing down on hers.

And she didn't hesitate, didn't even stumble. Adjusted to the shift in the battleground like the warrior she was, attacking him with fists one second and her mouth the next. Fighting him with lips and tongue, scraping her teeth against him like a bloody animal, tearing and nipping and god, she was fire. She was fire in the flesh, fire in his arms, and then

he wasn't holding her wrists anymore but had her arse cradled in his palms, fingers digging in for purchase. Suddenly desperate to hold on, match her angry kisses with his own. Prove to her that he hated her more than she did him, and he'd snog her all bloody afternoon if that was what it took to drive the message home.

She broke first, tearing away from his mouth with a gasp that had to scrape the bottom of her lungs as her head rolled back. Then Spike's mouth was on her neck, fangs sliding along a delicate column of flesh with all that warm, delicious blood pumping just a slice away, and he could do it now. Take it now. This alone would be a hell of a memory to carry with him through the centuries, and maybe if he hadn't gone funny at the taste of her in his mouth, he would have seized the victory she'd handed him without daring to push for more. But he was Spike, and daring was what he did. Especially where slayers were concerned.

"Can show you," he heard himself muttering as he scaled his fangs up and down her neck. And then that wasn't enough, either, so he shoved the demon back, needing to taste her without that between them. Not keen to examine why it was important, just knowing it was. "Want me to show you, Slayer? Exactly what it is you've been missin'? Bloody shame to kill you when you're all...unsatisfied."

It might have been the wrong thing to say, for the next second, Buffy had gasped again, and tore away. And balls, she might just be the loveliest thing he'd ever seen. Face flush, eyes dark, lips parted and swollen, hair all pleasantly tousled. If it weren't for the forming bruise and the cut he'd left along her skin, he might not know they had just been fighting to the death.

Fuck it. This was ending one way regardless. Might as well shoot for the bloody stars.

"You know I'm good for it," he said, stepping into her space again. Taking her by the wrist so he could guide her hand, bruised knuckles and all, to press flat against his cock. The burn of her skin was almost too much, even separated by black denim. Spike fed her a low moan, rolled his hips to create a mimicry of friction, then drew in a rattling breath. "Can make you feel like you wouldn't bloody believe. Take you to the stars and back."

Buffy stared at him, her expression unreadable. At last, she gave a



short laugh and shook her head as though coming back to herself. But she hadn't punched him yet—hadn't tried to pull her hand off his cock, either. Instead, she regarded him as if seeing him for the first time. Or maybe she was trying to suss out whether the proposal was genuine. Either way, the effect was the same—he saw the answer there in her eyes. Could feel it radiating off her body, too, all that frustrated confusion and anger, the curiosity. Maybe he'd knocked her a bit too soundly in the head; maybe he'd captured lightning in a bottle. All he knew was he was going to answer one of the questions that had plagued him ever since he'd first sunk his fangs into a slayer's throat, and this was the way it should be. With her.

"Don't you wanna know?" he asked, pressing her hand more firmly against his erection, trying not to go cross-eyed at the thought of just how tight she could squeeze with that grip of hers. Or how viselike her pussy would feel once he finally had her wrapped around him. How hot she'd be... Christ, he hadn't been with a human woman in years now, and never like this. Never because it was something he wanted. Something he *craved*. "Aren't you curious?"

Buffy dropped her gaze back to the bulge she was still considering. "And if you're all talk?"

"Think you can feel for yourself—"

"All I can feel is that you're sick and fighting me gets you hot."

Somehow, he managed to keep from pointing out that she was the one standing there with wet knickers and her hand on his prick. Seemed a good way to get her to back out of the decision he already knew she'd made. "Tell you what, Slayer. If I'm not the best shag you've ever had, I'll slip this ring right off and let you dust me. Won't argue. Won't even try to run for it."

"Because you're so good at sticking to your word."

"Keep it where it counts," he retorted. "And if I'm rememberin' right, last time we paired up, you had no complaints. So tell me, kitten, what exactly have you got to lose?"

He wasn't an idiot—if pressed, if she really wanted to argue, Buffy would have no trouble coming up with a million reasons to shove him away and get back to the dying part of the fight. But that's not what happened.

“Where?” she asked.

“Got a room in this hellhole, don’t you?” Much as he might fancy the idea of shagging her in the sunlight just to complete the picture of the best story he would ever tell, he very much didn’t want to be interrupted. Could ruin what was fast becoming the best day of his bloody life. “At your disposal, Slayer.”

Buffy flicked her gaze back up to his, and what he saw there had the power to set him on fire all on its own.

“Prove it to me.”



EVEN STILL, he expected her to talk herself out of it. To just stop walking, let him plow into her back, then turn around and sock him hard in the jaw for having snogged her in the first place. For presuming that she would ever let a filthy creature like him into the paradise between her thighs...because despite whatever he’d said, he knew exactly that *paradise* was a weak descriptor for whatever heights he was about to explore. No one who moved like Buffy, who had her passion and her anger and her strength, could be anything less than a religious experience between the sheets.

But somehow she didn’t talk herself out of it. Somehow he ended up exchanging the warm rays of California sun for the stale air of her dorm hallway. He caught a few stares from the walking snacks they passed and couldn’t help but smirk when they seemed to cotton on that buttoned-up Buffy was about to have herself a real good time. It did look a little conspicuous, her purposeful march toward her room with a bloke in tow, and still a bloody miracle that at no point did she come to her senses, for even she had to know how this would end. That he wouldn’t be satisfied just to sample her body—though, *bloody hell*, how he was looking forward to that—and would make her neck his chalice before the day was over.

Just so she couldn’t cry foul the second they were well and truly alone, Spike made sure to crowd up behind her the second she stopped and started fiddling with her dorm room door. Pressed himself against her arse, soaking in her scent—sweat and soap and *Buffy*—as well as her heat. Then, because he couldn’t help but tease himself, his mouth fell to

her neck, the very skin he would be tearing into before the sun had dipped below the horizon, and pressed a soft series of kisses there. He let loose a little growl when he felt her tremble, took her hips between his hands to keep her upright and dug his fingers in. The first thing he aimed to do was tear off the sheer blue number she was wearing—sodding garment had been made to tease, and that little camisole she wore underneath was hardly any better.

“Stop that,” she whispered, even as the saucy chit tilted her head, baring more of her throat to him.

“Baby likes to flirt,” he murmured, leveraging his hold on her to thrust himself more insistently against her arse. “Feel that, Slayer? Feel how hungry I am?”

“Words you should not use while kissing my neck.”

“Oh, but you love it.” He punctuated this by licking a long line up her milky flesh, chuckling when she trembled harder, her hand falling off the door knob. “Half the fun, innit? Knowin’ what I can do to you like this. Knowin’ what these hands have done, how close to the fire you are right now.”

“Get over yourself,” she forced out, but then the door was open and she was tumbling inside, Spike hot after her, and she whirled before he could slam it closed again, her mouth crashing onto his with more of the fight they had put on hold. Once more blasting him with that pure bloody fire, the inferno that was this inexplicable woman. Buffy bloody Summers. Bane of his existence, eternal thorn in his side, reason his life had gone to shite and more kissing him with fury that told him plain she knew what this was, too, and she was just as starved for it.

It was intoxicating in all the right ways. Probably the wrong ones, too.

Spike rumbled a growl against her lips and seized her by the arms, twisting her around so her back was to the door, which he knocked closed by slamming her against it and startling a gasp from her mouth. She wrenched away to look at him, but he was on her again before she could do more than glare, scraping at her lips with his teeth and seizing fistfuls of sheer blue fabric just for the pleasure of hearing it rip when he tugged. That earned him another gasp and she pulled back, panting, and watched as the pieces of her shredded blouse drifted toward the floor.

Looked back at him with anger and heat, and he knew she wanted to scream at him but she threw herself at him instead, channeling everything into the hot attack of her mouth that wasn't really kissing but also couldn't be called anything else. Then she was gripping the lapels of his duster and pulling hard enough the leather gave a whine of warning, and it would be fitting—the slayer he would kill today destroying the trophy of the slayer he'd killed back then, but Spike wasn't a man who forfeited his trophies without a fight so he shoved her back so forcefully that the door shook in its frame and held her gaze, defiant, as he stripped the duster off his shoulders.

*Not that.* Anything else was fair bloody game.

Buffy gave a sound that would have been called a growl were she a vampire, and launched herself forward again, and he was ready. Caught her with his arms around her middle and spun, thought for a mo' it might be good to get her on her back before she could do any real damage, but then decided there was no fun in that and so thrust her against the door again and crushed her with his mouth to distract her from retaliating. Only she was keen to it, what he was doing, shoving her tongue between his lips and against his, and *Christ*, no woman should taste this good. Should be this hot or have the power to knock him off course, for that was exactly what she did. And when he heard something tear—the red shirt he'd been wearing over the tee—he couldn't keep from grinning. Bringing this out in her, knowing that she was feeling it too, smelling how hot she was, was more than he could have ever dreamed or imagined.

This was what made fighting her so brilliant. Why he'd craved it when he was away, even knowing how rotten it was for him. The slow cancer that was Buffy Summers, eating through him and hollowing him out until all that was left was her.

Yet the reality of what came next made something in him twinge. If he did what he aimed to do, he would never have this again. That sense of consummation would die with her, and he would celebrate and rejoice and laugh his bloody heart out as he ran back to Dru, but some part of him would forever be changed. Unmade. It would be with Buffy. Dead with Buffy.

The shock of rage the thought filled him with had him slamming his

palms against the door on either side of her head as though he could trap her just where she was. As though she couldn't shove him back so hard he might just go sailing out the window, ring or not. That was part of the appeal, the draw. Knowing she could kill him, if the fight were fair, and also knowing how she was about to channel all that strength. *That* was what he should be thinking about—this moment and all the ones that would make up whatever was left of their time together. Not the Buffy-less stretch of eternity to come.

But before he could decide on a place to begin—fucking her against the door sounded brilliant, but so did pushing her to her knees and unzipping—someone on the other side of the door tried to push it open. Tried and failed, as Spike shoved it closed just as quickly with a resounding *thump*. Buffy froze and wrenched her mouth from his, her eyes going wide and the rest of her looking so deliciously ruffled that he had a hard time not leaning in to recapture her lips, and sod whoever was trying to interrupt.

“Buffy? Are you in there?”

Buffy immediately tensed. “Uhh, what’s up, Will?”

“There’s something against the door.” Again, the meddlesome little twit made to push the door open, and again, Spike slammed it back into its frame before it could yield more than half an inch. “Look, you’re kinda wiggling me out. Did Spike hurt you? Xander said—”

“I’m fine!” Buffy blurted, and now she was shooting a panicked *oh shit* look at Spike, and he could see—suddenly, horribly—exactly how the next few minutes could unfold. Buffy starting to think, starting to consider what she was doing, starting to *realize* exactly who it was she’d allowed back into her private space and the *wrongness* of it, and all that lovely anger he’d whipped up to tame would find its way back where it belonged. Slayer and vampire rather than woman and man, and he’d have to kill her like she was nothing, like she meant *nothing*, and he couldn’t let that happen.

So Spike met the question in her eyes with a shrug and dipped his head toward her neck, and it wasn’t already too late, for she tipped her head back rather than doing what any good slayer should, and her skin was beneath his lips, his teeth, and he was nibbling just above the place her blood smelled the sweetest.

Buffy gave a soft whimper, though not so soft that it didn't carry, for now her friend was pounding on the door.

"If you're fine, why can't I get in?"

"Because I'm about to *get in*," Spike whispered, sliding a hand between them—making sure to take a detour over her breasts—and under the waistband of her trousers and her knickers and when his fingers neared her cunt, had to fight a whimper of his own because she was hot enough to melt flesh from bone. "Say what you need to get rid of her unless you fancy your little chum hearin' you gettin' fucked by the Big Bad. Don't think I won't, Slayer. I'll make you scream for my cock while the whole bloody building listens. You want that?"

There it was again—a choice. Shove him back or do what he said, and there was no denying it *was* a choice. He saw it in her eyes, the way they darkened with heat and sparked with challenge at the same time. In the slight curve of her lips—almost a smirk. An answer.

"Sorry, Will," Buffy said, holding his gaze, nodding her encouragement when he teased his fingers through the curls at her mound, then let out the cutest little squeak he'd ever heard the second he touched her where she was soaked. "Just...a bit beat. You know with...the fight and waiting for Parker to call—"

Not a name he wanted to hear while petting her pussy. He sucked in his cheeks and narrowed his eyes, finding the swollen bud of her clit and giving it a good, reproachful tap.

If he hadn't snaked his free arm around her to hold her up, it seemed likely her knees might have buckled, which was just neat. He hadn't had a woman literally swoon in his arms in quite some time, and never with any sort of earnestness. So Spike grinned and stroked her again, the tip of his finger sliding over her clit with slow intent. Letting her feel it for real—get used to the idea that she hadn't imagined whatever sensation had just torn through her, and he was not disappointed. Buffy started with such force she collided with his chest, jostling his finger so it slipped lower, parting her folds and dipping into her honey, that warm liquid proof that his nose and eyes weren't deceiving him. For all the animosity between them, all the pain and hate and violence to come, Buffy wanted him at least as much as he wanted her. Never mind that it was wrong. Hell, maybe because it was.

“Buffy?” came from the other side of the door. “You’re really starting to worry me. Let us in.”

“Us?” Buffy echoed, her voice hitting a pitch he’d never heard her reach before. “Who’s us?”

There was a beat, then another voice—lower, male, *wolf*—chimed in with, “Hi, Buffy.”

“Hi Oz,” she said, giving Spike a sort of *help me* look that he found both hilarious and humbling. Not once since she’d started running roughshod over his life had she ever regarded him with anything other than anger or mistrust. Even now, with her under his fingers, her taste in his mouth, the air between them thick with the promise of what was to come, there had been an undercurrent of hostility. An understanding that even if they fucked each other senseless, it would mean nothing. Change *nothing*.

“I just need some time,” Buffy went on when she saw he wasn’t going to help. Not his fault, really. She couldn’t just dump that on a fella and expect him to adjust. “Fight...and Parker.”

There was that name again. Spike buried his face in her throat and bit down with his blunt teeth to stifle what would have been a much louder growl, and when she gasped in response, he dipped his fingers down the seam of her pussy until he was nudging her opening. Feeling her hot, so hot, and trembling, and *bloody hell*, just about the tightest cunt he’d ever pushed inside. She was everywhere, clamping hard around his fingers so he slid them in deeper, as far as they would go, and Buffy was panting at his ear and her mates were still on the other side of the door and if he didn’t feel that fire around his cock, he was sure he would combust.

“And nothing happened with Spike?”

“Nothing!” Buffy agreed, though Spike thought maybe a tad too readily. “I have Spike handled.”

He lifted his head, met her eyes and sneered. “Handled me, have you? You sure about that, Slayer?”

She returned his look with a glare of her own, some of that bright defiance that defined her shining through the lust and her flushed arousal. It was bloody glorious. “I handled him just fine,” she said clearly,

confidently. "Don't worry. There's nothing Spike can throw at me that I can't take."

"You haven't seen the goods yet, love," he growled. "Wouldn't want you to bite off more than you can swallow."

"And you're not hurt?" Willow asked before the Slayer could come up with one of her brilliant crushing replies.

"You don't need help?" came the other voice. The one belonging to the wolf.

She held Spike's gaze a beat, another, then said clearly, "Not hurt! Don't need help!" before rolling her head back and thrusting her hips up. Needy. Demanding. An adorable facsimile of control he would have a time tearing down brick by brick. "Just want some time. Big fight crashage. Tell Giles and Xan I'm fine. I'll see you later."

There was a pause that likely felt longer than it actually was. It was as though the whole bloody building was holding its breath. Then some murmuring, low and again not the witch. And Spike didn't care but he heard enough not to be surprised when Willow spoke again, sounding confused and defeated. "Okay. If you're sure."

"So sure," Buffy said. "Way with the sure."

Spike grinned and rewarded her by nudging her clit with his thumb. She mewled and snapped back to him as though surprised, and she probably was, poor thing. Was a bloody crime that neither of the tossers who had had her before had known what to do with her, had taken their time to get to understand what those soft little rumbles meant. But then, he'd always been a bit addicted to this part. Watching a woman's face as he learned her body—or showed her that he was already quite fluent. Making her mouth fall open wide as he pressed and caressed and dragged his fingers back until they were just barely inside her. Lingering there in the hope she'd start to whimper and beg, and god, that was a lovely thought. Buffy begging him to fuck her harder. To take her. Taste her. To show her all the things she'd never known to miss, make it so she craved him the way he craved blood. So that no man would ever hold a candle. Put in those terms, it was a small mercy he intended to kill her. Would be a right shame to experience this and have to face each day knowing she'd never have it again.

*Could keep her,* some inner voice reasoned—the same voice that he was



certain Dru had overheard in her mad way, for she'd always been in the foulest of her foul moods whenever it was loudest in his head. There had been no hope of convincing her that idle thoughts were only that. Hence what had pulled him back to Sunnyhell. To the Slayer.

And now, for the first time, watching as Buffy panted, feeling the heat radiating off her body, the wetness that coated his fingers, smelling her hot, soft, delicious, and alive, Spike found himself struck with doubt.

*Do I want to keep her?*

The answer was fast, kneejerk. Not something to consider or analyze for there was nothing to consider or analyze. Just no. *Fuck* no. He would make her scream and then make her bleed and that would be the end of that.

*Could keep her, though. Have her again. Make her yours.*

Spike fought a snarl and seized her by the shoulders to steer her into the room now that her nosy little mate had bugged off. Went over and closed the blinds too, just in case anyone thought to look in and interrupt their fun. No more hiccups, and no more going at this slow and nice, either—he had his sights on what he wanted. All there at his bloody fingertips if he could just keep the noise in his head from trying to shoot him down. Buffy hadn't signed on for more than a fuck, anyway, so it wasn't like it was even worth considering, and definitely not like that way lay anything other than misery. He *killed* slayers, he didn't love them.

*Who the fuck mentioned love?*

This time he didn't bother to fight—he snarled. Shoved the Slayer back toward the bed that smelled heaviest of her and didn't stop until the backs of her legs hit the mattress and she tumbled onto it. He didn't give her time to settle or adjust, rather started tearing at her boots—the same ones that had been smashing into his face not too long ago—and tossing them to various corners before turning his attention to her trousers.

“What—” she started to say, but he shook his head, abandoning his progress to pin her beneath him. There was a flash of surprise, and then he caught her mouth with his, furious now, both with her and himself. Most of all with the light feeling in his chest, like his heart might start pounding, or that he wanted it to. Maybe snogging her had been the wrong call, but he was in too deep to pull the brakes, and she tasted so

good. Salty and warm and alive, with air she needed to breathe crashing against him, into him, and he couldn't pull back. Couldn't help but keep kissing her, grabbing her, trailing his hands over her face and through her hair, down to her breasts, so hot against his skin. How many times had he tried to catch a glimpse down her shirt when they'd been in the middle of a really good brawl? How often had he fantasized about sinking his fangs into her there, feeling her come apart around his cock while her blood poured into his mouth and he thrust harder, trying to knock the air out of her lungs, trying to get her there again, squeezing him tight like he knew she would. Dreams never denied him. Dreams just kept fisting and clenching and demanding that he do it, pump her full of him, and it'd be a miracle if he didn't come on the spot, what with the grip of her cunt and the taste of her blood.

Only this was real. She was real. And when he ripped that flirty camisole down the middle, the breasts that spilled into his hands weren't in his imagination. Spike sucked in a breath, slowing down without really meaning to. Cradling each perfect swell against his palms, watched as his black-tipped fingers stroked over supple slayer flesh. *Buffy* flesh. Her nipples were a dusty pink, pebbled and straining for his mouth. And Buffy under him, watching him with wide green eyes full of both lust and misgiving, because she hadn't forgotten what he was or who, and she was vulnerable now. On her bed beneath him, watching as he lowered his head to one breast, gasping when his fingertips flirted over her nipple, then again when he flicked it with his tongue. Like she'd never felt that before, and that couldn't be right, but fuck, some tossers didn't know what they had. Would be just like sodding Angelus to go out of his way to not touch her the way a woman ought to be touched. Hell, the plonker would probably tell himself something like he worried it'd be too much, that he'd scare her with his passion or some other nonsense when the truth was he didn't know how to show a lady a good time if she wasn't into pain. Wasn't like Darla had been a fluttering virgin, or that she'd ever wanted to pretend. Much better for her to catch them fresh and let Angelus do what he did best.

Then college boy, out for only himself...

It wasn't natural, being offended on the Slayer's behalf.

Also wasn't natural for a vampire to have the Slayer beneath him the

way he did, to be running his tongue over her nipples, relishing the way she shook or the sounds she made, but here he was.

"Such pretty tits you have," he murmured before he could help himself and kissed his way down the slope of her breast to the one he hadn't yet tasted. "Man could spend all day here."

"R-really?"

He flicked his gaze to meet hers without thinking and felt that odd sensation in his chest do another turn. Hadn't he just been mad at her? Ripping at her clothes? Hadn't he just decided it was time to get to the shagging so he could hurry to the good part?

Fuck, what was she doing to him?

"Yeah," Spike replied, his voice lower, rougher than he would have liked. It was her eyes. And her mouth. It was her whole bloody face, kept throwing him off. Hitting him with the reality that she was really here and letting him do this to her, that all his plans were coming to fruition and if he wanted to just skip to the *death* part, all he had to do was take her head between his hands and twist to be done with her for good.

Maybe looking at her was the problem. It was an intimate thing, staring into the eyes of the woman you were about to be inside. Really seeing her and really being seen *by* her, and the fact that he was hungry for that intimacy—realized he craved it almost as much as he craved getting her around his cock—meant he needed to insist on distance. Shagging was shagging, could be as impersonal as he liked. The whole *gazing into her eyes* business was not, and he had to remember himself before he got lost in someone else.

Especially if that someone wasn't Dru.

Buffy must have seen the change, though, for some of her own defiance was back when he straightened and seized her about the shoulders, the softness and vulnerability, the glimpses of the woman who didn't know her own beauty gone. The knowledge filled him with regret then frustration at his own regret, and he flipped her over before he could examine either too closely.

"On your knees," he said roughly, staring now at the round perfection that was her arse. And it seemed he'd been right—looking at her directly had been the problem—for Spike already felt a modicum more in control. Just enough that he didn't do or say anything nancyish when

Buffy made to obey. There was defiance in her moves as well, like she wasn't convinced she ought to give in without a fight but also too lost in her own need and curiosity to say no. Spike grunted low in his throat and started ripping at her trousers anew. No interruption this time, no second-guessing, just stripping the fabric down her thighs and over her knees so that she was left in nothing but her knickers.

Her knickers with their soaked cotton, with the visible wet spot that taunted his tastebuds. It would be a right shame to get the Slayer like this and not take the time to truly savor her, so the next thing he knew, he had his face pressed against that spot and was tonguing her through the fabric. And Buffy let out a gasp he was bloody certain no one else had ever heard her give before and thrust her succulent arse back, her cunt grinding at his mouth, and Spike growled in return and nipped at her, and then it wasn't enough. He needed more than a sampler—he needed the full dish.

“Hey!” she snapped when the sound of the fabric tearing lit the air. “You could *not* destroy all my clothes, you know.”

Spike didn't answer; he was back between her legs, the ruined fabric safely in his pocket. One slayer had given him a scar, the other a coat—this souvenir would be the best. His favorite. He could already see himself in some not-so-distant Buffyless future wrapping those knickers around his prick and wanking to the memory of this moment. The memory, because this was when it was happening. The only time. It would never happen again after.

The growl had already left his throat by the time he was aware of it, but as his mouth was on her, it didn't hit the air at all. Instead, all he heard was her hard gasp, the humbling sort, as he seized her hips and danced his tongue along the slit of her cunt just in the hope she would do it again. And she did with a low moan, one mingled with shock and lust, that reached down somewhere deep inside him and squeezed, and he was moaning too. Moaning along with her, into her, lapping at her because she was the best damn thing he'd ever had in his mouth. On his face. Between his hands. Fire and spice and everything nice, searing his tongue, and he couldn't pull away from her if he wanted to. Every taste a cocktail of perfection and not enough, leaving him hungry, *desperate* for another.

“Oh my god!” she panted, wiggling that marvel of a cunt against his face with the sort of abandon that told him she probably wasn’t aware of what she was doing. “Oh my god, Spike, what—”

He treated her pussy with a light smack and sucked her clit between his lips, and that shut her up. Or, rather, made her whimper so loud the walls trembled as fresh juice drenched his mouth and chin. “I’m eating you, Slayer,” he growled, bracing his hands on her arse again, keeping her nice and spread. “Tastin’ you where you live.”

“What—why—”

“Because you’re delicious, you daft twig.”

“That... *That* is delicious?”

“Mm-hmm...” Spike sucked two fingers into his mouth, hesitated, added a third, then eased them into her pussy with slow decadence that made him growl and made her moan and clench around him as she had before. Christ, it had only been a matter of minutes and he’d already forgotten just how hot she was, how tight. He watched for a few seconds—mesmerized by the sight of his fingers working in and out of her, his cock so hard now it was pressed flush against the zipper in a way that damn near caught the skin—then withdrew and crowded in behind her, bringing his hand around so that the fingers covered in her were dangling in front of her face.

“Taste for yourself,” he rasped.

“Uhh, no. Gross.”

He could tell she wanted to sound bad and tough, but her voice was far too tremulous to pull off the effect. “Gross?” he repeated, bringing his right hand into play, finding her clit with ease and grinning when she gave a quivery moan. “Oh baby, there is nothin’ gross about this pussy. Hottest, sweetest thing I’ve ever had on my tongue. Fuck, I’m gonna be cravin’ that taste for the rest of my miserable life.”

There was that twinge again. The fear that he wasn’t just sweet-talking the girl but giving himself a glimpse of what lay ahead. But Spike once more forced the thought back, dragged his fingertips along her soft, plump lower lip. “Trust me, you’re divine,” he said, then dropped a kiss along her spine just because. “Taste how divine you are.”

For a beat, neither of them moved, and he was certain she wasn’t going to play. Then, *god yes*, Buffy’s hot mouth closed over him, sucking

his index finger in all the way. And she moaned and he moaned and rewarded her with a light tap of her clit, which made her moan again and the vibrations around his finger were heaven. Then she released him, slowly, and moved to the next. Once more sucking him in all the way, though this time bringing her tongue into play, and it was so easy to imagine her doing that to his cock, he could have sworn he felt the echo along his shaft. He *wanted* to. How pretty she would look on her knees, blinking those doe green eyes up at him as she worked her mouth down his length, swallowing him into that bloody inferno until he was pressed against the back of her throat. Holding his gaze as she moved back, dragging her lips along his cock, the hot wet feel of her, her tongue, and Buffy was sucking his ring finger into her mouth now and he wanted to cry or scream or shove her face to the mattress or just sodding all of it. There was no fast way to work her out of his system—no walking away from this feeling completely satisfied, even if he drained her dry. He'd always wonder, always think, always wish he'd had just a little more time.

"That," Buffy panted a second later, thankfully jarring him out of his depressing thoughts and back to the present. Back to her and the fact that he had this, he had *now*, and not to bloody waste it. "That wasn't...as gross as I thought it'd be."

"Wouldn't bloody kill you to admit I'm right once in a while."

"I dunno. Better not risk it."

Spike barked a laugh before he could help himself but sobered almost immediately when, once more, he again remembered what he planned to do with her after this little interlude. Suddenly, joking about her death had lost all its punch and he was mad at himself all over again. He pushed his hand to her back until she understood he meant her to press her face to the mattress, took one last lick of her succulent cunt, then began whipping at his belt to free his prick. The sound was naked against the air, making his throat go tight. Then he was guiding his cock up and down her wet slit, rolling his eyes back at that sensation alone, teasing her and himself and still not enough. Never enough. There would be no more of this, no more of her, and he had to make it count.

"Unh..." Buffy rolled her hips back, gasping when the movement sent his cock slipping along her folds and over her clit. "You planning on doing anything with that or are you just wasting my time?"

And goddamn her, his heart swelled.

*Bossy bitch.*

"You want this cock, Slayer?" Spike dragged himself to the mouth of her pussy, hissed at the contact.

"I want you to put up or shut up."

"Best you find something to hold onto."

She took him to heart, wrapping those lethal hands of hers around the wooden posts that made up her headboard. He watched her fingers circle them, watched the knuckles go tense, and that was all he needed. Then, *fuck yes*, the tip had disappeared inside her, and she was so hot she was perfect and so wet there was nothing for him to do but keep pushing, keep watching as she swallowed his prick inch by inch. Watch a part of him disappear into all of her, and she gave a loud moan and rolled back, and he pushed forward, and it was so good. The friction, the heat, the way she clamped hard around him—god, so much better than his fingers—and the little sound she made when he drew back and watched his cock, now drenched with her, come back into view.

"Is that all you got?" she asked, her voice rough.

And despite himself, despite the war inside, Spike grinned. She wanted to see what he had? He'd give her a preview. Starting with a hard, open-hand smack against her biteable arse, and her gasp of surprise turned into another moan, louder, and he started pounding into her. Not nice. Not polite. Not candles and flowers and whatever else the unimaginative sods of her past had done. A rough, bruising rhythm that had her snapping her hips and crying out every time he thrust his cock home, had the bed rattling, springs whining, the bloody walls trembling, had his balls slapping her soaked flesh, and her scent became entwined with his, and it was so delicious he could have wept. Wanted to, in fact, which just pissed him off so he fucked her harder.

"This what you had in mind?" he rasped, and smacked her arse again just because he could. Her cunt clenched tighter around him on reflex and another surge of wetness drenched his cock, and he pictured himself in her mouth again. Watching as she licked up all the juice she'd soaked him with, his hand wrapped around her hair, her eyes wide and defiant and on him, and his anger swelled once more as he knew he couldn't have that. Couldn't have her. Not really. Not beyond this.

Buffy turned her head to catch his gaze. "This all you got?" she said again.

Spike dug his fingers hard into her hips and slammed her back onto his dick. "You like it to hurt, baby? I can make it hurt."

"I just...*unmb*..." She squeezed her eyes shut, a look of almost primal bliss on her face, and even though that alone immediately belied her words, it didn't make him crave them any less. "Just want you to do what you promised."

In spite of himself, in spite of his anger and resentment and the growing dread about how this would end, he smirked. There would never be another one like her. "Be a love and try not to scream too loud when I make you come," he replied, sliding his fingers around her hip now, over sweat-laced flesh until he was stroking her wet labia. "Got sensitive ears, you know."

"Not...screaming."

Spike leaned forward, shifting inside of her, and she whimpered and it was so sweet—sweeter still knowing she didn't mean it. Then he had her clit under his finger, a light tease that had her trembling anew. Trembling then tensing and tightening everywhere, and *fuck*, she was amazing. The way she felt and the way she fought, the way she smelled and the way she tasted, the way she hated him with her body while loving him at the same time. Twisted as that was, as they were together. And he pushed and thrust and fucked and she bucked and reared and took him in deep, so deep, and he'd been right, this was the way to do it. With her eyes safely facing forward so he didn't lose himself in them or her little gasps or anything else that might make the impending pain even worse.

He could do it now. Drag her back, pull her into his lap, bounce her on his cock as he brushed her damp hair out of the way and sank his fangs where they belonged. Then he'd get to taste her blood as her orgasm claimed her, and she'd just never want him to stop drinking and he never would. Not until there was nothing left.

Until all this wonderful life, this warmth, this everything was gone forever.

And that was it. The moment it clicked—the moment everything clicked. Buried balls deep inside the Slayer, his head swimming in the



moans he was wringing through her lips, her pussy clasp around him, Spike realized the awful truth about himself.

He didn't want to kill her.

He, *Spike*, didn't *want* to kill the Slayer.

Because Dru was right. Bloody hell, why was Dru *always* right?

The realization lived in his head for a second, maybe less than that, before Buffy reared her head back with enough force it smashed into his own and knocked him out of her on his arse and nearly off the bed itself. Something cracked and broke, and then she was on him again, sinking back onto him with a moan and holding something sharp to his chest.

Spike blinked, not sure what the hell had happened. Only that Buffy was astride him, working herself up and down his cock, panting as her luscious tits swayed with every bounce, and behind her were the ruined remains of the headboard she had destroyed to secure the sliver of wood she now held above his heart.

The little bitch had turned on him.

Fuck, he really was in love with her.

"Not bad, Slayer," Spike said, and dragged his tongue over his teeth, clutching at her hips again. Desperate now, hungry for her orgasm. Needing to know what it felt like when a slayer, when *Buffy*, came all over his cock. "Didn't know you had it in you. But aren't you forgettin' something?"

Buffy shook her hair out of her face, the light leaking in through the shades he'd closed striking her in a way that made her appear divine in every sense of the word. "What's that?"

He smirked and held up his hand—the one bearing the ring.

Except the ring wasn't there.

Spike had a second, maybe two, to stare at his hand in utter shock before Buffy shoved him back to the mattress, rolling her hips in a motion. And squeezing him again so nice his eyes nearly went cross-eyed. *Did* drop his head back with a long sigh, thrusting up and almost, just for a second, not giving a fuck about the stake she'd fashioned or the ring she'd somehow stolen. Lost instead in what it felt like to have her on him like this, riding him, knowing she could kill him at any second. That perhaps she meant to. That Buffy had let him fuck her to get this close. He couldn't even be mad about it. What a bloody brilliant way to go.

It had been when he'd insisted she suck on his fingers, he realized. That had to be it. She'd seized the advantage as any good slayer would and he hadn't felt a thing, lost as he had been in the moment. In this. In *her*. Her heat. Her fire. Her utter perfection. That little almost-grin, almost-snarl twisting her lips, how her eyes were alight, her cunt so tight, the sounds that burst through her like she couldn't quite help herself. It was utter bliss—*she* was utter bliss, and he had been too fixated on her to notice she was playing a different game. The same one he was, only she was better at it.

Of course she was. She was the Slayer.

She was Buffy.

"You gonna do it like this, love?" he asked, grinning up at her. Couldn't help it. The part of him insisting on anger was drowned out by the part that was impressed. Even proud. "Nice of you to let me go with a smile on my face. But do you think you can really finish me off?"

Buffy didn't respond, just studied him, licking her lips, and she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Skin all flushed, her hair clinging to her face and shoulders, sweat sliding between her breasts, her strong legs on either side of his, her perfect pussy swallowing his cock at a rhythm. If he'd thought the view was good before, it had nothing on this. And it was so obvious to him in that moment that he loved her, that he had loved her perhaps from the start, that he just wanted to laugh at himself for only seeing it now. Like this. For being so thick that it took the girl fucking him to literal death before he understood.

He took her hips again, both surprised and not when she didn't blink. Pressed upward just a bit so the tip of her makeshift stake dug into his skin. And yes, he wasn't imagining it. The hitch in her breath or the widening of her eyes, or how she started riding him harder, leaning into him as he helped guide her in increasing frenetic thrusts, and he hoped she did it soon if she was going to do it at all because there was no coming back from this. No life after Buffy. No living with the knowledge that he was lost for her.

"Just let me feel it," he whispered. "Wanna feel you come."

The hand holding the stake started to tremble. And maybe her lip did too. It was hard to tell.

And he couldn't stop talking if he tried.

“You’re perfect. You’re sunshine. You’re a fucking goddess.”

Buffy barked a sob that was half ecstasy, half something else, and her eyes took on a shine that looked like tears but couldn’t be.

And he had a choice to make and only a second to make it.

The worst she could do was kill him.

But she didn’t.



SOMETIMES HE WISHED SHE HAD.

Sometimes it seemed dying at that moment, dusting with this impossible, terrible knowledge would have been the less painful path. Instead, he had this. Living with the understanding of who he was and who he wasn’t, the curse that came with being sick with love for someone who could never love him back...

Well, it certainly put those years with Dru into fresh perspective. She might not have loved him the way he’d loved her, but she had cared. Of that there had never been any doubt.

Buffy was something else. Not even a dream, really. A nightmare. A glorious, never-ending nightmare from which he would never awake.

It had been in those last minutes together. He’d thought, even with the burning love inside of him, fresh and searing, he might be able to still save himself. Sink his fangs into her, ring or no ring, and drain her before she could hollow him out more than she had already. There had been hesitation in her eyes, her improvised stake still there against his chest but not digging in anymore, for she had been too lost to it, whimpering and clenching and taking her pleasure, and he’d slid his fingers between them again so that he grazed her clit every time her pussy swallowed him whole, and she’d started to shake, tremble, and that had been enough. Spike had arched off his back, seizing the wrist holding the stake and squeezing until she dropped it, and the next second she had her arms around his neck and they had been kissing. Hot, honest kisses that tasted like triumph and failure all at once, her legs locking around his waist, her thrusts hurried as she moved toward the climax she had always deserved but never experienced, and kissing him like he was air, life, when he was everything she wasn’t. And that had been the moment.

He'd shifted into his monster face without pulling his lips from hers. Seconds, then, to make the decision to save himself. She hadn't even balked when he'd started dragging his mouth down her hot neck, just tightened her arms around him, tightened everything, soaking his cock with every plunge, and then he'd been at the crucial point. The place that could spell her end. Never had Buffy been more vulnerable for him—not even that night when she'd lost her head and gone all damsel on him—and he'd licked the salt from her skin and made the choice, the snap decision, and sliced his way home.

And that had been the end for him. And the beginning. Buffy had let out a raw, feral cry, clutching him tighter, holding him to her, and her blood had poured into his mouth, so rich and hot and *her*, and he'd whimpered and growled as she spasmed wildly around his cock, the most exquisite almost-pain he'd ever experienced. Then he'd been jetting into her, his spine tingling and his balls tingling and everything tingling as he filled her with him, and drinking and drinking until he knew, realized, that taking more would mean the end of this. Of her. That the barren wasteland of a Buffyless world would be the one he stepped back into after he pulled out of her. And the pain that had accompanied that thought had burst through him with enough force to make him crave dust, and he'd pulled away while she was still trembling. Licked the place he'd bitten her, trembling himself and wishing these few blissful seconds would last forever. It would be worth it—losing Dru, losing the ring, losing himself if he could stay with Buffy, just like that, for the rest of eternity.

That was when the nightmare had set in—the knowledge that what he wanted was out there but could never be his.

The next stretch after that remained a blur, exacerbated by pain and panic. Not that he had taken too much—he knew he hadn't, for Buffy had given him a sleepy, drunken smile when he'd pulled his fangs away. She'd even kissed him again, a soft kiss that would have broken his heart if it hadn't been shattered already. And he'd known he had to go, get out of there right bloody then, before her head cleared enough for her to remember who he was and that she hated him. For her to switch back into the Slayer rather than Buffy, this interlude an aberration, a pocket of reality they could never revisit.

So he'd lifted her off his cock, the wet *plop* of the action emblazoned in his head, as well as the frown that had immediately chased away her happy, sated smile. He'd pushed her onto her back and she hadn't fought, tucked her under the blankets, all while trying to keep from shattering, then set to straightening himself up, which hadn't taken much, as he'd only undone his jeans. Never even gotten to feel her skin-to-skin.

If he'd known he loved her at the start...

Well, he probably wouldn't have gotten as far as he had. He'd needed hate for that.

Thankfully, the shadows had grown long enough by then that he hadn't had to worry about going up in a bloody blaze of glory as he'd made his escape. In the days that had followed, he'd wondered more than once if he ought to have taken advantage of her exhaustion to search the room for the gem—there hadn't been many places she could have stashed it, regardless of how distracted he'd been, but he'd worried about the little witch coming back and discovering Buffy in a post-coital coma, aided by blood loss, and those fresh bite marks on her throat. He'd also thought it possible the stubborn bint might have just swallowed the ring for safekeeping—she had pulled it off with her teeth, after all, and he wouldn't have put it past her. So he'd gone, not without a last, lingering look at the woman who would never love him, and slipped out.

This time it would be for good, he'd told himself. No more returning to Sunnydale after that. Time to man up and admit that Buffy had truly defeated him as no slayer ever had or would.

Spike was good about keeping the promises he made to others—the ones he truly meant, at least. The ones he made to himself were a different story and always had been. Which was how, not even a month later, he found himself barreling back into the best and worst place on earth—over the *Welcome to Sunnydale* sign, as per tradition—with no bleeding idea what he meant to do or where he meant to go.

Except to see her.

He *had* to see her.

He parked the DeSoto downtown and stepped out into the night amid the clueless denizens of the hellmouth, those hurrying along to grab this or that in preparation for the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday. The one America loved to retrofit to their own bollocks mythology. He

thought, as he had so often over the last few weeks, about picking off one of the weaker gazelles to ease the rumblings in his belly, but the thought died a quick death.

If only the Slayer had had the courtesy to do the same thing before it had become too late. Before she'd domesticated a wild animal without meaning to, and with no intention of tending to its needs. Just muzzled it and sent it off back into the wild—and yeah, sure, he'd been the one who had done the leaving and all, but she wasn't getting out of claiming her share of the responsibility. It was her fault that he couldn't even hunt anymore without her face flashing through his mind. The thought, bloody ludicrous as it was, that *this would hurt Buffy* playing through his head on sodding repeat, even though he knew it wasn't true. Buffy couldn't care less about what he did so long as he did it well away from people she had a means of protecting. There was no way for her to have ever known about the bird in San Antonio, the one he'd singled out specifically because of the way the light had hit her hair and how he'd been just sauced enough to nearly convince himself she bore a passing resemblance to a certain blonde. He'd done the seduction right, gotten the poor little doe off and away from her chums, and had nearly drained her past the point of no return before he'd thought of *her* and he'd felt what could only be called shame pulse hard behind his breastbone.

And it had been wrong, that shame. Wrong to feel anything other than pure animal satisfaction at having a full stomach and a fresh corpse at his feet. So he couldn't kill the Slayer, but that didn't mean he couldn't get his jollies offing birds in her likeness. Hell, for all he knew, that was the secret to getting over the disease she'd given him. Immunity built up through repeated exposure, or some other rot. He was a vampire and people were *food* and if he wasn't going to even be a monster when no one was looking then what sort of bastardization of a demon was he?

The shame had filled him, infuriated him, made him want to off the girl just to prove he could.

But he hadn't. And Buffy was the reason.

Buffy was the reason for everything. Why he couldn't sleep, couldn't eat properly—pig's blood purchased from a butcher he hadn't even had the decency to kill could not, by any reasonable accounts, be called *proper*—couldn't close his eyes without seeing her. Feeling her.

Tasting the ghost of her on his tongue. Reliving the stolen moments they'd had as though they were all he had to live for anymore, and in some ways, it was worse than it would have been if he had managed to kill the bitch after all. At least then he would have known the reason he couldn't have what he wanted was because what he wanted no longer existed.

He wouldn't be back here in Sunnyhell, pointedly *not* eating the pedestrians who made it embarrassingly easy for the town's vampire population to fill their bellies. He wouldn't be heading out to the cemeteries, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Slayer between headstones. See her in action, all that beauty and strength molded into the ultimate weapon, giving her the perfect place to conceal who she was underneath it all.

That was Buffy, hiding in plain sight. Same as he had been every day his entire life. Even when he'd thought he hadn't.

Spike heaved a sigh and stopped once he reached the entrance gate to Sunnydale Cemetery, delving a hand into his pocket for his smokes. He'd been cognizant enough to snatch a newspaper before he'd left the main thoroughfare to give the obits a cursory glance, see if any in particular screamed *vampire* to him, and it being Sunnydale, the undead population was proud to deliver. From experience, he knew the Slayer would start her patrols where the graves were the freshest and work her way out, and if he played his cards right, he was in for a hell of a show. An aggravating show, mind, and a study in sexual frustration, but a good time nonetheless.

All he had to do was pluck up the nerve to approach her in a way that wouldn't have her reaching for her stake. Assuming such a way even existed. He couldn't imagine that the story she'd come up with to justify what had happened in her dorm room was all that flattering.

He made his way through three ciggies before anything interesting happened. A faint rustling reached his ear, the sort that usually precipitated a fledgling's fight to open air, and his body came to life with the warning buzz of a nearby predator. She was close—not close enough to smell but enough to sense, and all of him tightened with nerves and anticipation.

Then several things happened.

Spike exploded into motion without knowing why until his fist connected with a scowling human face hidden underneath about a pound of camouflage warpaint. From his left, someone yelled, “Hold him!” and an electric whine cut through the night. And Spike had no idea what was causing the sound but was certain he didn’t want to find out. He snarled threw off the pair of beefy hands that tried to seize him around the shoulders, and was just about to burst out his fangs and give these gits the thrashing they so deserved when her scent filled his nostrils and something inside of him quieted.

From there, everything went fast. Bodies flying, crashing into mausoleums, to the ground, while the men—there were four of them—screamed instructions at each other. Then Buffy was in front of Spike, and he didn’t have time to say anything, to even take in her expression, before she had her hand clamped around his wrist and was pulling him after her at a pace that nearly had him forgetting he didn’t need to actually pant. The ground rushed under his legs and the scenery around him melted into little more than a blur of grays and greens, and he thought about barking at her to stop, slow down, or trying to yank his arm away just to prove he could, but all of that died in his throat because Buffy had saved his arse and *what did that mean?*

Not that he couldn’t have saved himself, mind. He just hadn’t gotten around to it yet. Four human gits in army makeup could hardly be called a threat.

At last, Buffy seemed satisfied that she had put enough distance between them and the blokes playing dress-up and slowed from a run to a brisk walk. Still, she didn’t turn to him. Didn’t acknowledge him when he said, “Buffy?” rather firmed her grip on him as though to preempt any escape attempt and kept her focus ahead.

“Slayer—”

Buffy squeezed his wrist with enough force his bones whined in protest. And that was it—enough. He might be in love with the bitch, but he was still his own man.

“Will you just hold on a second?” he snapped, digging his heels into the ground and yanking his arm free. “What the bloody hell was that?”

She whirled around, her eyes set into the glare that he knew so well, and that was enough to knock him right off whatever the hell he’d been



about to say. Everything had happened so fast, and he didn't understand most of it. Only that he'd been dreaming of this moment for weeks—ever since he'd closed her dorm room door behind him—and suddenly it was here. *She* was here. As beautiful as in his memories, only a thousand times more so because it was real. Her eyes, bright with anger, her hair, windswept from the race through the cemeteries, and her neck, with the mark he'd left there on display for the world to see. Spike studied it the longest, mouth watering and his fangs, even retracted, tingling. God, to taste her again...

"I'm waiting," Buffy said, crossing her arms.

He blinked and dragged his gaze back up to hers. "For what?"

"The reason you're about to give me. The 'why I shouldn't kill you right here for the stunt you pulled' reason."

Spike straightened, threw a glance over his shoulder. "Considerin' you just went to a load of trouble to save my neck from those... What were they?"

"Commando guys," she replied in a bored tone. "Human, from what we know, and a massive pain in my ass, which you should know something about."

She likely didn't mean for him to think about smacking that pretty arse of hers, but he couldn't exactly help where his mind went. Buffy on all fours, her cunt wrapped tight around him, gasping every time his palm struck her flesh. Just the memory had his cock twitching.

"Human, eh?" he said, shaking his head to loosen the memory. "That sounds like the sort of problem you might need a monster to help solve."

"We're not killing anyone, and you haven't answered my question."

"What was your question?"

Buffy narrowed her eyes, which didn't help the situation behind his fly at all. She was so gorgeous when she was miffed. "What are you doing in my town? *Again?*"

"I go where I want," he replied, swelling up. Seemed the part of him that had been nervous about seeing her, the *William* part, had been back with those commando gits. Now that he was here in front of her, the path forward seemed easy. "Free country, or so you Yanks love to claim."

"You had to know what would happen if you showed your face around here again."

Spike smirked and stepped forward, letting his eyes wander down her body. He didn't have much to regret about the afternoon they'd spent together, but he'd never quite forgiven himself for missing the opportunity to feel her skin-to-skin. That would be the first thing he'd rectify. The next would be finding out just exactly the sort of magic that mouth of hers could perform when she wasn't spitting nails at him. He imagined there would be a lot of fight in that too, teeth scraping and tongue striking, and *fuck*, it would be as brilliant as everything else with her had been.

"This face? Was hopin' you'd find a spot for it between your legs, actually," he said, and wagged his tongue at her so she couldn't miss his meaning.

From the fist she smashed into his face, she hadn't.

"You're disgusting," Buffy spat, her voice shaking and her eyes hard. "You think it works like that? You can just...just...come back to town after weeks and we...what? Pick up where we left off? That was a one-time deal that I was insane to have made in the first place, but the fact that you think it meant anything makes you even more insane."

Spike dabbed at his nose, surprised to discover it wasn't bleeding. "Prefer the word *optimistic*, myself."

"You bit me."

"I'm a vampire, aren't I? That's what we do."

Buffy rushed toward him again and shoved him hard enough he staggered back against a mausoleum. "You fucked me and bit me and just left."

"Well, what the bleeding hell did you expect, Slayer?" Spike snapped back, pushing forward to regain some territory. "I was there to kill you. That was the plan. Always the sodding plan. And I could have. I had you."

"I had you too!"

"Yeah, well, you didn't do it."

"Neither did you!"

"Right!" This was fast becoming the strangest argument he'd ever had—even in all his years with Dru, he'd never been in a fight where everyone agreed with each other. "I didn't kill you. And forgive me for assumin' you wouldn't be too happy to see me when you woke up."

Suppose you're tellin' me you wouldn't have tried to stake me to save face?"

"And why would I need to save face?"

"Because the Big Bad beat you and you knew it."

Buffy came at him again, this time with a kick, but he caught her foot before it could connect with his chest and leveraged his hold on her to yank her close. She twisted away almost at once but not nearly with the force it would take to make him believe she really wanted free. The Slayer could level the whole bloody graveyard if she fancied—the fact that she'd dragged him here, was demanding answers at all, told him that he hadn't been the fool he'd feared in coming back. If she wanted him dead, he'd be dust already.

"No need to get touchy," he said, bobbing away when she launched at him again. "Don't hear me complainin' about havin' lost the gem."

"Is that why you're back?" Buffy spat. "The gem?"

"Not that thick, love. Wager you've already destroyed the sodding thing." Or sent it to Angel. He didn't want to say that, though. Didn't want to hear her confirm it and wrestle with what it meant that her ex could nearly end the world and kill all her friends while doing it and she'd still trust him with something that would make him indestructible. That sort of devotion was what Dru had specialized in for over a century, and while Spike was resigned to the fact that he was in love with yet another of Angelus's supplicants, he didn't have to torture himself with the information. Not yet, anyway. Not before he'd had the chance to win the girl for himself.

He hadn't been trying before. He would now.

"Then why?" Buffy asked, and maybe it was his imagination, but she sounded a bit breathless. "Why come back here at all? If it's to kill the Slayer, sorry. You had your chance. I won't be that stupid again."

"What do you wanna hear?"

"The truth would be nice."

"The truth." Spike stared at her for a long moment before sighing and looking to the grass between them, dropping his shoulders. He could draw this out—keep playing—but he didn't want to play anymore. He'd already played himself as long as he'd waited before giving in to the siren song that was Buffy Summers. Yeah, he'd bested her the day in her room,

but she was the one who had crawled inside of him and refused to leave, and he was tired of pretending like she hadn't won all along. "Which truth would that be? That you're the first thing I think about when I wake up and the last thing I think about before I get some kip?"

Buffy's face fell, her eyes going wide. But she didn't speak.

"Or that I haven't killed anyone since I left you? Not even to eat?"

"You haven't murdered anyone lately and you want a cookie? Is that supposed to impress me?" The words had a bite that didn't match her voice.

"Again, love, forgettin' I'm a vampire. Not exactly murder where we're concerned. More survival."

"Yes, *survival*. Like you never go out of your way to kill people just because?"

Spike rolled his eyes, gritted his teeth. "It's what I'm supposed to do! Evil, and all. Doesn't it matter that I'm trying? That *you* make me want to try?"

There was a sharp retort at the ready, he could tell, but she didn't let it fly. Instead, she frowned, the hardness in her eyes softening. No, not softening. Breaking. As though she were trapped under an invisible weight she was no longer interested in trying to support. It transformed everything about her in a matter of seconds, and he knew, gut-clenching, that he was the reason.

"What do you want, Spike?" Buffy asked quietly, all trace of bite gone. "If it's the gem, I—"

"It's not the gem. Fuck the bloody gem. I came back for you."

"Me. And here I thought I wasn't worth a second go."

The words were a blow, and an effective one, as he didn't know how to respond. Tell her he'd been a prat, yeah, that he'd meant to throw her off her game just for the pleasure of killing her, and how he hadn't realized that wasn't what he really wanted until he'd been buried to the hilt inside her cunt. And even then he'd fought it because what vampire wouldn't, knowing what it meant? Knowing what was at stake? How irrevocably his life had changed?

"You unmade me, Summers," he said at length, spreading his arms before letting them fall against his sides. "Dunno what more to tell you. I'm here because I think I'm yours."

“You think?”

“Believe me, not somethin’ I was too keen on once I wised up. Bloody disgrace, is what it is.”

Buffy pressed her lips together, looking him up and down, her expression not betraying a thing. Not the way her body did. The heart that was suddenly pounding, the rush of blood beneath her skin, how she somehow relaxed and tensed at the same time, the wheels in her head turning so loudly he could almost hear them, if not the thoughts themselves.

When she met his eyes again, though, something had been decided.

“I killed one boyfriend,” she said. “And practice makes perfect, so if you give me a reason, do not think I’ll hesitate to do it again.”

If it could have, his heart would have jumped. “I won’t give you a reason,” he whispered. “I bloody swear it. I’ll—”

“Also,” Buffy continued loudly, speaking over him, “since you’re not killing people anymore, I bet you have all kinds of pent-up energy. Guess what, Spike? You still get to fight, but demons and other vampires, and you’re officially volunteering to be on the front line between the world and whatever monster of the year is trying to end it.”

He grinned in spite of himself. “That’ll be hell on my reputation.”

“Do you care?”

“Not a lick.”

“Good. And speaking of licking...” She stepped toward him, bringing all her wonderful warmth that much closer. Making him itch to touch her and never stop. “You’ll be doing that a lot. Lots of licking. I liked that. And if you’re very good, maybe I’ll lick back.”

A low groan rumbled through his throat. “Slayer...”

“And if you ever make me wake up alone again, I will find some creative, cruel means of torturing you that will have you begging for mercy.”

He could cry. She truly was the perfect woman. The only one who could set his world aflame.

“Those are the terms,” Buffy said, and now she was close enough to breathe in, her breasts against his chest, and *Christ*, she wasn’t wearing a bra. She *wasn’t* wearing a bra, but she was wearing something else. Some-

thing he felt through the fabric of her shirt, small and metallic, and he knew what it was at once.

The gem. Buffy hadn't destroyed it. Hadn't sent it off to Angel. She'd been wearing it around her neck this whole time.

But at the moment, he didn't care about that. All he cared about was what separated her supple flesh from his hands and mouth. What she needed to hear to know he meant every word he'd said and then some.

"Kind of a tall order, Spike. Working alongside the Slayer, saving the world... Not many men can handle it. Can you?"

Spike nodded hard, forced himself to speak through a throat gone tight. "I swear it."

"Make me believe it. Make me believe *you*."

"I will."

She studied him for a long beat, then nodded. "Okay. I'm satisfied. For now."

Then her mouth was on him, hot and sweet and biting and fire, and he loved her so much he could burst with it.

And it didn't matter that he hadn't said the words—he would in his own time. Nor did it matter that it seemed unlikely he'd hear them back. But if ever the day arrived that she gave him the gem of her own volition, that would be enough. He'd know he had succeeded. He'd know she loved him too.

Until then, he'd just have to try to earn it.