

# CUPIDITY

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HOLLY DENISE





“TOP of the afternoon to you. How goes the world through the eyes of the Buff?”

Buffy offered a half-hearted smile as she took a seat at their customary cafeteria table. “Same old,” she replied, picking at her paper lunch bag. “I assume you two had fun Bronzing-it last night while I was reaping the benefits of Watcher orders?”

The reaction was instantaneous. Willow and Xander exchanged comical, not-at-all-subtle looks and began shaking their heads.

“It really wasn't that much fun,” Willow said in her best ‘I-promise-I’m-not-lying’ voice. “I mean, not as in the entire...‘oh, we do this every night.’ To have a reason to stay at home...very cool.” She paused. “Have you spoken with Giles since the ‘stay-inage’ orders of yesterday? And idea on what—”

“No, not yet,” Buffy retorted, her tone harsher than she intended. Her temper rolled on an exceptionally short yoyo as of the recent. “Sorry, Will. He doesn't seem too wigged as of the current. When he loses his cool, that's when I'll go into panic mode.”

That was a lie, but she found no point in worrying her friends any more than necessary.

“Let's not focus on thoughts of unhappiness,” Xander said, then

began rubbing his hands. "After all, big eighteen coming up. Outlandish birthday plans, anyone?"

Buffy grinned in spite of herself. "I thought I told you...quiet reflection is the theme for this year's Slayerfest. Birthdays in the Land of Buffy don't have a history of resulting in hugs and puppies. Big yay for quiet reflection."

"Oh, come on," he prodded, flashing a puppy smile. "I just know there's a party weasel buried in there somewhere. Slip into your fun shoes and get yourself a noisemaker. If your dad's gonna be a no-show for skating, I say Wills and I take it upon ourselves to entertain the Buff."

She sighed at that. Though it was no secret, she didn't appreciate being reminded of her father's shortcomings. "Thanks for the thought, Xan," she retorted. "But I think I'm covered. I'll make Giles take me or something. He owes me."

"How you figure?"

"World savage. He can spare one night to treat me. Especially when I'm feeling this..." She made a face. "Lethargic."

Willow frowned and leaned forward. "I'm sure it'll wear off soon," she said, not in her 'I-promise-I'm-not-lying' voice, thankfully, though her tone didn't inspire much confidence. "I mean...it has to, right?"

Buffy forced a nod. "Yeah. Like I said... No major Gilesy wiggage in action right now. I should keep my cool. Be mature about this."

"About losing your power?"

The words were a punch to the gut, and suddenly, she didn't have the strength to keep her brave face in place anymore. Buffy whimpered and dropped said face into her waiting hands, giving in to the sense of doom that had been following her since her powers first went all hinky.

Willow lurched forward, eyes wide. "Ohhh! I didn't mean that... I...you're going to get your powers back. I mean...you have to! You're the Slayer. No sense slaying without...slayage powers, right? You're probably just...worn out or something. And...no worrying from Giles, remember? I mean, you're right. If Giles loses his easily-wiggled-

British-cool, then yeah. Panicky is perfectly acceptable and...but Buffy...you're going to get your powers back. I mean, you have to. How else can you slay?"

"Faith," she pointed out.

"Pshaw." Willow rolled her eyes. "The slayer-slut-bomb?"

"Well, she was the one they tapped."

Still, sense was not being made. No sense at all. Not with her friends, and certainly not with her Watcher. And with as much as she tried to force her thoughts to greener pastures, her mind kept dragging her back to the frightening reality that she might never get her powers back.

God, she didn't know what she would do. Despite the burden of Slayerhood and all the heartache and stress that came with it, she couldn't imagine a world without her strength. Which, yes, made her feel like the biggest hypocrite in the universe since every free second she'd had since being Chosen had been spent bemoaning the fact. The last few days, though, had taught her that getting what you want royally sucked. It wasn't like she could just unknow everything she'd discovered about the actual world or smother her own burning need to be out there in the thick of it.

There would be no rest. Not in this lifetime.

Willow waved a hand in front of her face. "Buffy? You sure you're all right?"

She blinked and forced a smile. "Yeah. I'll be fine. Just...you know..."

"Worried?"

She nodded. "Well...it's not exactly something that's easy to let go of."

"It'll pass. It has to."

Willow's tone, however, was clouded with doubt. And that doubt followed Buffy the rest of the day. Through class, through bluffing her way through homework, and finally to the library, where Giles would almost assuredly tell her that there was nothing to do but wait.

And because she had no other choice, she'd do just that.

Buffy sighed and dropped her belongings into a chair. "Giles?"

Her Watcher appeared on prompt, popping out from the office. "Ah. Good afternoon. Feeling any better?"

She shook her head and sighed again, lifting herself into the table. "Nada. Any luck with the research?"

If she hadn't been looking at him she might have missed it, but she didn't. Something flickered across his face. Something that meant nothing good. But she blinked and it was gone, and she wasn't sure she could trust that she'd seen it in the first place. Her instincts weren't exactly sharp.

"No," Giles said.

Disappointment filled her whole. "Didn't figure."

"I still believe that all you need is rest."

Buffy snickered. "Sure. Make it sound all simple. Like resting is an option. I had a dream last night that I was walking through the graveyard at night and..." Buffy trailed off; she didn't need to elaborate. "But then the vamps dressed in drag and sang Broadway show tunes. It kinda took away from the big picture."

"Well," Giles said. "I have decided that... Given everything, you deserve a night to yourself. Your mother called and she supports my taking you to the ice show this evening."

Buffy blinked. "Seriously? I mean...you do realize that cotton candy and assorted souvenirs of all types will be included? Not to mention the event itself."

The look on the Watcher's face dimmed softly, a sort of fond reflection. "Your mother..." he repeated, an eyebrow flickering in discomfort. She couldn't blame him. After all, not much time had passed since they were making out like horny teenagers. "She...she said that she had offered to take you but...understandably, you consider it more of a...erm..."

He wanted to say 'fatherly responsibility.' That enough was clear in his eyes. It was a fair statement. Over the past three years, he had marked the bar as more of a parent than her biological dad could ever hope to touch. Buffy smiled her gratitude. "Great. So you're taking me. As in the...really?"

"Yes, I believe we have covered that." Giles stuffed his hands into

his pockets. "You deserve it, after everything. With what you're going through. What time do these things normally begin?"

"Seven, but we'll wanna get there early." She wriggled in excitement. It was so good to feel something other than worry. "Ohhh, thank you so much!"

He nodded with a small smile. "Of course. But first—"

"Slayer trainy-ness. Gotcha. 'Course, you...all work and no play."

"All things considered, I would call that an unfair conclusion."

She grinned. "I really appreciate this, Giles. I mean... Mom's right. I didn't mean to throw it in her face, but it really is a...something you do with..." At that, she cast her eyes down, feeling suddenly awkward. "Well, you get it."

"I do." Giles offered a small smile. "Now, I believe we have a date with some stones."

Buffy gave the obligatory eye-roll but kept her quips to herself. Giles had earned a little reprieve from her sassy self. She knew how much he would hate the thing he was willingly taking her to tonight.

So she trained. At least staring at the weird stones didn't put her non-existent slayer muscles to the test.

And maybe tonight, she could get away with not worrying about whether or not those slayer muscles would ever harden again.

GILES HAD RECOMMENDED that she dress sensibly in case she came across trouble of the fanged kind, but without strength, dressing *sensibly* meant dressing for an outing, and not patrol. Since her missing strength didn't seem likely to rebound within the new few hours, she figured it was safe to cash in her chips and thoroughly isolate herself from the Slayer-persona. After all, without the power, acting the part seemed rather futile. And if she was going to be average-citizen Buffy from now on, she might as well embrace her inner damsel.

The thought gave her chills, but Buffy forced her mind elsewhere. There would be no doom-and-gloom over her uncertain future tonight. Tonight, she was determined to forget that demons existed; that she had been hand-picked by the Powers to stop them, and that the Powers had evidently decided to fire her. Tonight was about the all-around birthday celebration. Once again, her dad had cancelled, but it didn't matter because Giles was there.

Giles, who she could actually rely on. Thank god for him.

Her mom flashed a smile as Buffy descended the stairs. "Are my eyes deceiving me?" she asked. "Or is my daughter wearing a skirt?"

Buffy rolled her eyes but grinned just the same. "I do have a collection of skirts, you know."

"It's just such a rare occurrence to see you in one."

"You gave me a three-hour lecture about not patrolling in skirts."

"Well, honey, those kicks you do leave little to the imagination." She crossed her arms and smiled. "You look lovely, Buffy. I just know you're going to have a great time tonight."

Buffy nodded. "Well...ice. Skating. Pretty regular, if you consider the full. I just... I'm glad he's coming."

"He's like a father to you," she observed. "You deserve this. One night from slaying demons."

The smile on her face faded. "Yeah. One night."

Buffy had yet to confide her fears in her mother. The woman was still reeling from the bombshell that was Slayerhood—to take it back now was borderline cruelty. Joyce had seen so much in just a few weeks. Furthermore, she would greet the news a blessing in disguise, and Buffy wasn't sure she could handle that just yet.

The foyer suddenly filled with headlights. "Ohhh...that's Giles! Gotta jet."

"Have fun, sweetie!"

"Will! Love you!"

Before Joyce could get another word out, Buffy pecked her on the cheek and bolted out the door.



THERE WAS something funny about this.

Giles was...fidgety. He had hardly said a word since she'd gotten into the car. Nothing aside from an initial, "Good evening," and an irritated, "I told you to dress sensibly." The trip was awkwardly silent. Something was on his mind, she knew, but she didn't want to ask. Tonight was not about shop. Tonight was about enjoying herself to the fullest. Plus, birthday fest. Tonight was definitely about the birthday fest. Reality could check-in tomorrow. She had tonight called for ice-fantasy of the much-deserved kind.

However, that nagging feeling refused her a moment's rest. Perhaps her watcher had discovered something that he was afraid to share.

A few minutes later, the uncertainty hardened into downright fear. Giles brought the car to a stop somewhere that was definitely not the ice show. Her spider-sense of panic didn't start screaming until he killed the engine. There they sat still for a few minutes, encompassed in shadows and silence. It wasn't until he turned to face her that Buffy realized the fullness of her anxiety. This was not like him at all. This was serial-killer behavior. If were anyone but Giles, she would be pounding on the door and practicing her damsel-scream.

But it was Giles. It was—as in *not* Hannibal Lecter. Whatever was troubling him, she could handle it. She and Giles could handle it. That was what they did, after all. They handled things—world savage, ancient prophecies, research papers, and midterms. They had everything covered.

“There is something I need to tell you,” Giles said softly. The edge in his voice unmasked her confidence, and without warning, she felt like a lost child. “It...it came about... I am sorry to deceive you. Understand that this has been one of the most trying times for me. Buffy...I...”

Without realizing it, she had backed against the car door, hand fighting to find the handle. *Great. Let's really get into the part. Maybe my boobs will bounce when I run up the stairs.* “Let me go out on a limb and say we're not going to the ice show tonight,” she ventured, keeping her tone tempered.

*This is Giles. Old, tweedy, British, Giles.*

“The very position of my... The duty I perform as watcher, as well as your continued training...depended on what I am about to tell you.”

Yes, this was Giles. Giles, who was scaring the shit out of her. And it occurred to her she should tell him so they could get to the part where this was funny.

“Giles...you're scaring me.”

Not so much as a twitch of laughter.

And now she really was terrified.

"It's a test, Buffy. It's all a test." At last, he looked at her, eyes burdened. "Your sudden ailment. The loss of your powers. All of it. A test each slayer is to perform when she reaches her eighteenth birthday. The Council... I've been..."

Her world fell apart without warning. Every fundamental understanding on which she had based her belief system shattered, and she was left choking on air.

"You knew," she said at last, doing her best to keep herself from lashing out in fury. The calm collectiveness strained in her voice would not last—not with the outrage pumping through her veins. "You knew the entire time. You knew what was happening to me. You saw what it was doing to me...and you..."

God, this was not happening.

"I wanted to tell you," he said, twisting to face her. "Believe me. I wanted nothing more in the world. Hiding this from you... It was reprehensible. I understand. But...there was no way I could tell you. What you're about to endure is something that has been... These are the ethics of the Council. I had no personal say—"

"But you saw what it was doing to me!" And then her rage had to go somewhere. She kicked the glove compartment and ignored the flash of pain that shot through her body at impact. "You stood right there and watched! You watched as it drained me! How could you... How could you *not*... How could you do this to me?"

"Listen, I have no time to explain myself now." Giles exhaled deeply and glanced to the building just outside her window. "Your test will begin shortly. The Council is relying on you to use cunning and...well, everyday skills to defeat the vampire they obtained for the event."

Her insides froze. "What event?"

"A test of cunning, like I said. I—"

"What *vampire*?"

"The vampire that Quentin Travers secured for the test."

"No, Giles. Tell me straight. What vampire?"

At that, he sighed, removing his glasses and dropping them to the hem of his shirt. "I was under the impression that it would be a vampire called Kralik—clinically insane and very powerful. However, something unfortunate happened. I tried to get Travers to call off the whole thing—"

"What happened?"

"Kralik was killed. Evidently...another vampire got wind of the test and seized the opportunity." Giles glanced at her, though she knew his vision was nothing without his glasses. He did not wish to see the look on her face, and for the world, she did not blame him. "Travers did not share with me who, but I have an intuition..." He sighed heavily. "Buffy, you have every right to... I know what you must be thinking—"

"You. Have. No. Idea." Before she knew it, tears had welled in her eyes. She made no move to wipe them away. "How could you do this to me? I thought I was losing everything... I thought—"

"Your powers will return."

"That doesn't matter! You *lied* to me!"

Another sigh hissed through his teeth. "Now is not the time for this," he said. "You're going to have to face whatever is in that house. There are vials of holy water, crosses, and a few stakes in the glove compartment." A short pause. "I will wait here—"

"Don't bother." With an angry huff, Buffy pried the glove compartment open and seized a stake. "So much for a quiet, normal night, huh? Not so in this universe. Not if you're me. Thanks for the great birthday present."

She didn't miss the flash in Giles's eyes, but remained unmoved. And he didn't say a word.

The march to the old house was slow. When she reached the doorway, Giles's car was still there.

"Of course," she murmured. "Don't bother ever listening to me."

A sigh rolled off her shoulders, then she opened the door.

Buffy shuddered as she crossed the threshold into pure darkness. She was surprised but pleased when her eyes adjusted quickly, even if there was nothing to see. No members of the Council—

nothing to suggest controlled conditions. Her breaths were harsh against the cold silence, and every step she took betrayed her location.

Her slayer tinglies might have been out of commission, but she felt the vampire. The knowledge sliced her to the core. What would happen if this thing bested her? Would the Council simply stand aside and let her die?

She'd experienced death once. She wasn't eager to do it again.

It took a few minutes, but she ultimately conceded the fact that she wasn't going to surprise anyone, and instead of creeping around and pretending to be stealthy, she decided to throw all her cards on the table. After all, aside from her life, there was nothing to lose. The vampire could sniff her out, as it was. The unexpected surge of her spider senses had faded again. There was nothing left to do. She wasn't going to make it if she didn't think on her feet.

Take away her strength and her skill, and all that was left was her mouth.

"Yoo hoo?" she called. "Big Bad Vamp. Paging Mr. Big Bad Vamp. Come out, come out, wherever you are. Let's just get this damn thing over with."

She didn't sound confident. Four years of making insidious commentary had left her splendidly dry—and even that was fitting. Her powers were gone; why not her quippage as well?

Buffy heaved a sigh, and a few minutes of silence followed. Nothing. Nothing at all. The house moaned a little—the way old houses were prone to do, but betrayed nothing. The vampire could be anywhere—waiting for her anywhere. She was marching the parade route to her own execution and she couldn't do a thing to save herself.

How could Giles do this to her?

A part of her expected to wake up and find herself in the safety and comfort of her bed. The day had been so surreal that anything, even pipe dreams, seemed feasible. However, her gut knew differently. This was reality—cold, hard reality. She was really here, lurking in the dark of an old abandoned house, searching for a

vampire whose silence would put any mime to shame. She was stripped and powerless. And the walls betrayed nothing.

Her gut told her the game was nearing its end. She tensed, aware that every hair on her arm was sticking up. Despite the heat, she shivered hard and bit her lip as she crossed to a separate hallway.

It took every ounce of her resolve to avoid cursing Giles for not packing a flashlight—for not giving her anything at all beyond his apologies. Her anger with him had already reached immeasurable heights, and there would be plenty of time to scream when she was home and not-dead. Whatever she could have done to change any of this was out of her hands now, and she refused to dwell on what couldn't be changed.

Still, a flashlight would be nice.

Steadying her breathing, Buffy decided to attempt opening the lines of conversation once more. It couldn't hurt. At this point, really, nothing could hurt. Either the vamp showed itself or didn't—either she lived or died. She didn't know how much longer she could take the wait.

Turning her eyes back to the hall, Buffy raised chin and called out, "All right. Enough. Come on."

Nothing.

"Hello?"

Silence.

"Heeeellllo?"

Silence.

"Well, for Pete's sake, are you a scaredy vamp? 'Cause if you think this is how I wanna spend my birthday, you've gotta—oaf!"

It happened so fast. So freaking fast. The sensation of being dragged off her feet...then the room was spinning. In a fury of quick movements, she felt her stake-arm twist behind her back. The cold flesh against her sweaty, clammy skin made her shudder. She could see nothing, but her other senses were going haywire. The smell of wafting nicotine tickled her taste buds. The harsh breath at her ear smelled of cheap brandy. He said nothing, still, but she sensed his amusement—his excitement, and it made her insides tremble.

The vampire twisted her stake-arm furiously, and in a flash, she found herself weaponless. He roared in victory and spun her around to face him. Their eyes met—a clash of violent blue—and she felt a something hard fall within the pit of her stomach.

The impression was brief. Buffy had time to fight, but the thought never surfaced. She was only aware of Spike grasping her wrist as he pulled her roughly to his chest. A flash of fangs, then his hand closed over her mouth, and he rolled them against the wall.

“Well, pet,” he drawled, his breath hot at her ear, “since you asked so nicely.”

HER HEART CADENCED against the cold silence, and she was certain the floor had dropped from under her. For long seconds, there was nothing she could do but panic. Pure, unadulterated panic. Spike. *Spike*. Slayer of slayers—the thorn in her side, the one vamp in all the world that would cross oceans just to get a taste of her neck. *Spike*.

And yet, somehow, there was clarity and calm with that knowledge. It was a vampire she knew. Somehow—somehow—she was comforted.

Because she'd apparently lost her marbles along with her super strength.

Against her better senses, Buffy began struggling and spat out his name like a bad flavor. "Spike."

"You called, gorgeous?"

A moan tore at her, every nerve in her body shaking. "Someone up there must really hate me."

"Think they take numbers at this point."

She pried her hands free of his—little good it did—and wrapped her fingers around his wrist, attempting unsuccessfully to wriggle from his grasp. "They chose...you?"

"I know. Doesn't make much sense, does it? A bloke who's killed two in his past to do the Slayer in good, especially when she's not at her best." He nipped at her cheek. "Sounds like a bloody good joke to me."

Buffy offered a humorless laugh and jerked her arm backward, butting her elbow into his gut. There was a surprised gasp, and he released her, though some foreign pull compelled her to remain where she was instead of doing the more sensible thing and running for it. Instead, Buffy turned to face him, and she saw nothing but the violent blue of his eyes.

"I'm all with the impressed," she snapped. "You were able to keep quiet for almost a full five minutes."

"Woulda lasted longer, but the entire thing got boring real quick-like." The blue eyes sparkled with glee. "And here we are. Whaddya say, love? Ready to take on the Big Bad, all defenseless?"

"I'm sorry. Hard to get all scared when the last time I saw you, you were drunk outta your mind, crying your wittle heart out about your whore ex." She crossed her arms. It was likely not the brightest tactical move, but there was no way the Council could believe she would refrain from provoking such a blatantly walking target as the vampire before her. "How'd that work out, by the way? Obviously not very well if you're here with me."

She felt rather than saw the snarky grin melt into a scowl. It stung with empty retribution, and at once, she felt cold again. Monster or not, it wasn't kosher to make fun at someone else's pain.

Regret lasted as long as it took him to backhand her. She fell to the ground, pain slingshotting through her body. God, is this how it felt to normal people? There was blood on her lip and every inch of her hurt.

"Gotta say, I could get used to seeing you on your knees, pet."

"You're disgusting." It took a moment, but she managed to climb to her feet, bracing her weight against the nearest wall. "And what the hell are you waiting for? You had the chance to bite me two seconds ago. Thought you didn't play with your food."

"I don't, but I also gotta make this last," Spike retorted with a

shrug. "I mean, come on love. Of all the hours I've spent imagining this moment, it'd be a bloody insult to kill you right quick. What, with all the grief you've caused me? Way I see it, I got you to myself all night."

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Please. If that means listening to you yammering all night, just kill me now."

"Now, now, Slayer...where's the fun in that?" He slammed his arm against her again, sending her back to the ground with a grunt. Pain exploded and seared, and when she didn't automatically begin the pathetic crawl back to her feet, he sighed and circled her. "Course, if you're gonna lie there all night, I got better things to do. Come on. Gimme all you got. Power or no power, I know there's somethin' in you that won't let you back down while I have my fun." There was a teasing pause. "Then again...that also has its perks."

Where these delusions had originated, she had no idea. Spike should know better than that. She was not about to let him beat on her until he decided he was bored. The vampire was sloppy enough to let his guard down.

She cursed herself for not bringing a cross; she'd left the car in too much of a huff. With a gasp, Buffy rolled to her feet, stretching her sore muscles until it hurt. "Remind me to kill Giles when I get out of here."

"Why should you have the fun?" Spike retorted. "And who says you're gettin' outta here?"

There was no time to think. She summoned every ounce of strength left in her broken body and kneed him fiercely where men don't particularly like to be kneed. An agonized moan ripped through the air, and then she was running. For the moment, she had the advantage, and she was running. Her thunderous paces quaked beneath her feet. The world was spinning and she was dizzy with weakness and ache. God, he'd only hit her twice, and she felt ready to die.

*Note to self. More training.*

Spike's howls diminished just as quickly—quicker than the last time she'd kicked a vamp in the balls, granted she'd had slayer

strength to back her up. Perhaps the impact had surprised him more than hurt. Either way, after the angry grunts and growls subsided, the air was once again occupied with the vampire's cynical commentary. His words were muddled with distance; she didn't hear anything beside the hum of his voice and the rhythm of his words. She knew that rhythm—Spike was still in mock-mode, though his temper had surely been tested.

The reality of the situation was overwhelming. She was racing through an empty house with a vampire in full pursuit—a vampire that had two slayers notched on his belt. Her stake was gone. The supplies she could have taken had been left in Giles's car in the heat of her outrage. She was alone.

Buffy came to a sudden stop. That thought was silencing. Spike could track her easily—if her noisy steps didn't betray her, her scent certainly would. Running would do little good. Drawing in a collected breath, she edged to the hallway wall, trying in vain to immerse herself in the some of the darker shadows. It would help, maybe, but not for long.

The vampire was nearing. It was funny to think of Spike as patient, but the steps he took were slow and measured. He obviously wanted to relish this. There was no sense in rushing things when he knew there was nothing to lose. When he knew that there was no escape for his intended. She steadied her breathing, for the little good it did. At this rate, even Giles could hear her heart pounding.

Giles. Shivers broke loose across her skin and tears flooded her eyes. Who was there to trust if she couldn't trust him? The man who, not too long ago, had accused her of exhibiting no respect for him or the job he performed? Giles had been her most trusted friend, her mentor, and he'd led her here. Led her to Spike—to her executioner, and she had nothing with which to defend herself.

Was this payback for keeping Angel's return a secret?

"Here Slayer, Slayer, Slayer..."

Buffy snapped back to cold reality. Spike was just a few feet away, and he was going to kill her. And suddenly, she found herself crawling through the ceiling on parent/teacher night.

That first fight...

*"The last slayer I killed...she begged for her life."*

She knew him, now. She'd seen him at his best and worst. He'd helped her save the world, then he'd locked her friends in the basement of a burnt-out factory and blackmailed her to help him win back Dru's love. Somewhere in between, it had become difficult to remember just how dangerous he was.

Spike was rounding up the staircase.

If nothing else, a thousand years would pass before she begged Spike of anything.

"Come on, pet!" he called, banging on the walls. "You know you want a go. Must be goin' bug-shaggin' crazy without an outlet for all that anger. Tell you what, if you come out now, I'll let you beat on me. Just a little."

Yeah, he'd enjoy that.

A floorboard creaked. Buffy steadied herself against the wall, eyes trained on the advancing bulk at the end of the corridor. She was spotted, she knew. She'd betrayed herself the moment she attempted to skid across the telltale floor, and likely before that. The grin on his face was bright enough to attract incoming airline traffic.

"Now," he said, taking a step forward. His paces were slow and seductive, and his eyes burned her with heat that astonished almost as much as the familiar clenching in her belly. She knew that look—he had given it to her the night they'd first met. The sort of look that made her knees go weak, only to slam with her the devastating realization that he was an enemy. "Now that I got you here..."

"Oh, save it," she snapped. "Good god. Blah blah blah. You just really love to hear yourself talk, don't you?"

At that, he shrugged and the snarky grin grew wider. "Well, what can I say? Got me an eternity to kill. It's better if I'm a good conversationalist."

"Or if you live under such delusion."

"Now, now, Slayer..." He was just a few feet away now, his silhouette outlined against the blackened stairwell. "Don't tell me this doesn't excite you just a little. You and me...cooped up in here till

your Council friends decide to pop in and see if you're as dead as they want you. Surely you can admit...if one vamp was gonna do you in, can you think of anyone better?" He paused. "And if you say Angel, I'll rip your bloody head off."

"Aren't I running that risk either way?"

"Less bitchy you are, the longer I'll keep you around."

"Doubt anyone could follow those rules."

He huffed. "Speakin' of the giant sod, where is he on your big night?"

Buffy blinked. "What are you doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Talking to me. Shouldn't one of us be dead now?"

"Well, if that's the way you wanna play it." Spike shrugged, withdrawing a cigarette from the lapels of his duster. "Thought we might catch up a bit, is all. After all, kitten, how long has it been?"

She rolled her eyes. "Really. Next time you blow into town unannounced, remind me not to help you."

"Bloody likely." He blew a string of smoke into the air. "Out with it, Slayer. Where's your boy? The big one/eight and he decides it's not even worth a soddin' birthday card? Typical of Angelus, if memory serves." He paused thoughtfully. "Then again, Dru always said he gave the best presents."

Something dark coiled within her, but she would not bite. She knew that remark stung him more than it did her.

"Angel and I celebrated earlier this week," she retorted instead. "And Dru—god bless her sick little mind—is right. He does give the best presents. I'm going on two years running here. What's the matter, Spikey? Were you just...inadequate in that department?"

A growl tore at his throat. "You're one to bloody talk!" he snapped, stomping toward her. He wrapped his ironclad grip around her shoulders, heaved her off her feet and threw her at the wall. "Just with the stories Angelus told! The nancyin' around you two did? How'd it feel? Your first go sent him right into the arms of someone as loopy as—"

"That wasn't him," Buffy choked, clamoring to her feet.

"Really? And you know him so well to know the difference." Another blow sent her to the ground again. "Christ, Slayer, I'd've pegged you for smarter than that. Sure, you didn't know the git before the first change, but that's no excuse. He had the bloody talk and walk...well, with a bit more confidence." Spike grinned nastily, fisting her blouse at the collar and pulled her to her feet. "Then again, busting a nut tends to give a bloke a bit more swagger."

"Pig," she spat, cursing herself when she couldn't come up with something less original.

His smirk burned without suggestion. "Well," he conceded, "suppose I should be honest. Wasn't exactly all rosy for me, watchin' Dru shag him into the bloody ground right under my nose." The fire his eyes drifted and something relative to shared pain tainting his features. It didn't last long; the next instant, he was smiling again, wagging his eyebrows suggestively. "Neither of them could match us, love. We sure made a helluva team, didn't we? Always knew I should've stayed around for the saved-the-world-victory shag."

"You're disgusting."

"I've been called worse."

"Shut up."

"Make me."

"You know, for something that caused you so much pain not too long ago, you don't seem to mind yammering on and on about it."

He shrugged and let her go, walking her against the wall. The cold surface against her back surprised her. It wasn't like the other walls she had encountered that evening. It felt...stronger. Perhaps reinforced with steel, or something else. A panic room in the midst of a crap-shack that would collapse if the wind blew too hard.

"Just friendly warnin', love," Spike murmured, blowing another low stream of cigarette smoke that tickled her upper lip.

Buffy fought off a wince—she couldn't stand smokers. It was an image she associated with Angelus. Though she couldn't remember him actively lighting up, the scent was always heavy when they fought. Smoking simply didn't fit Angel—whether he was the demon or the man she loved. The platinum nuisance, however, wore the

habit well. With the leather he sported and that awful car he drove, adding a few packs of cigarettes and bottles of cheap alcohol completed the cliché, though in a way she couldn't help but find exciting.

*I'm deranged.*

It was hard to believe that Spike had lived for over a century. He would fit in so well with the crowd at Sunnydale High...except, of course, for the drinking of blood, allergy to sunlight, and random killings of those that annoyed him.

Against her better instincts, she felt herself relax. Even now, throwing her around as he was, part of him was genuinely engaged with *her*. Buffy. He was talking to her because he enjoyed it.

Why couldn't he act like a vampire?

"Last time I was here, you and King Forehead were on the road to forgettin' all past hurts, and I know where that leads."

"Why do you care?" she asked.

"Why else? Not too keen on seeing Angelus again." Spike shrugged again, pressing forward.

"And to that, I add a major duh."

He narrowed the space between them with another step. "Like I said, pet, just a little advice. Don't feel obligated to follow. By all means, if you're anythin' like the other slayers, you likely have a death wish. So go ahead. Bang your boy. See what I care."

Buffy arched a brow and took a step forward. "And here I thought you were going to kill me. Are you giving me an option?"

Spike grinned. They were practically nose-to-nose. "That depends, Slayer," he retorted softly. It was a tone he had never taken with her before. "You wanna offer me somethin' better?"

At once, her knees felt weak.

*What was that? What what what?*

When he didn't continue, she heaved a breath that rose against his chest. It was then she realized how close he was. How...

Before her thoughts could catch up with her, the steel barrier behind her suddenly gave way. She lost her balance, causing Spike to lose his, and they tumbled together into a vat of darkness.

He landed on top of her, his face between her breasts and his pelvis pressed against hers. Buffy gasped a sigh and arched, causing his erection to dig into her more sharply. He was evidently comfortable enough not to move anytime soon, and in a moment of blind panic, Buffy shoved him off her reacting-oh-so-wrongly body and made a run for the door.

She reached it just as it slammed shut with emphatic force.

“Bloody hell...”

Buffy would not be defeated so easily. She would not fall into the role of the helpless heroine. This was not a movie. No one was outside, and the door was unlocked.

Only it really, really wasn't. It took several minutes for her determination to melt into despair. Banging against the door accomplished nothing. She was not up to full strength. In fact, she was more drained than ever.

Buffy heaved a defeated sigh and sank into the darkness.

Trapped.

With Spike.

God, maybe she really was going to die tonight.

BUFFY SIGHED and propped herself against the door, trying to ignore how hard her heart was hammering.

*So not good. So completely not good.*

“Who turned out the lights?” Spike demanded gruffly, huffing as he pulled himself to his feet.

She tossed him a wry glance, but it was lost in darkness. *Stupid vampire makes me waste perfectly good glares.* “Shut up,” she snapped instead, wrapping her arms around herself.

“What happened?”

“You pushed me into a broom closet. *That’s* what happened.”

“Ohhh, kitty’s got claws.” A beat. “I’d hope you’d realize how big the average broom closet is, kitten. It’s not *that* small. More likely a panic room.”

Buffy decided to ignore the fact that she’d had thought the same thing before, well, being shoved inside. Instead, she grumbled and forced herself to her feet. “Perfect. This is just perfect.”

The next thing she knew, Spike was right in front of her, practically pressing her into the door. “Move over, pet. Gonna test the door.”

"It's *locked*," she said, frowning at the tremor that commanded her voice. *The hell?* "I already tried."

"You're not up to full strength, remember?" Without waiting for her reply, he closed his hands around her upper arms and forcibly moved her to the side. The sensation was brief and slightly heady, and he had already turned back to her by the time it occurred to her that she should be miffed at having been manhandled. "Bugger all."

"I told you."

"The door's locked."

"Yeah."

"And we're stuck." He paused, and she could have sworn that she saw his eyes flicker over her. "In here. Together."

Buffy flushed, and on the same beat, they moved to their own respective corners in the room—as far from each other as possible. She slowly slid to the floor again, hugging her knees to her chest.

"Why do you even care?" she asked after a minute, feeling small and vulnerable, and hating herself for it. "I'm under the impression that I'm vampire lunchmeat any way I look at it."

"Well, we can't get the door open, and I wager it's better to be stuck in here with someone than bore myself to death. Or...more to death." With a sigh, he reached for his cigarettes. "Course, it can always go the other way if your yammerin' gets outta hand."

"Well, don't piss me off."

"Wouldn't be talkin', pet," he retorted and blew a ring of smoke into the air. She stifled a cough. "Seems to me that you're not in the position to be givin' orders."

"If you think I'm going to *take* orders from you, it's better you just kill me now."

"And miss out on all this fun? Not a chance, sweetheart." He tipped his head toward her, and she saw his eyes twinkle. "Course, I'd get close to that door, if I were you. The second it opens up—"

Buffy smiled sweetly. "You'll be dust by then."

"Is that right?"

"Giles isn't here to drug me up, is he? Slayer strength comes back and hence...Spike-dustiness."

“Won’t happen.”

It was her turn to be pessimistic. She arched a brow and leaned back. The wall against her shoulders was comforting in a bizarre fashion. “And how?”

“Killed me a few slayers, pet. Can’t give me the willies with that kind of talk.”

“Yeah. And I’ve staked me a few hundred vamps. You’re no different.”

The boom of his laugh made the walls rattle. “And you assume your precious Angel is?”

The mention of Angel threw her, but she refused to let it show. “He has a soul.”

“Yeah. Let’s see how long that lasts.”

A growl rumbled through her throat. “It’s not going anywhere this time. We’re not going to... There will be no...of us...doing things that would make his soul go away. I mean, don’t you think he’s learned his lesson? Don’t you think I’ve learned *mine*?”

“Kitten, you’re what...eighteen today?” Her eyes had finally decided to adjust, and immediately followed the sound of Spike’s voice. He was reclined against the wall opposite her, a flicker of orange marking his mouth. She wondered how many cigarettes he would go through before she choked on secondhand smoke. “Yeah. Rite of passage, and what all. You’ve been with...hmmm...let’s think. Oh right. The enormous prat...and that’s it. I’ll admit, he’s a cool one to wait as long as he did. But do you think in a century you’re the only one to have given him a happy?”

Buffy’s eyes narrowed. “Well. Gee. Let’s think. Happy for Angel equals no long soul. Basing it on—”

“And there’s another thing. Demons really don’t separate the line between sex and violence. Ask your sodding Angel sometime... I *know* he has a few skeletons hangin’ in his closet. Things he’s too bloody *proper* to admit.” The sound of his laugh made her shudder this time. It reeked of the truth—the side of the truth she would never bring herself to fully investigate. “No man, regardless of his bloody lot in life, can go that long without polishing the knob.”

"You pig."

He snickered. "It's the truth. Can't blame me if you're not strong enough to handle it."

"Just because you're led around by your penis doesn't mean all men are."

"Not me, pet. Don't turn this around on me." His hands came up. "And don't get your knickers in a twist. I'm payin' you a compliment, here. Angel got his rocks off before he met your precious self, but at least it didn't make him happy. Or at least, not enough to drive his soul away. Bloody bastard didn't *love* any of the bints before you. God, if you think that's all there is to it, then you're gonna be mighty surprised when you start going out there in search of a comfort fuck every five seconds."

"That's rich, coming from you."

Spike arched a brow. "Was with the same woman for over a century, wasn't I?"

"That wasn't love. You're not capable of that sort of emotion."

That wasn't true. Buffy *knew* it wasn't true. If anything, Spike was commanded by emotion. She'd seen it when he'd come to her before—to help her stop Angelus. She'd seen it just a few months ago, when he'd shown up a slobbering, pitiful, recently-dumped drunk. And yet, she couldn't help but go for the dig. It was all she had right now.

The humor behind his snicker rivaled brewing irritation. He was hurt—she could tell—but he managed to swallow it. "A vampire slayer that knows jack 'bout vampires. Look out world. Here she comes."

"I know all I need to know about vampires," Buffy retorted. "Vampire equals evil. Evil can be stopped with nice pointy weapons. Nice pointy weapons equals dust, ergo no more vampire."

"What about the hunt? You knew enough to threaten me with Dru, if memory serves." At that, he flustered. "Which, by the way, made the list of the many reasons I'm gonna kill you."

"Because you *never* tried to kill Angel?" she snapped. "And besides, this is a stupid argument. You *can't* love! You have no soul."

You don't know what love is... What feelings are. It's all lust to you. There is no difference."

A nerve had been hit—she knew without needing to hear him speak. And before she could wallow in regret, the vampire was on his feet, stalking toward her, his eyes raging. "How can you explain me and Dru?" he demanded, slamming an angry fist to the wall behind her. "If sex is all we care about, why the bloody hell would I stay with her? Don't tell me it was because of deep, philosophical conversations. I'm sane; she's not. She likes the idea of destroyin' the world; I don't. But I would've gone through time for her. I could have anyone I fancy, couldn't I? Didn't so much as sniff at another woman while she was sickly."

"Anyone, really? Ego much?"

There was a beat there when she thought she might have pushed him over the edge. His eyes blazed and his fangs descended. The hatred in his gaze made her inner little girl shrivel in fear, but somehow—just as rapidly as they'd flared—the sparks of anger began to fade.

"Anyone, love," he agreed. "Even you, I wager. If I tried hard enough."

"You stayed with Dru because she made you," Buffy retorted. "That's what Angel said about him and Darla. About pretty much all vamps and their...makers or whatever."

Spike stared at her for endless seconds before deep laughter commanded his body. "Yeah. He would say that." He turned back to her, and she realized, belatedly how close he was. For the first time next all evening, she felt she saw fully him. "Bet he conveniently left out the part where he followed his dear maker to China where Dru and I were havin' a bloody bloodfest during the Boxer Rebellion. He was gaga over her, sweetheart, even with a sodding soul." Spike laughed again. Coldly. "Bloody tore him apart when she told him to sod off. Couldn't stand the humanity in him. Then you came along and suddenly he's all heroic...stakin' the girl that loves him to save the Slayer. Don't you think he regrets it? Even just a little?" When she didn't answer, Spike chuckled and turned away again. "Sure made a

fuss about it to me and Dru last year. Our 'happy family' was missing its matriarch."

Buffy was silent for a long minute. In all honesty, she'd never given the matter much thought. Angel was not the type to discuss his feelings or his past. What she knew about Darla was limited to the attack on her mother and that she used to be Angel's one-and-only. It had shocked the hell out of her when Angel had found the courage to end his sire—almost as much, she was sure, as it had shocked him.

Buffy shuddered. Doors in her mind were opening to a selection of rooms she had never before thought to explore. It was very possible, of course, that Spike was stringing her along, but the art of the mind game was not his forte. If he wanted to hurt her, he would—and not through words.

For the moment, they were merely talking.

"Why?" Buffy found herself asking. "Wait. No—"

He blew out a pillar of smoke and was silent for a long minute. "Why?" he repeated. "Why'd he go back to her, is that it?"

"If he knew what she was...yeah."

"Well...have you ever been a vamp, pet?"

The question was sarcastic but she grinned in spite of herself. "Actually, yes, I have been."

"Tryin' to be serious, here. No need to get cute."

"One day, two years ago, everyone's worst nightmares began coming true, courtesy of Lucky Nineteen." Buffy hissed a sigh. "One of mine...well. I turned into a vamp for about thirty minutes. Longest half hour of my life."

There was a brief, astonished silence. "You're not yanking me, are you?"

"Do you see a chain around here?"

"Well, don't know exactly." She heard him rustle to his feet, sparks flying off the end of his cigarette as he tossed it to the ground and stomped it out. "Didn't give you a full search, love. Don't know what sort of toys you might've packed with you."

"Ass."

Spike ignored her. "Angelus went after Darla because she, me,

and Dru were his only relations. Don't know what I'd do if some nancy tribe of gypsies tried to wire me up. Couldn't rely on Dru, that's for bloody sure." He huffed, and she could tell that he was masking a greater hurt. "She doesn't like me as it is."

"Are you looking for sympathy?"

"Not that pathetic." Spike moved suddenly, and, to her utter dismay, slid to the floor beside her. Buffy forced herself to bite her tongue. She knew that he wanted a response, and she wasn't about to oblige. "So, how'd it feel to be one of us, Slayer? The bloodlust? That taste of the dark side. Did you enjoy it?"

"It was my worst nightmare. You do the math."

"Worst nightmare? Those are the best types." He flashed a grin. "Come on, pet. You don't expect me to believe that you didn't think, just for a split second that you could get used to the extra strength. Besides, your being vamped would solve Angel's problem right quick. Wouldn't be bloody human if you—"

"Don't tell me what is and isn't human!" Buffy snapped. "You can't lecture me on things you know nothing about."

"Nothin'?" Spike retorted. "And what, you fancy yourself the mistress of all humanly knowledge? I got a lot of years on you, Goldilocks."

"I'm sure you have a point."

"You can't stand there and tell me the thought didn't cross your mind," he replied. "You and your honey with a pair of matching fangs. Wouldn't be human if it hadn't occurred to you at least once. No shame in admitting the Slayer has a naughty side."

"My god! I swear!"

"Yeah, yeah. Swear all you want." He lit up and she could see him again. Brief, flickering light. His dancing eyes told her that he knew just how much she hated smokers, and just to irritate her, he blew in her direction. "No one can be that pure without wanting a taste of life on the wild side."

"Would you *please* put that thing out? Some of us *do* have to breathe."

"Humanly hazard," he replied, indulging on an extra long drag.

"Not like these things'll kill me. And why exactly should I care? You're forgettin' that I hate you."

"There are less annoying ways to kill me."

"Yeah." Spike grinned. "But you're so cute when you're angry."

"Tick tock," she retorted. "The more time you waste, the more it buys my strength to return. Then your ass is mine."

Wrong thing to say around Mr. Everything's-An-Innuendo, and she realized her mistake a second too late. If possible, the condescending smirk his lips grew even more condescending. "Kitten, all you gotta do is ask."

This lack-of-strength thing was beginning to really piss her off. Buffy tried to shove him, but he barely budged. There had to be something she could do to wipe that arrogant look off his face.

"So," he began again, his voice annoyingly conversational. "What else? There's gotta be somethin' to do in here to keep us occupied till your Watcher decides to bust you out."

"I like the idea of you leaving me the hell alone."

He ignored her. "Wish I had a deck of cards or something." They locked eyes again. "Okay, so in the trying to keep from getting too horribly bored, what's your favorite flick, Slayer?"

"What?"

"Come on. Got any better ideas? Start yappin' and keep my mind off my stomach. I'd rather be hungry and busy than full and bored. Take your bloody pick."

"I don't have a favorite."

"Bollocks. Everyone has a favorite."

"Do I look like everyone to you?"

"Come on. What else is there to do?"

"I'm not here to humor you."

"Right. You're here to *feed* me. All things considered, I'm letting you off easy." A sigh sounded through the air as he shook his head. "And my tummy's gonna start making with the rumblies sooner or later. Answer the question."

"I told you," Buffy retorted with a huff. "I don't have a favorite."

“What was the first thing that came to mind, then, if you’re gonna play it that way?”

“Why do you care?”

“Why *don’t* you? Come on. The longer you yap, the longer you live. Besides, it’ll keep us *both* from dyin’ of boredom.”

Buffy was quiet for a long minute. In the end, she decided there was nothing to gain from being contrary. “*Ferris Bueller*, I guess,” she murmured with a long, defeated sigh.

“Hmmm. Really?” He sounded surprised. “Why?”

“Ferris reminds me of Xander...if Xander were smaller, confident, and popular.” A small grin tickled her lips. “Willow is Cameron. The thought of skipping school is one of the seven deadly sins in the world according to her. But Xander definitely has Ferris potential. He just never lets it out.”

“Xander’s the tall, gangly kid, right?”

“You kidnapped him and you didn’t know his name?”

“Oi. I was half drunk.” At her pointed look, he shrugged and conceded, “Well, all right. Mostly drunk. Soberin’ up after a bad split’s somethin’ any bloke would try and avoid. Don’t suppose you ever let yourself have a taste of the wild side when you—”

“Shut up.”

“Thought not.” There was a brief silence. “He fancies you, doesn’t he?”

“Who?”

“The boy.”

“Xander?”

“Yeah. At least that’s what Angelus said.”

“Angel actually took the time to tell you how much Xander annoyed him even after he lost his soul?”

Spike shot her a surprised look, then chuckled. “You really have no grasp of just how much you affected that bloke, do you? If he wasn’t trying to find a way to kill you, he was definitely aching for another go.”

Something dark shuddered down her spine. “What do you mean?”

"Don't act so innocent," he retorted. "Y'know exactly what I mean. Angelus was a bloody prat who cared about nothing outside shagging, killing, and playing those sodding mind games with his food. Puppies nailed to walls, and the like. Nice bedtime stories for the kiddies. The point is you shouldn't go all blushing virgin on me. You're old enough to—"

"You're telling me that I shouldn't be disturbed that my boyfriend wanted to rape me?"

Spike sighed. "You're not seeing the big picture. He wanted to kill you more than anything. Since when is killing you okay and wanting your pussy so bloody shocking? Creature of the night, and what all. Don't think there's ever been another of my kind that I hated before him." There was a brief pause. "And strictly speaking, like I said, sex and violence are pretty much one in the same for a lot of demons. For a vamp to make the distinction is a stretch. Angelus knew—yeah—but some of us...well...you get it."

An arctic breeze commanded her tone, though she didn't know where to aim it. "Why protect him then? If you hate him so much?"

"I'm not protecting him." Spike tensed at the suggestion. "More general defense for my kind. Trust me, pet—if you want rid of Angel, you have my blessin'."

To that, she had no reply, and silence inevitably set in. And then her mind couldn't help but wander.

How long would the Council have them wait before checking in? Did they care if she succeeded? Did they care if she didn't? If she died, what did that prove?

Her stake was on the other side of the barrier, and odd as it was, she was almost glad. Despite appearances, it was much better being trapped with someone rather than alone. Even if that someone was the bane of her existence.

Better not to let the conversation die. Her options were to keep talking or risk a bored Spike, and a bored Spike meant a murderous Spike. Despite whatever excuse he'd given her, she was somewhat amazed that he had refrained from indulging a sweet tooth. Slayer

blood was reputed to be the richest in the world, yet he hadn't laid a finger on her—not even when she'd provoked him.

It was such a far cry from the Spike she'd thought she knew.

*"What happens on Saturday?"*

*"I kill you."*

He wasn't playing—she knew that because he wasn't Angelus. That was abundantly clear. Spike wasn't Angelus. One couldn't hold a conversation with Angelus—not without a hefty set of bars and plenty vials of holy water standing firm in between.

It was this motivation that prompted her to ask, "What's your favorite color?"

Spike tilted his head. "Huh's that?"

"You heard me."

"Oh, so I heard right? You're making conversation?" That irritating smirk returned. "Thought I might have been imaginin' it."

"Good god! Would you save it, already?"

"Well, aren't fickle tonight?" Spike's eyes were dancing. "What's my favorite color? I suppose it'd be black."

"Black's not a color."

"Sure as hell is."

"It's a shade, you moron."

"Watch it, Summers." He lit another cigarette. "You'll hurt my tender feelings."

"This is me not caring. Name another color. An actual color."

"That is an actual color."

"My god, you're dumb."

"No need for that," he said glibly, then sighed and leaned back. "Oh, let's see. Red. There? That's a bloody color, right?"

A sigh rolled off her chest. Buffy didn't realize how annoyed she had become until she caught herself counting backward from ten. "Yes. Thank you."

"Why so interested? Gonna buy me a prezzie?"

"A muzzle, if you're lucky."

"Throw in a few chains and you'll—"

“Don’t even finish that sentence.” She huffed. “Honestly, are you seriously trying to press me?”

“Depends on the context, pet.” Spike took another long drag off his cigarette. “But that’s beside the point. Any other reason *Ferris Bueller* your favorite flick?”

“To shut you up, mostly.” She was quiet for a long minute. “I guess I like it because it symbolizes everything I could want out of my high school career.”

“How you figure?”

It was so odd to hear sincere interest in his tone. She’d become so accustomed to raw contempt.

“Well...look at him. He literally has zero concerns.” Buffy offered a short laugh. “His only goal is to have fun. It’s the ultimate fantasy. I mean, you’ve seen it, right? With an eternity on your hands, I’d be on a non-stop movie-fest.”

That earned a grin. “And then some, pet.”

“Well...Ferris is everything I’m not. He gets to have fun. A normal family. A world where the number one concern is getting a car instead of fighting demons. And hello to a normal boyfriend.” She had spoken before thinking. “Don’t get me wrong. I love Angel. I do. It’s just...”

“He’s not normal.”

“In a nutshell.”

“And you want normal?”

“No. Yes. Not exactly.” It was stupid—talking about this. Sharing personal stuff with a soulless fiend was never a good idea, but he had opened the floodgate. Unwittingly, perhaps, but it was open, and there was no going back. “It’s not just that he’s a vampire. It’s... He’s Angel. He rarely opens up. I know that he... I just get jittery when he’s near.”

He laughed outright. “That’s just being clever, pet.”

The remark earned a glare.

“I’m just saying,” he continued, “you want it all and that’s not somethin’ you’re lookin’ to ever get. Normal Average Joe boy... someone who doesn’t spend more time brooding than he does

talking to you.” He shook his head with another chuckle. “That’s what really annoys me about the git. He—”

“You wouldn’t know anything about it,” Buffy snapped. “You’re Mr. ‘I’m Evil Ask Me How.’ Angel can’t see passed what he did because what he did was terrible. You don’t get that. Don’t give me advice or...lectures on things you can’t possibly begin to understand.”

That had undoubtedly struck a nerve. The next thing she knew, Spike had leaped to his feet, and his eyes were blazing. “You wanna play, bitch? Fine then. I’ll play.” He flicked his half-smoked cigarette to the ground and extinguished it beneath his boot. Then he was right in front of her. She hadn’t said anything particularly provocative, but a vampire needed no reason beyond hunger to trigger outrage. However, when she waited at his feet, he halted and schooled himself with more of that uncharacteristic restraint. “Here’s what I understand. I know you bloody humans make more with the dramatics of livin’ than you do the actual livin’. Every sodding generation’s the same—and all die off before they can warn the next one. I got me forever to learn what this gig’s all about. It’s not a problem for me—it’s the saps with consciences. And Slayers. I know a bloody lot about Slayers. You don’t have as much time. You hardly have *any* time. And look at this—you’re gonna waste away what time you got by playin’ mind games with some prat who has forever to brood? This is it, pet. All you’ll ever have.”

With a grunt, she pulled herself to her feet, holding his fiery gaze despite the temptation to look away. Words hurt, yes, but the truth hurt more. It was something her friends were particularly sensitive about—her imminent death. A second time. A final time. There was something to admire in such blatant honesty, even if she resented it.

But she would die before admitting it. “Thank you, Captain Obvious.”

Spike huffed and took a step forward. And again until he was pressing into her, inside her bubble. He didn’t thrust his hips forward—he didn’t need to. And despite the suddenness of it, Buffy wasn’t surprised to feel his hard cock through the thin fabric of her skirt. It didn’t surprise her, and it didn’t disgust her. She wanted it to disgust

her. God, she wanted disgust so badly, but it refused to come. After all, he had warned her that members of the demon world did not easily distinguish sex and violence.

Something dark shivered up her spine. Was he thinking he'd provide a demonstration? It didn't seem entirely unlikely—but again, Spike wasn't one to fuck his food.

If she ever pushed him over that edge, the consequences would be heady indeed.

She didn't know what he was trying to prove aside reasserting his dominance. Spike wanted her to know that he was in charge. That he could kill her anytime he wanted. He could do *anything* to her anytime he wanted. There were no words. No threats. Nothing aside from the feel of him against her, his erection pressing into her stomach, his eyes dark with intent.

Forever passed before he moved away. She didn't know which was worse—the cold body pressed against her or the colder air that struck her when he left. She was ashamed when he left her panting. Without forward indication, something had changed. Something significant.

His back was to her. The dark did little to conceal the trembles seizing his wiry frame. He had felt it, too. Whatever the change was—however great or small. Perhaps they had reached a plateau where anger no longer touched them.

“You back to havin’ a death wish?”

“Go to hell.”

And perhaps not.

SHE LIKED it better when they were talking. Silence burned—no matter how much he angered her, how irritating his answers and innuendos were, there was something soothing about listening to him speak. And despite wanting this to not be true, Buffy knew that it had very little to do with the logic that an occupied Spike was much safer than a hungry-jonesing-for-slayer-blood Spike. Because, apparently, no amount of *evil vampire* could undo the girlish thrill at hearing a sexy accented voice.

“What’s your favorite movie?” Buffy asked.

Spike did not turn to face her. “What’s that?”

“You’re favorite movie? You asked me.”

“Didn’t know you still fancied chattin’, love.”

“Might as well.”

He chuckled. “So you’re still in the game, eh, sweets?” He sighed again, sliding to the floor across from her once again. Since his earlier break in temper, he’d gone back to putting as much space between them as possible. “Okay. Let’s see. I’ve always fancied some older pictures. And Monty Python’s bloody brilliant.”

Buffy pulled her face into a scowl. “I hate Monty Python.”

"No. You don't hate it. No one hates Monty Python. You just don't get it. There's a difference."

"How typical. 'I hate it.' 'No, you just don't get it.'" She rolled her eyes. "You're an ass."

Spike grinned broadly. "I can't help it if you don't get British humor, pet."

"This isn't a British thing. It's a *good taste* thing."

"Next time you see your Watcher, ask him if he prefers Gilliam or Palin. Though if he's a true fan, he won't have a favorite."

"Giles doesn't watch Monty Python."

"Course he does."

Buffy narrowed her eyes.

Spike scoffed. "What?" he demanded. "He can summon demons, but not while demandin' that someone bring out the comfy chair?"

"How did you know about the demon-summoning stuff?"

"How else you figure?" he replied. "Angelus yapped endlessly. Almost as much as you do."

That should have been obvious. "And you think just because Giles was a ticking time-bomb in his youth that he's a Monty Python fan?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Because it's...Giles!"

"Are you naturally this ignorant?"

Buffy crossed her arms in a huff. "Says you."

That flash of annoyance she was so accustomed to flickered in his eyes, but without the heat of before. Things were growing...comfortable, and she didn't know if that was a good thing.

"Yeah. Says me," Spike replied. There was a brief pause. "What was the question again, love? Oh right...favorite flicks. Well, Dru always liked that musical from the 70s. Made me buy the soundtrack and all."

"*Buy?*" She didn't bother to hide her skepticism.

Spike favored her with a grin. "Right. I ate the guy workin' the counter and knicked the record. What else do you need to hear?"

"What musical?"

"Not even gonna mention. Took a bloody decade to get those songs outta my head." He shook his head. "Let's just say it was one of the only things out there as wacky as her. That should explain enough."

"I take it you're not an *Interview with the Vampire* kinda guy, are you?"

"Hell no. Pitt playing a sap who's bloody Angel all over again? What a bloody rip. It's good for a laugh, and all that, but not much else. Truth be told, Slayer, most monster flicks are only good for a laugh. Take *The Exorcist*."

"*The Exorcist* was funny?"

"Hilarious. Ever see it?"

Buffy frowned, wiggling in spite of herself. "My mom didn't let me."

"Didn't *let* you?" he sputtered. "You're the bloody Slayer, aren't you?"

"Yeah, well, I wasn't when I asked if I could watch it. And if you haven't noticed, my life hasn't exactly been calm over the last few years."

Spike stared at her a moment longer, then barked out a laugh and shook his head. "You must. It's the funniest film out there. We'll make a date out of it when we get outta here. What do you say?"

"Maybe when the earth rotates backwards."

His eyes brightened the challenge. "You mean it, Slayer? 'Cause I know a fella who knows a demon. Probably not as hard as it sounds."

She had nothing to say to that, so she didn't try, and what followed was a long and oddly comfortable silence. It was strange that she felt so calm. After all, the murderer of two slayers sat only a few feet away from her, but the panic she knew she should feel on an instinctive level failed to surface. And Spike seemed equally relaxed. Aside from expected threats that surfaced every now and then, he had yet to lay a finger on her. She owed a lot to his hatred of boredom.

*The power inside Sunnydale High fails and two vamps crash through the windows. The night before St. Vigeous. A day early. People scream in*

*hysterical confusion. Then Spike enters, accompanied with a herd of cronies.*

*"What can I say?" he drawls. "I couldn't wait."*

The other memories came then, flooding in without waiting for permission.

*Willow's panic. "We can't run, that would be wrong. Could we hide? I mean, if that Spike guy is leading the attack..."*

*Giles's cogent patience. "Well, he can't be any worse than any other creature you've faced."*

*Angel's earth-shattering declaration. "He's worse. Once he starts something, he doesn't stop until everything in his path is dead."*

For whatever reason, Spike had stopped now—now when killing her would be the simplest thing in the world. Her mind wanted to rationalize that it was the fight he loved; the fight and everything that came with it, and therefore killing the Slayer without a struggle involved would be tedious.

And yet he had been willing not so long ago. The previous Halloween had transformed her into something even weaker than what she was now. She'd been more than defenseless—she'd been someone else entirely. She'd been trapped in a body that did not recognize her.

He had tried to kill her then. Why were things different now?

It happened fast—everything suddenly became clear. Everything. The clouds parted and she saw things as she hadn't before. One significant thing had changed since then: Drusilla. She had been there to fight for—to kill for. Now she was gone. When Buffy had last seen Spike, he had been confident that he could win his insane lover's heart. Not much time had passed and he was back—without Dru at his side.

What had happened? The need for knowledge surged her veins but she didn't want to stir up past hurt.

*And since when do we care about the evil thing's feelings?*

*"Slayer?"*

Buffy blinked and looked up. His eyes, much like his tone, were soft and conversational. He seemed to warm to her with each passing

second, and she knew that had to wig him out as much as did her. "Yeah?"

Spike paused, and though she didn't know why, she got impression that he wanted to say something profound. Say something that meant something more than the dance they were currently performing around each other. That some of the thoughts occupying her head were in his, too, and that he shared her need to make sense of them.

If that was the case, though, he apparently talked himself out of it. "What's your favorite color?"

She lifted a shoulder. "Don't have one."

"You must be the hardest person to shop for in the world."

"Why do you care?"

"Just askin'. Dru was simple. Get her a few dolls, a severed limb of an ancient demon, and maybe a pint full of virgin blood and she was satisfied."

"And to that, a major ick."

"Don't knock it till you try it."

"Not planning on trying it anytime soon."

"Exactly. Don't knock it, then." At that, he shuddered and slapped a hand against his stomach. "Bloody hell," he murmured. "Knew I shouldn't have mentioned food."

Buffy went cold. "What?"

"Council wankers didn't feed me before...well, they were pretty much countin' on an all out vamp/slayer bash."

"And you haven't..." Sense was not being made here. At all. "All right...that's it. What's going on?"

"What?"

"You weren't fed...and you've been trapped with a weakened slayer for...God knows how long, and you..."

He looked at her like she was the crazy one here, which only pissed her off more.

"You're a vampire!" Buffy all but screamed. "What the hell are you trying to prove?"

"Are we back to wantin' a death wish?"

"I want answers, Spike. Now. From everything Angel's told me about you, from everything Giles has dug up in the library... You have number three sitting right here, and you—"

His brow furrowed. "What, Slayer?" he demanded. "You're complainin' that I'm not killin' you? Sounds to me like you're the one off her bird. I told you, don't fancy just sitting around here with nothin' to do. I can handle a bit of hunger. Rest assured, pet, it's nothin' personal. I want to kill you just as dead as you want me."

"Want you?"

"Dead."

Buffy bit her tongue, and she saw his eyes flicker and his nostrils flare.

Then he started to laugh, and she thought she might melt into a puddle of embarrassment.

"Vanity, vanity," Spike drawled. "Is that it? You're afraid I fancy you? Or is it the other way around? 'Cause not that I'm not flattered, but—"

"You are such a prick."

"Gotta rather big one, yeah."

"You're disgusting, and I'll kill you before I let you touch me." Shivers crawled across her skin, bunching flesh into tiny goose pimples. Every hair on her arm stood at attention. "Stay away from me."

"Not exactly an option in here, love." Spike edged nearer, likely just to piss her off. "Besides, I'm the one with the brawn, remember?"

"And obviously not the brains."

Spike scowled. "Watch it, pet."

"Well, come on—you've had the Slayer pinned for what...a really long time. Not only that, but your tummy's rumbling. And you haven't even tried? I'm amazed that you have the gall to call Angel housebroken."

Even as the words left her mouth, she had absolutely no idea why she was talking.

The next thing she knew, Spike had yanked her to her feet and had her pressed into the wall. Her eyes met his strained yellow gaze,

his demon ridges melting out the human façade that he wore so well. And suddenly, her body flushed cold with fear. True fear. She hadn't known she could feel real fear anymore. Not after Angelus.

Spike was proving that she wasn't as seasoned as she thought.

"All right, kitten," he snarled, his fangs skimming her throat. "You want the Big Bad? Here he is. The full. Didn't think you'd ever be a willin' victim—"

"Oh, shut up!" Buffy snapped. "If you're gonna do it, do it. Don't talk my head off."

He growled again. "Right then. Less talk, more feed. You ready, Slayer? Here's your bloody death wish."

She had every reason to believe him. He had her against the wall, his hands curled around her upper arms, his chest pressing her breasts, and the undeniable feel of his arousal digging into her stomach. A contended purr rumbled through him, and in a beat, she felt the prickle of fangs at her neck.

Buffy gasped and screwed her eyes shut. Her legs trembled and her body throbbed. And suddenly, she was fighting the incredibly *bad* impulse to thrust herself against his erection. God, something was seriously wrong with her. This was not a moment to swoon. This was not a moment to wonder how Spike's mouth would feel against hers, how his cock would feel deep inside her body. He was nuzzling her throat, his fangs pricking at her skin, and there was nothing to suggest this wasn't the end.

What was he waiting for?

Then it came. His fangs slid across her skin, so tenderly she felt it all the way down to her clit. God, she was nuts. She barely cared that he had drawn blood. It was a gentle caress, almost affectionate, and he withdrew just seconds after stealing the first taste. Buffy nearly collapsed in need as he tightened his grip on her, aching and desperate and about to do something really, really stupid.

She never got the chance. In a flash, Spike snarled and pushed himself away from her, slamming her against the wall. The air was knocked from her lungs, and she collapsed into a boneless heap.

God he was *furious*.

"You bloody bitch!" he screamed. "Bloody rotten bitch! Look what you've done to me!"

Buffy blinked and scampered to the nearest corner. "Spike—"

"It's all your fault!" Spike growled, whirling to face her again. "God, I'm gonna kill you. Drink from your bloody brainstem. All this! All your—"

"What are you talking about?"

"You're the bloody reason Dru left me! The reason everythin' went so *fucking bad*." He stopped and laughed bitterly, shaking his head. "Remind me never to call truce with you again. Why the *fuck* didn't you *beat it over my head* that it's against the rules? Stupid bitch. You should've staked me for goin' so fucking soft. Sod the world. She—"

"I told you as much when—"

"All I see is the Slayer," he quipped in a derisive falsetto. "You're poisoned with her, Spikey. Can't see anything else. You hurt my daddy." He turned his back to her and started screaming at the opposite wall. "Well, fuck your bloody daddy! I'd've killed him a thousand times over for what he did to you!"

"To who?" Buffy squeaked.

"To either of you!" Spike froze in shock, but began pacing again before either of them could dwell on the admission. "None of it meant a lick to him. He played her against me. He played *you* from every angle from Sunday. But she'd never see it that way. Neither of you would. Nuh uh. To her, it was because of you." He forced a pained laugh. "Have you ever heard anythin' more ridiculous? I did it to save you? *You*?" His hard strides became more pronounced. "And you know what really smarts? What really yanks my chain?" He didn't even pretend to wait for her reply. "She was right! I have you here, every vamp's dream, an' what so I do? Make bleeding conversation! What have you done to me?! What have..." Some semblance of calm began to fight through the outrage. And then he stalked toward her again, pulling her to her feet with such ferocity that even he seemed unnerved. "You're the Slayer," he said, voice unnaturally soft, his eyes feral. "Things shouldn't be this bugged up."

A war of emotions surged within her, each battling for superiority.

*"This should be a kick."*

*"I violently dislike you."*

"It's not my fault," Buffy finally replied, struggling though her useless muscles whined in protest. "I didn't trust you. I *told* you that it was the worst idea ever. *You* came to *me*, you arrogant jackass. You wanted *my* help. It's not my fault that whatever you did just wasn't enough for her. I—"

"Shut your gob!"

"Well, it's the truth!"

"That's it. Sod all the bloody reservations." And that was it. She understood. Negotiations were over. Spike growled ferociously and lunged, mouth fastening over the ghost of a bite he'd just given her.

But the second her blood touched his tongue, his animosity melted with a moan. His grip on her loosened as lust overpowered outrage, and his fingers began rubbing soothing circles into her sore skin. His vampiric ridges disappeared the next second. And then—oh god—it was all Spike. His lips were on her throat, laving the small wound in her skin, and the hands that held her began to tremble. Buffy gasped and curled her arms around him, barely aware of anything but the feel of his mouth on her and his denim-clad erection thrusting against her pussy. God, she had never been so turned on in her life.

Spike dipped a hand between them, lightly caressing her skin through the thin material of her skirt, his mouth exploring the length of her throat.

"Oh god," she moaned, her head falling back. "Oh my god."

"Buffy..."

She didn't know who sounded more surprised. The world came rushing back the next instant, she almost collapsed. Her body was on fire. Her heart hammered. Every inch of her trembled and ached. She was wet for him. God, she was *wet* for Spike. Spike, who was panting and looking at her like she was the hybrid of Heaven and Hell. Lust burned his eyes and blood was on his lips. Her blood. And she'd let it

happen. She'd let it happen with a vampire. A vampire that was not Angel. A vampire without a soul.

"This is wrong," she heard him say.

That was the understatement of the year.

Something resembling resentment burned her veins, and Buffy pounced on it before it abandoned her. "Really?" she spat, hand going to her neck. "What the hell are you thinking?"

His back was to her. He didn't even bother playing dumb. If the hostility in her voice affected him, he did not show it. And even through the darkness, she could see him quivering. "I don't know," he replied uneasily. "God, Slayer...I...Bloody Dru. It's all her fault. Her fuckin' fault. Got this idea in my head that won't go away. I came here to kill you, kitten. To prove to her that...that you...you're just a girl."

She balked. "Just a girl?"

"No." Spike's voice hardened. "*No. Not just a girl.* You're the Slayer." He whirled around to face her again, his eyes blazing with familiar outrage. Good. Outrage was good. Buffy knew outrage. She knew how to react to outrage. Kissing and groping and dry-humping—yeah, those were things she wasn't so good at. "You're the fucking Slayer, for Chrissake! It's wrong. Don't you think I know that? And if she hadn't opened her big trap..."

Buffy's blood ran cold. "What are you saying?"

"I'm sayin' I killed that bloody Kralik fellow so I could have a go at you, myself. Give Dru your head on a stick. Prove that you mean *nothing* to me." Another growl tore from his throat. "Bloody hell, what's wrong with me? I've killed me two slayers, and I enjoyed the hell out of it. Why are *you* so sodding different? What makes you so special? Why can't... Why do you torture me?"

Buffy couldn't think—couldn't move—couldn't breathe. What he was saying was beyond impossible—and what's more, he knew it. He knew it.

"Because you're screwed up!" she screamed.

*And you enjoyed it. What does that make you?*

He chuckled bitterly. "Understatement of the bloody year."

"Stay away from me."

“Gladly.”

Empty minutes filled awkward silence. There was nothing to say. The impression of his lips against her skin blazed with sizzling warmth, but she ignored it. She had to ignore it—had to rid herself of such aberrant thoughts. She would not allow him to poison her heart.

However, the rage she craved was out of reach. Spike looked just as shaken—his eyes screaming with his confusion.

“It’s wrong,” he said again, though she got the impression that he wasn’t speaking to her.

There was no time to mourn the loss of silence. “You’re damn right it is,” Buffy spat without thought.

“Bloody Dru.”

“You can’t blame that on Drusilla. She didn’t make you—”

“No?”

Buffy shook her head. “She planted the idea. It wasn’t her fault that you decided to act on it.

“This wasn’t my...I didn’t mean for that to happen.” When she didn’t answer immediately, he looked at her pointedly. “It’s not like I’m enjoyin’ this, pet. It was wrong enough when Angel... When he...”

Another silence settled over them. Somewhere deep down, Buffy knew that she should have felt safer now; she knew that he wasn’t going to kill her. That he *couldn’t* kill her because of this...whatever it was.

But she didn’t. If anything, she felt more vulnerable than ever, and she didn’t know why.

Finally, Spike huffed out a sigh and reached for his cigarettes. “I’m sorry,” he said shortly.

Buffy licked her lips and hugged her knees to her chest.

So was she.

BUFFY HAD THOUGHT things would be better if Spike stopped talking, but she was incredibly wrong. There were times when quiet killed. After just a few minutes of his eyes watching her heatedly, she found herself fidgety and self-conscious.

Spike finally sighed. "So..." he said slowly. "How's Joyce?"

Granted, silence had its virtues. "You don't get to do that."

"Do what?"

"What you did to me...just a few minutes ago...and then ask about my family as if you care."

He huffed, and she saw frustration flash behind his confused eyes. Funny how his gaze could reflect and he could not. It wasn't fair; Angel had revealed so little in all the time she had known him, and he'd never poured so much through a single look.

"It's not all about you, princess. I like your mum. She's got spunk."

"Yeah. And you'd kill her the minute you got the chance."

He arched a cool brow. "I've had the chance. Remember? If I wanted that, she'd've been dead a long time ago." Spike shook his head. "You never locked me out."

"Something I intend to fix as soon as I get out of here."

"That was Dru's first clue," he continued, speaking as though she

had not. "I have an invite to your place and haven't offered the lot of you. Didn't even touch your mum. Dru can't understand things like that. There are very few humans that I like, and your mum happens to be one of them. Dru can't handle that."

"She shouldn't. It's not natural."

Spike ignored her. "I don't get it. One little deal with you and suddenly I'm not demon enough for her."

Buffy was not impressed. "Killing two slayers doesn't turn girls on the way it used to, I guess."

"Fuck, those were the best nights of my unlife—I'd give anything to do them over again. Add in a few moves and spunk that I could brag about now."

She shivered in disgust. "More than you already do?"

"Hell yeah. And once I get outta here, I'll go find someone to eat right quick. That's what I do." Spike sneered. "It's what I'm supposed to do."

"And I'm supposed to kill you."

"Not if I kill you first."

"Been there. Tried that."

He grinned. "Tables turn when you're defendin' your own hide." A pause. "You gonna sick Angel on me for what I did? For takin' a little taste of what's his? 'You messed with my girl' kinda thing?"

"I don't hide behind my boyfriend."

"You'll do it yourself, then. Is that right?"

Buffy nodded stoically. "That's right."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

That was a bluff if she'd ever heard one. She wasn't sure she could kill him now—not without a reason. And maybe that was what he was trying to do, remind her of what a monster he was so she'd make his death a quick one when this was said and done. He couldn't kill her so he was banking on her to put him out of his misery.

He'd changed. Against all odds, all logic, Spike had changed. He'd changed on his own.

Whatever Dru had said...

The thoughts complied into dark, looming clouds.

"How's your mum dealin' with the slayin' and—"

"Stop talking about my mother!" Buffy wobbled to her feet and stumbled wearily against the wall. "I don't care what Dru told you. What you *allowed* yourself to believe. You're a vampire, Spike. An evil, disgusting vampire. We're *not* friends. We don't chat and ask about each other's lives. I don't give a damn why your psychotic girlfriend left you! That is not my problem. My only problem right now is... well, let's just say I'm looking at him." She felt her lower lip wobble when she saw the stricken look on his face, but she didn't let herself falter. *Not giving into him. Not giving in.* "Just leave me alone."

Spike bounded to his feet, malice sparkling behind his eyes. "Right, Slayer. No need to say more. If you want the Big Bad, that's what you'll bloody get."

"I want you to snap out of it."

"You think this is any fun for me?" he barked. "I'm supposed to kill you. It shouldn't take *so fucking much* to kill you. Can't do it, though. I can't do it. I want it. God, I want it. I want you outta my fuckin' head. I oughta rip your head right off your neck and be done with it for what you've done to me." He chuckled bitterly. "Seems so simple. You know...I can always have it both ways."

She shuddered as he stepped forward.

"Make all of this go away for you, make it so these feelings are right. That's it. I'll drain you dry, Slayer. Then I'll make you like me."

A shiver of fear raced down her spine. "I will never, ever be like you."

Spike paused, a wicked smile breaking across his face. "Don't get your knickers in a twist. I'm just teasin'."

"Don't even begin to play that game with me."

"I wouldn't want you all fangy, love. You're enough of a bitch as it is. Besides...you couldn't handle that much power."

The rebuttal was instinctive; she couldn't help herself. "Yes, I could!"

Spike smiled but didn't say anything. He didn't need to. The look on his face got the point across better than words could have hoped.

Buffy flushed. "I hate you."

"No, you don't. And that's the problem, innit?"

"Get over yourself."

"I will when you do."

"I swear..." She shook her head. "When we get out of here, the first thing I'm gonna do is—"

"Take a cold shower?"

"You're disgusting."

"Yeah." He was simply patronizing her now, and enjoying every minute of it. "You, too."

Buffy was too angry to form words. Too upset and confused to see where the line ended, or where it had been crossed. He had retreated into himself again, burying the part of him that had been hard and passionate just a few minutes ago. He was so different from every vampire she had fought in the past.

She knew that, of course. Angel had told her that.

Angel. Buffy attempted to focus, but at the moment, she couldn't conjure the image of his face. He'd haunted her all summer and for some stupid reason, at the moment, she'd forgotten what he looked like.

"How long have we been here?" she asked.

Spike arched an eyebrow. "Thought you wanted me to leave you alone."

"I do."

"Then—"

"After we get out of here. I want you to leave me alone after we get out of here." Buffy sighed. "After we get out of here, I want you to leave town and never come back. Never. You got me?"

Spike's eyes darkened. "Yeah, kitten. I got you real good."

"Good. Then we understand each other."

"I wouldn't go that far." He paused. "You understand what you want to."

"As opposed to you. You see what you want to."

"Right now I see a bitch with her head so far up her arse that she doesn't get the big picture."

“What? That you’re God’s gift? That you’re a demon who has tried to kill me, my friends, and Angel more times than—”

“We’ve both had our outs with your boyfriend, love,” Spike retorted. “And yeah. I have wanted you dead. Still do. Can’t stand the bloody sight of you.”

“Then what?”

“I told you, it’s Dru.” With a growl, Spike pushed himself to his feet and began pacing again. He would walk himself into a trench one day if wasn’t careful. “She has visions—right. Visions about things to come. She knows me better than anyone. And if she says... God no. It can’t be that. I came here to prove it. I—”

Buffy rolled her eyes. “And yet, all you do is annoy.”

“Why can’t I kill you?” he screamed, attacking the quiet with such ferocity that she thought she might actually jump out of her skin. “I know I want to. I feel it, Slayer. I feel...I need blood. I’m starvin’ half to death and you’re right there. Can’t eat. Can’t feed. Can’t kill you, and I don’t know why. I’m a vampire, love. I’m a vampire, you’re the Chosen bird. Vampires kill the Chosen bird...that’s what we do.” He stomped toward her with intent, his bumpies bursting through his human mask.

Buffy was on her feet the next instant, little good it did. He had her trapped in the corner, and even if he didn’t, there was nowhere to run.

“So what makes you so special?” he demanded, his eyes sizing her up. “William the Bloody here. I’ve never shown anyone a lick of mercy. So tell me why I can’t kill you. No reason. Nothin’ holdin’ me back. I’m in a room alone with the Slayer and I...”

The harshness of any vampire while in game face was something she had never before appreciated—not like she should have, at least. Angel’s demonic countenance was something that he had a habit of hiding. He vamped very infrequently, even as Angelus. Spike, on the other hand, had hidden his human face from her for a long while, save the night of their first meeting. She hadn’t seen him sans fangs until the night he’d changed her life. Until the night he’d come to her for help.

The night he'd gone against everything she knew about demons.

*"We like to talk big, vampires do. I'm going to destroy the world.' It's just tough guy talk."*

He had her pushed against the wall the next second, and there it was again. The shimmer of forbidden excitement that rushed through her blood, coupled with the sudden, unwanted pool of wetness between her thighs. He gasped against her, and—oh god—she felt it. Spike's hard, denim-clad cock probed her mercilessly, thrusting against her pussy and driving her crazy. His was panting now, breathing hard against her lips, his eyes wide with confusion.

This was something she'd only shared with Angel while copping feels during routine patrols—then, and that one night where everything had changed. She had it again, but the vampire against her was not Angel. The vampire was a slayer of her kind—one that had killed and would kill again. One that wanted her. Now. Here. She felt it. He wanted her, and there wasn't a soul to blame it on. He wanted her.

The anger in Spike's eyes slowly drained, though he refused to slip from game face. He was studying her curiously—the look he gave her told her that he was fully aware that she was wet and aching with need, and where she expected him to mock her, he did not. As if wanting the enemy was the most natural and just thing in the world.

"There's no such thing as havin' it both ways," he said huskily at her ear, the impassioned growl that tagged his words making her knees weak. "Either you're...food...or you're..." He thrust his hips forward, earning a strangled moan. "Right then, Slayer. If it's one or the other... You're the girl and I'm the one who's supposed to deal with it. Here it goes."

There was a flash of fangs, and that was all she cared to see. Buffy snapped her eyes shut and grasped him by the biceps. Something pierced her neck and all inner fortitude collapsed. It was futile, struggling against him or denying what she wanted. What she really, really wanted.

It was bad. It was disturbing. It was unnatural.

*Hell, it's my birthday.*

Was that even a reason? Did it matter anymore?

She cried out in surrender and threw her arms around his neck, tugging him into her and thrusting herself against his erection. That was it. She felt it. He felt it. He moaned almost helplessly, and the fangs vanished into a series of wet, needy kisses. His lips were soft and nearly affectionate against her skin and some hidden part of her swelled with warmth. It was a loving sense of being unloved. Desire in its rawest form.

“Fuck,” Spike moaned, peppering her bloodied throat with kisses. “Fuck, Buffy. What are you doing to me? What *have* you done to me?”

*Angel*, her conscience screamed. *You can't do this to him.*

He pulled back, his eyes wide and vulnerable. He growled at her lips and tugged at her legs until she wrapped them around his waist. “Ohh, fuck, kitten,” he purred, cupping her cheek. “This is gonna be so much fun.”

Then—*oh god*—he swallowed her in his kiss, and the last symptom of resistance abandoned her wholly. Whatever hell she put herself through in days to come was worth his kiss. His kiss was so singular to anything she'd ever experienced—he melted savagery with yearning, desire with anger, and tenderness with cruelty.

Her time with Angel had been slow and exploratory. Not once had he been brutal or savage. Truly, the only time she could remember Angel getting forceful with her was during their first kiss—the one that had caused him to vamp uncontrollably. The night he'd taken her virginity, he'd been careful and tempered, not once letting his demon loose even if she knew he was dancing a fine line with control. It was one of the reasons he had originally insisted that there could be nothing beyond friendship between them.

True, it hadn't been until he'd lost his soul that she'd truly seen him as the vampire he was. Her love for him had clouded her judgment at every turn. And she'd learned her lesson. Oh, how she'd learned her lesson. Not once since his return had she allowed herself to be caught so thoroughly off guard.

Spike was entirely different, and it didn't take knowing him to know that. He was able to pour outrage and compassion into his kiss without breaking her. He thrust himself against hers furiously, as

though trying to shove her through the wall. He was angry. He was impassioned. He was beyond mystified. He wanted to vent that rage and she was the nearest target.

She was the nearest target, and she was all his.

"Slayer," he moaned, wrapping an arm around her waist as his other hand pulled at the hem of her dress. The next thing she knew, the fabric was bunched around her hips, and his fingers were outlining her pussy through the thin, drenched cotton of her underwear. "Mmm...you're so wet for me."

"Who says it's for you?" she gasped, bucking against him.

Spike found her earlobe and tugged with his teeth, slipping his fingers under the crotch of her panties and rubbing her sopping folds. "Oh, baby," he growled. "I think it's for me."

There were no words. None at all. God, no one had prepared her for this. Angel had been very hands-off during their time together. He'd asked without searching, knowing that she was untouched, and that the wrong move could send her screaming. He hadn't wanted to frighten her or push too hard.

At the time, it had seemed considerate. Now, she just felt robbed.

Spike had no such reservations. He knew this was only her second shot at intimacy, and he didn't care. He didn't care that their past had been nothing but violence. He was not tender, though, and she didn't want tender. Tenderness suggested something more complicated than lust. Tenderness suggested genuine affection, and that was something he could not possibly feel. Not for her, at the very least.

*And I'm here why?*

"You're here because curiosity killed the Slayer," he purred, his fingers finding her clit. "Cause you knew I'd be here."

Was that even remotely possible?

"No," she protested weakly, thrusting against him. Her own hand remembered itself after a few mindless seconds and began tugging at the clasp of his jeans, finally freeing his hard length with a shared groan.

"Unh," Buffy whimpered, her fingers curling around his cock.

Angel hadn't let her touch him. Another step taken to keep her from running away, she'd guessed. Now she was holding Spike's cock, and damn if anything had ever felt so right. "Oh god."

"Oh, fuck me, baby," Spike moaned, making her blood hot. "Squeeze me just like that." He dropped his mouth to her throat again, sucking hard as he pushed her against the cold steel of the partition. The growls he released were deep and possessive. She was not his, he knew, but for the moment she might as well have been.

"You like that?" he growled, thrusting into her hand. "You like feelin' me stroke your clit?"

"Ohhh..."

"Such a hot little hand."

Her heart was pounding so hard, she was sure it would break her chest. Buffy threw her head back with another long groan, and Spike seized the advantage. The dress was suddenly gone, whipped over her head, and except for her undergarments, she was naked in his arms.

"You're so warm," he murmured.

She said nothing, squeezing his cock again instead.

"Mmmm," he purred. "Keep doin' that an' you'll find a mess on your hands."

"No need to be crude," she replied.

He grinned, arched a brow, and pinched her clit. "Come on, Slayer," he rasped. "I wanna hear you scream."

"Not gonna happen."

"Want me to tug at it with my teeth? I'll do it. You know I will."

Small shivers exploded through her body at the thought, and for long seconds, she couldn't form words. She tightened her grip around his cock again, and was distracted by the catlike coo of pleasure that hissed through his lips. He was losing and she knew it. The dick always controlled people like Spike—it just took the right pair of hands.

But he surprised her the next second when his fingers suddenly abandoned her, leaving her aching and unsatisfied. Her clit throbbed. Her pussy ached. And he just grinned at her.

"You bastard," she growled.

"I wanna hear you scream for me."

"Learn to live with disappointment."

She furrowed her brow and prepared to release her hold on his cock, but ended up squeezing him tighter instead.

Spike chuckled with another coo of delight. "Yeah, baby," he drawled. "Do it again."

"You asshole."

"Want more, you gotta scream." He gave her clit a good tap. "Tell me who you're with, Slayer. I'm not him. Got that? I'm not him."

"Yeah, I can tell. *He* would have satisfied me by now."

God, that was such a lie, but it worked. Spike growled angrily and the next thing she knew, her back was pressed to the floor, his mouth tearing at her laced breasts. His duster suddenly flew across the room, and before she realized what she was doing, she was dragging his T-shirt over his head and shoving his jeans to mid thigh.

"Lose your knickers," he snapped.

Buffy drew in a breath and complied quickly. She was too turned on to argue.

Then he was poised above her, the head of his cock dancing over her wet flesh, sliding between her pussy lips only to withdraw again. It was enough to drive any sane person mad, and for a crazy instant, she felt she could finally relate to Dru. He palmed her breasts with near reverence, finally ripping off her bra and tossing the offending garment somewhere behind him.

"Now, love," he rasped gutturally. "You ready to scream?"

"Not on your life." She sounded more certain than she felt.

"Not a problem."

Then he plunged inside of her, and the world was made new.

"Oh my god," Spike gasped, tossing his head back, his eyes shining with something she hadn't seen before. He glanced down at her and grinned. "Hold on tight, darling. This is gonna be a wild ride."

Buffy barely had time to gasp. The next thing she knew, he had withdrawn from her body almost fully, then slammed inside her

again. She felt torn, but pleasure beat out pain. The memories of her one night with Angel suddenly floundered—shades of a bad memory made beautiful again by the man above her.

She blinked away tears and dug her nails into his forearms. “Ohhh.”

“Such a tight little cunt,” he gasped, drilling into her in a hard, steady rhythm. “Fuck, baby.”

She didn’t want him to see how much she was enjoying this. “Guh.”

“You’re so warm and tight.”

“Shut up.”

Spike’s beautiful face melted into a scowl, his thrusts growing harder and more violent. She squeaked inelegantly, throwing her head back with a throaty moan. “Oh, god,” she whimpered.

“You’re with *me* now,” he snarled, nipping at her throat as he bruised her with force. “You’re with *me*, Slayer.”

“Ohhh, god!”

“Say it!”

His cock was striking some bundle of nerves deep within her that she hadn’t known existed, ripping harsh cries from her lips and sending shock waves of absolute euphoria through her body. It was hard and rough and god, she loved it. She couldn’t get enough, blazing in the space between heaven and hell.

“Say it, Slayer!” Spike growled, his hand slipping between their bodies to capture her clit. “Tell me who you’re with.”

“Screw you.”

That might have sounded a tad more convincing had it not ridden out on a moan.

He stroked her clit furiously, his other hand at her throat as he pounded her into the ground. The air tasted raw and heavy. She was barely aware of her answering thrusts—of the need that coursed through her blood and drove her to recapture him every time he pulled away. Then his fangs flashed and dove, piercing her breast and searing her with a blindingly hard stab of pain.

She screamed and bucked. He grunted and feasted. Then the

pain dwindled, and her body lit with pleasure. Pleasure that melted into panic before drowning in ecstasy once more.

*I can't be enjoying this.*

Spike finally glanced up and slipped his fangs out of her, licking his blood-smeared lips with a predatory grin. The hard smack of their bodies echoed off the walls. His was still massaging her clit, still determined, it seemed, to both bruise her and make her sing to the stars. Their battle had taken form of something hot and primal, and they were fighting to give each other fresh scars.

"Say it," he snarled again. "Goddammit, Slayer, say it!"

Defiance charged her veins. "No," she spat, scissoring her legs around his waist. There was a sudden surge of strength, and the next thing she knew, she flipped him over, his erection stabbing deeper into her body and prompting a long hiss through her teeth. Spike's angry growls melted into a whimper at that, his hands immediately finding her hips.

"Oh, Buffy..."

He sounded reverent, and the notion chilled her. Spike wasn't supposed to moan at her like that.

"Shut up," she spat again, pressing her palms to his chest as she bounced on his cock.

Hurt flashed across his face and she chose to ignore it.

"Buffy—"

"Shut *up*."

He dug his fingers into her hips. "Fuck you," he growled, thrusting up hard. "You're with me, Slayer. I'm right here."

"You—"

"You're with me, and you're gonna gimme a scream." Then he surprised her. He cupped her cheek tenderly, his other hand roaming over her bloodied breasts, down her slippery abdomen before settling over her pussy again, nimble fingers pressing over her clit with something close to affection. "You're with *me*, Buffy. You're with me."

She sobered, tears stinging her eyes again. "Ohh..."

"It's all right. You're with me. I've got you."

“Spike...”

“Scream for me. I wanna hear you scream when you come.” His head fell against the floor, thrusting upward. “Wanna hear you scream when you drench my cock.”

She shook her head. “I can’t.”

If she gave him everything he wanted, there would be nothing left of herself.

“Yes, you can. It’s all right to like this, sweetheart.”

“What did you call me?”

Spike bit his lip and closed his eyes, rolling his hips with her every thrust. “Nothin’.”

“No, I think it was something.”

He smirked. “Can’t remember. Guess you’ll just have to pump it outta me.”

The last thing she wanted to do was comply, but her body ached with lasting need. Buffy pressed her hands against his chest again, bucking her hips once before she began to ride him in earnest. Her ass slapped against his balls with every bounce. He remained focused on her clit, and the sensation of his calloused fingers struggling to keep up with her wild gallop did little more than send her further into the fire.

“God, Slayer...” he moaned. “What are you doing to me?”

“Pumping it out of you.”

“Okay, *sweetheart*.” He grinned. “But you’re still gonna scream.”

“You first.”

“Don’t think so.” Then he surprised her, sitting up and sliding her down so that she was in his lap. His fangs descended again, and before she could scream her protest, he sank his incisors into her waiting throat.

She trembled around his cock as her body exploded into orgasm, and his name tumbled from her lips in a deafening scream. He muffled his triumphant roar into her bloodied flesh, the vibrations rocking her insides until he finally pulled away from her neck. Watching ruby drops of liquid dribble down his chin sweetened the

climax all the more, and as he spilled himself inside her, she collapsed against him.

The room was alight with color. Her ears were ringing, and Spike was tugging at her ear with his teeth.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“Don’t mention it,” she replied sleepily, and then slumped against him, completely sated.

HE WAS LICKING the dried blood off her breast, a contented purr rumbling through his throat, his hips rocking rhythmically against hers. It took a few minutes for light to pierce the fog swimming around her head. She felt his cock hardening within her, felt her body's treacherous reaction as fire lit her veins.

God, he couldn't be doing this to her again.

"I could stay inside you forever," Spike sighed, his lips and tongue tenderly caring to the wounds his fangs had inflicted. "You're so tight, baby. Feel so fucking wonderful."

Buffy tried hard to repress the shiver that his words inspired, but she couldn't. It was all so new. She hadn't had The Talk following her night with Angel on account of, well, everything. And ever since he'd returned from Hell, they'd mutually declared the subject of sex off limits. Safer for everyone.

"Mmm..." He flashed her a wicked grin, slipping his fingers between them once more. Her clit was throbbing, and she jumped a bit when he began to massage her again. "Buffy..."

Her heart pounded. The sound of her name on his lips like that as his cock slid in and out of her pussy was perhaps the most erotic thing she'd ever heard.

“Ohhh...”

“That feel good, kitten?” His mouth fell to her neck, sucking eagerly at her skin. “Come for me. Wanna feel you come again.”

The words were ultimately what sent her over the edge—the words wrapped around the rough arousal in his voice. Buffy threw her head back, choking a pleased sob as her body spasmed violently around his. She felt him jerk against her, his arms crushing her to his chest as he roared into climax.

Every nerve in her body was alive. Buffy didn’t realize how hard she was trembling until she felt his lips against her shoulder, and the unexpected tenderness of his kiss served as the proverbial bucket of ice water. Slowly, timidly, she willed herself to meet his eyes, and was stunned with what she saw.

He wasn’t smirking arrogantly or wagging his brows. Instead, his eyes were awash with astonishment. Buffy heaved for air as though drowning. She couldn’t breathe enough.

“Let me go,” she said suddenly, wiggling on his lap and earning little more than a long, strangled moan. “Let me go! Spike, damn you!”

Suddenly his cock slipped out of her, and she was left, her mind panicked but her body pliant with the orgasms he’d given her. She didn’t pause to think—rather, scurried across the small room to her corner, pressing her sweat-laced back to the steel wall with a long, trembling sigh.

There were no words. She was too embarrassed to speak.

Though hardly any time had passed, it had taken longer than she thought. The first waves of unspeakable remorse. The knowledge that she had betrayed everything she stood for. The look on Angel’s face when he found out what she...

Spike rustled from where she left him, readjusting his jeans without muttering a word. He looked wounded, abandoned, but didn’t make a move to follow her. Instead, he edged to the opposite wall, finding her dress and sliding it to her without a word.

Buffy bit her lip and closed her fingers around the fabric. She met his eyes cautiously and sighed.

“Go on,” he said, his tone clipped. “Get dressed.”

She was shaking too hard to move, and instead tucked the dress under her arms so that her breasts were covered. The leather of his discarded duster tickled her bare leg, but she made no move to return it. She wanted to melt into the shadows—disappear completely and sleep until she forgot what had happened here. What she had done and how she had betrayed herself, her calling, and the guy she loved.

The silence couldn't last, of course. Spike wouldn't allow that, no matter how much space he was trying to give her. When he spoke again, his voice was small and uncertain—his tone a thousand miles from where it had just been. For all things, Spike sounded as lost as she felt. “Slayer?”

She spoke before she thought. “Shut up.”

Spike's eyes darkened. “No. You don't get to do that.”

“I said shut up. I don't want to talk about it.”

“You can imagine how bad I feel about that.”

“Stop it!”

He ignored her. Instead, he defiantly rose to his feet and paraded across the small room, grasping her by the shoulders and dragging her to her feet. Her dress fell to the ground, and she was suddenly naked against him, her pussy throbbing still from having had him inside her. And yet, despite everything, she wanted him again, and she knew that he knew it. His eyes flickered and his nostrils flared, and he pressed his cock against her, the zipper of his jeans grinding against her clit. It hurt—it felt wonderful. And she was as lost as ever.

*I'm sick. I am one sick puppy.*

“This isn't about makin' you *comfy*. You can't let me do that to you and expect—”

“I'm sorry, let you?”

Buffy struggled. Surges of what she hoped was her returning power shot through otherwise flaccid muscles, but the strain was futile. She thought about kneeling him but concluded it wasn't the best strategy. After all, despite everything that had changed, there was still nowhere to run.

Furthermore, she knew that she had no leg to stand on. Blaming

Spike was useless. She'd let it happen; hell, she'd *wanted* it. And now that it was done and logic had returned, there was nothing left but acceptance. It was time to pick up the shattered pieces and move on.

Her body trembled. "Spike..." she pleaded gently. "Please...just leave me alone."

Spike's eyes softened, but he didn't let her go. "Can't do that, Slayer," he replied, almost regretfully. "Not sure...I'm sorry, for what it's worth. Not for what we did, because that was brilliant, but I don't want you to... I won't tell a soul." He paused effectively. "Any soul."

His selflessness astounded her. For all her guilt, she hadn't even considered the damage *he* could inflict. What he could do the minute he saw Angel again—how he could destroy everything with words.

At the same time, there was no reason to believe him—nothing but the *want* to believe him. But even then, she trusted him. She didn't know how or why, but she trusted him. The look in his eyes spoke volumes.

"Really?"

She hated the neediness in her voice, but he had the power right now.

Spike offered a sad smile and nodded, slowly releasing her. "Really."

"Why?"

"Number of reasons," he replied, glancing down. "But Christ, I wasn't sure before, I sure as hell am now."

"Sure about what?"

"Dru...what she said." Spike ran a hand through his hair. "I'm not gonna keep my mouth shut because of fear of what you might do, pet. I know you'd stake me in a heartbeat if I said a word. And I'm not doin' it to spare Angel's precious feelings."

She was afraid of the answer, but the question came anyway. "Then why?"

There was a pregnant pause, his eyes shining with hurt, even if he was resigned. "I'm doin' it because you love him. It doesn't matter what happened here. Don't you think I know that? You love him, and if I made a thing outta what we did, it'd hurt you." Spike shook his

head, and glanced down with another sigh. "I don't know why I should care, so don't ask. My mind's all muddled. But I...what I do know is that... You're somethin', Slayer. Somethin' I can't..."

"WHAT ARE YOU—"

"I'm sayin' that no vamp should ever feel this way. Not about you, or any slayer. It's not right—goddammit, it's not right. Soul or no soul." He huffed. "But at least Angel has the excuse. I got squat except the accusation from a bird who chats up dollies all day."

It hit her then. Everything came tumbling down. Everything. The pieces of what he said, the way he'd held her while he'd been inside her, the soft nicknames he'd called her as he'd caressed her skin. He'd taken her with anger, but he'd held her with affection. With tenderness. With...

The room was spinning. Buffy pressed a hand to her stomach and gasped. "Oh god."

Spike glanced up. "What?"

"You...oh god. You can't! You—"

He raised his hands in protest. "I didn't say anythin'."

"You almost."

Spike blinked. "Yeah. So?" He released a long, guttural growl and began to pace again. "Do you fucking get it now? Understand why I'm so fucking horrified? She said more than... She told me that I'm bloody in love with you. She told me I can't kill you because of what I feel. She told me..." He met her eyes. "It's not true. It bloody can't be. Fuck, it's too crazy to be true...even for her. You don't even like me and I *hate* you. Only I *don't* hate you, and that's the problem. And no matter, I'm an evil thing, right? Even if it was true, I'm not daft enough to think I'll ever have more than this. I just had to see. Had to prove her wrong. Had to..." Emotion stormed his eyes, and he tore his gaze away again, focusing on the floor. "Had to have you. Just to see. God, I've buggered everything up."

"Spike." The softness in her voice surprised her, but it was authentic. "You've had me in here for hours. You've had the chance to

kill me”—she waved a bit with a weak grin—“the Slayer...and you haven’t.” Buffy pursed her lips and hazarded a step forward. “And you *are* evil. Dru can’t change that...no matter how much she says you’re not.”

He flashed a grateful smile at that. It was perhaps the most awkward moment of her life. She was standing in the dark with a vampire that hated her, her body sated from the orgasms he’d given her, reassuring him that he was a monster. More than that, she found, to her utter dismay, that she wanted him again. The fog had lifted and clarity had been returned, and god, she wanted him again. She was standing just a foot or so away from him, naked, telling him that he was evil, and she wanted him.

“And look at me,” she continued, her tone loud and forced. She needed to remind herself of who he was. What he was. Why she was utterly and irreversibly screwed. “I slept with evil.”

“Yeah.” The corners of his mouth tugging in his characteristic smirk. “And you liked it.”

“Hey—”

“Wasn’t an accusation, pet. You bloody liked it.”

“And here I was thinking you weren’t as repulsive as I’d thought.”

He scoffed. “Very funny.”

“I wasn’t aiming for funny.”

“Point is, you’re around darkness all the time. It’s natural.” The understanding in his eyes nearly tore her apart. “What’s not natural is me. Standin’ here and not wantin’ to rip your throat out. I’m not sayin’ I’m in love with you, Slayer. But I’m also not... Well, let’s just say that anything’s possible after that.”

“Spike—”

He waved a dismissive hand. “Don’t worry about it. I didn’t say anythin’. Anyway, I just wanted to let you know that. What we did here...your secret’s safe with me.”

*What we have here is an ethical dilemma*, Buffy reflected with a long sigh. He was speaking words she’d never expected from any vampire. It was as though the past had been erased. There were no more battles, no more spilt blood, no more teases or taunts or vehe-

ment threats. In the end, it was just them. Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and William the Bloody. Spike. It was Spike. Spike as in ewwww. Spike as in her self-proclaimed executioner. Spike, who had tried to kill her with more fervor than any other.

*That's not quite true, is it?*

No, it wasn't. Spike had never toyed with her the way Angelus had. Not once.

Buffy met his eyes again and was overwhelmed in his confused compassion, and just like that, some final barrier was crossed. She didn't love him. She would probably never love him. But he had given her something that no one else had. It wasn't about Drusilla or Angel—it was about them. It was about them, and tonight. And that was all she needed.

"Spike."

"Pet?"

She wet her lips, trembling. "It's not...we're not done yet."

"I was countin' on that."

"I mean...the Council." She nodded to the closed door. "We're not done. They're expecting us to fight."

"Not now." Spike shook his head. "Not after what we've done. Bloody hell, Slayer, if I couldn't do it before, what makes you think I can do it now?"

Buffy offered a watery smile, taking a step forward. Her heart was pounding, her mind racing, but she did not falter. It was wrong. It was disgusting. It was more than a little immoral. And she couldn't do this to Angel...

And yet it came so easily.

She could drown in the blue of his eyes. The intensity with which he regarded her grew with every exchange. Angel never revealed as much through a single look. It was unfair that Spike should reflect pieces of a soul that he did not possess. Where did Spike end and Buffy begin?

Oh god...

"It's not that," she whispered against his lips before sealing the space between them. Spike moaned and melted into her, his hands

going to her hips and his clad cock thrusting desperately against her wet pussy. God, he was shaking—quivering and holding her as though she would break. He cupped her face as he explored her mouth with his. He melted her with his lips, and damn, she hadn't known it was possible to reveal so much through a kiss. It was unlike anything she'd ever given or received in the past. His touch spread through her like the very origin of desire.

He maintained tenderness while refusing to hold back his passion. They were battling within seconds—teeth and tongue waged against each other as his hands explored her body. In a flash, Spike had her pressed against the wall once more. His eagerness made her burn.

And then realization hit.

This wasn't about sex. Not to Spike. Not now. He wanted her. He wanted *her*. Not any slayer. Not any *woman*. No one right now but her. He was kissing her like he loved her, touching her like he loved her, and all she could offer him was a few hours until sunrise. Until the Council decided enough was enough and came to declare a winner.

She couldn't give him anything but this moment. And even on the chance of ruining this, of breaking their peace, she had to let him know. This was all they'd ever have. She wasn't going to use him—fuel him with promises of a future that couldn't exist.

Buffy mewled in protest and broke her lips from his, then fought off a gasp as his mouth fell to her throat. "This isn't..." Words suddenly seemed bland and inadequate. There was nothing she could say to make this right. "Spike, this is..."

"Just tonight, I know." He suckled ardently at the bite mark he'd given her, and every nerve in her body exploded in ecstasy. "I get that. But fuck, Slayer...doesn't it make you wonder? Just a little? How fucking great we'd be together? You're so warm. I'm gonna drown in you. God help me..."

It was only logical that Spike—with as much as he talked—would eventually know exactly what to say. "God doesn't help creatures like you," she retorted, reaching again for his zipper. The moan that

rumbled through him as his cock sprang into her waiting hand was worth everything.

"Well, whatever he's doing works for me." He bucked against her sharply. "Just...like that, love. Stroke me just like that."

"No. Gaahh, Spike, I need—" She wrapped a leg around his waist, using her leverage to maneuver his jeans down his legs. Her other arm locked behind his neck, tugging him into her as she positioned him at her opening, teasing her slick folds with the velvety head of his erection.

"I know what you need, baby," he growled, thrusting into her with a moan of delight.

"Ohhh!"

"Oh, fuck, it gets better every time."

Her eyes watered. For being crass and obnoxious, he was also... sweet. "Really?"

Spike rested his brow against hers, panting heavily against her lips. She cried out when she felt him sliding between her lips, her body screaming in protest until he entered her again. "You're perfect."

"Oh god."

"Fuck, I knew," he murmured, kissing her cheek, then dipping his head to taste her lips again. "I had to. The first moment I saw you."

"Knew what?"

Spike sighed raggedly, holding her eyes as he moved within her. And there was nothing else like it. Nothing like the feel of him sliding in and out of her body. Nothing like the awe that powered his eyes. No one had ever looked at her like that. No one—not even Angel. Now Spike was gazing at her like she was his personal savior, his body loving her in ways that words never could. She cried out and tore a long kiss from his mouth, thrusting her hips against his with need she barely understood.

"You're so warm," he murmured. "So tight and perfect. Buffy..."

He was calling her *Buffy*. She didn't know when that had started, though she was certain it was a product of the past few hours.

"Make this never end." Spike whimpered and buried his face in her throat, his thrusts rocking her against the wall, his hands holding

her fiercely now. As though if he didn't, she'd disappear completely. "God, make this never end."

The tears threatening to spill down her cheeks were growing more and more difficult to hold back. The desperation in his voice, the need in his trembling body squeezed at her heart. Why did he have this power over her after only a few hours? "Spike..."

"I knew...I knew..."

Buffy shuddered and kissed his shoulder, her vaginal muscles tightening around him. "What did you know?" she asked, threading her fingers through his platinum locks.

"Knew *this*." He nipped at the shell of her ear, sliding a hand between their thrusting bodies to capture her clit.

"I knew..." He massaged her clit slowly, studying her face with fierce intensity. His eyes widened at every moan that whispered through her lips. Every choked sob of pleasure that wracked her body. Every time she trembled and clutched at him—like he couldn't get enough of her. "God, how I knew. Saw you dancing that night and I wanted nothin' else. Wanted this. Wanted to fuck you all night. Wanted to bury myself in your cunt and—"

"Don't say that."

"Oh, but you love it." He smirked and nipped at her lips. "My dirty little Slayer. Such a bad girl. That's why you—"

"Spike..."

His thrusts grew harder, pounding her against the wall. And while his animalesque ardor took her by storm, she was surprised at his ability to bruise her with his body and love her at the same time. The fangs and the blood were gone, leaving his ardent rumbles against her skin, lips grazing her shoulder as he held her steady against him. His nimble fingers were exploring where they were joined, applying pressure, making her nerves dance, stoking something in her toward explosion.

"Come for me, Slayer. Drench my cock."

And yeah, that was it. She exploded around him, and the world came tumbling down. Hot, white, bone-rattling euphoria shot

through her, and she chased it, bucking in wild throes as she rode out her orgasm. And all he could do was hold her. “Oh god. Spike!”

It seemed the sound of his name was all he needed. He locked an arm around Buffy’s waist, his other hand braced against the wall, thrusting madly into her until he roared and came. And even as he began to come down, his hips thrust forward—trying to capture as much as possible before it was over.

“Buffy...” he moaned.

Her name tingled every nerve in her body, and finally, the full implication of her name on his lips slammed into her with full force. Not pet, love, kitten, or Slayer. She was Buffy. Just Buffy. There was no world. There was no world. There was no Angel. There was nothing but Spike—buried within her—and kissing her brains out.

Forever passed before Spike lifted her with him, carrying her with him and lowering her to the ground. They lay face-to-face. His grip tight around her waist, his cock still buried inside her. The emotion in his eyes was overwhelming.

“I don’t know...” he murmured sleepily, grazing the love bite on her neck.

“What?”

“God, pet. None of this was supposed to happen.”

There was the truth—plain and simple. He was right. But how could either of them go back after this?

Spike shifted against her and released a trembling sigh. “I don’t know how I’m gonna...”

It was somewhat disconcerting that he could read her mind.

“You’re going to,” she said softly. “We both are.”

He shook his head, his mouth roaming over her skin. Her neck. Her breasts. Her lips. Her cheeks. Her chin. Her shoulder. He just couldn’t stop kissing her. “Now that I’ve tasted this... God, I can’t...”

“Sure you can.” Buffy closed her eyes and stretched. “And so can I.”

“You have Angel, kitten. Movin’ on isn’t exactly a big thing for you.” Spike sighed, pillowing his arm under her head, stroking her

face. "And now I'm lost. There's no place in this bloody world for a soulless prat who pines for the Slayer."

"Nothing happened here."

His eyes fell shut and his features were wrought with pain. Dammit, she could cut out her tongue. It made her ache to think she could potentially have that affect on him. But nothing could change what she knew or what he was. What she could never give him. What she could never say to make it better.

She knew now that whatever he felt was authentic. Someone who felt nothing could not look that wrecked.

"That's all well and good for you," he retorted bitterly. "You can walk away. You can back to your boy and your bloody perfect life with the little Scooby Gang at the ready to crack the next case. I can't. This is all I'll get. Shouldn't have gotten anything. And now I..."

It suddenly became essential to change conversation. To stretch within that line of comfort. To get him to a place far away from here. She didn't want to hurt anyone—not him. Not now. Not after what they had shared.

"You never told me what your favorite movie is," she said, her segue awful, but the pained look on his face even more so.

Spike pulled away, slipping his cock out of her, and rolled over on his side, away from her. Buffy whimpered in protest and reached for him, and when he didn't respond, she wrapped an arm around his chest, pressing her breasts to his back. "I'm sorry," she whispered. It was perhaps the hardest thing she'd ever said.

Spike didn't reply. He just sighed and covered her hand with his.

"You don't think this is going to be hard for me?" she asked.

"Should I?"

"Of course. Having to live with—"

"Oh, don't gimme that." He huffed but didn't release her hand. "Don't tell me how bad you're gonna feel, or any of those sodding dramatics. I know, Slayer. No need to rub it in. I know you've done everythin' you know not to, and it meant nothin' to you. I get it." His voiced muffled slightly, burning with emotion that an evil thing was not supposed feel, introducing her to a new, somehow more awful

kind of hurt. "But it meant somethin' to me," he continued, "and I can't go back."

She swallowed hard. "You think it meant nothing to me?"

"Besides an orgasm? Not a bloody thing."

"You think I would have screwed any vampire I got trapped with tonight?" Buffy squeezed him tighter, but he didn't respond. And it hit at last—everything came full circle, and she understood with earth-shattering simplicity. Fear. That was what this was about. Fear. Her sudden lack of her strength was supposed to be the worst thing that could happen, but it wasn't. Not now. Spike had changed that. "No. It was you. It was always going to be you. This... I said I loved Angel. I've believed that for so long. I still...but can I call it love if it was this easy for me to... I got trapped with you, and..."

She couldn't say it. She couldn't deny everything she had trusted for the past year. Every nerve of her body ached for Angel—or it had, once upon a time. She didn't know anymore if she was aching for her vampire boyfriend or the memory of what they had once been. She had loved him, she knew, but there had been so little time for love—it had hit her out of nowhere, fast and intense, and then he'd been gone. And yes, killing him had nearly killed her, but the memories that she'd carried with her to Los Angeles to mourn had been fuzzy and romanticized.

Just a few short weeks ago, she'd been so ready to say goodbye and move on. Was it possible that she'd moved on without realizing it?

Buffy released a trembling sigh and rested her head against his shoulder, brushing a kiss against his throat. "Honestly, Spike, I don't know what's happened. I know that it wouldn't have been just anyone. I don't know what will happen...and that terrifies me. But you were right about one thing."

He waited. He really wasn't going to make this easy for her.

"I can't just walk away. I don't know...but I don't want you gone."

"What are you sayin'?"

*Good question.*

"I'm saying I need time." Buffy honestly didn't realize that she was

saying that until the words tumbled through her lips. And god, she really did. She needed time. She didn't want Spike gone, because she liked this. She liked holding him and being held by him. She liked everything about him once the anger was gone. She wanted time to consider what she wanted, and she was open, for the first time, that what she might want was right in front of her. "I need time...to think. To get what it is exactly that I did tonight. What it means. And I understand if that's not good enough for you...but it's all I have, and I hope—"

It happened fast. Spike rolled over and grasped her arm, growling and pulling her down for a passionate kiss. Pleasure exploded through her veins and she grabbed at him, whimpering as her tongue warred with his. As his hands caressed her skin. As she allowed the window of possibility to open, and saw, somewhere, where this could lead her.

They pulled apart a few minutes later, panting. He rested his brow against hers, his chest rumbling with a contented purr against her breasts.

"It's not fair to you," Buffy admitted the next second, her eyes fluttering shut. "I get that. I'm not going to use you to test my love for... I'm not saying anything. I might blame you when I get my mind cleared. I can't think right now. When we get out of here...come back. Leave and come back. Let some time pass. We'll see where to go from there."

That was practical, right? To know they might, someday, have this again. To know the best might still be yet to come.

Spike nodded after a few seconds, and forced a grin. "And what do we tell the wankers from the Council?" he asked, edging back with her until their backs were pressed against the wall again. "That we decided to fuck each other senseless instead of fight to the death? But oh, please don't tell anyone 'cause we're still tryin' to figure this thing out?"

"We tell them nothing." That wouldn't go over well, and they both knew it. At his skeptical glance, Buffy sighed and conceded. "All right. You're not exactly a conventional vampire. We tell them that you

decided it would be wasteful to kill a slayer without the fun involved. Without the fight and...the fight. We kept our truce formed when I killed Angel and decided the best way to fight was...not to fight."

"And they're gonna believe that?"

"That's what you said, anyway. Before we..."

"Right. Hungry or bored. I remember." He eyed meaningfully. "Don't fancy killin' you now, and while they might accept it, I'm bettin' you anythin' they'll bring Angel along, just to play it safe, and all...and he'll know right away."

Buffy froze. "H-he will?"

"The nose always knows, sweet."

"Oh god."

Spike frowned and sighed. "Could make it a part of the agreement, I suppose? If we get outta the room, he won't be able to tell as quickly. He'll still smell me all over you. We can say the Big Brute's gotta stay away until we're both outta the room."

"That sounds reasonable."

"I might have to punch him, though. Just for kicks."

Buffy smirked lightly and shrugged. "Do what you gotta."

"Gotta." He sighed. "Just wish the tummy would stop with the rumblies."

She paused at that. There was really little to say that would make his hunger go away. While she'd counted on cotton candy with Giles in ode to the Birthday-Ice-Show ritual, she'd eaten before leaving the house. Her companion had not had the luxury of option.

In the end, it didn't take much to make her decision.

Buffy sighed and snuggled into his. They were coiled so comfortably against the wall that leaning into him seemed natural. The way he tightened his arm around her made her warm, and there was only one thing she could do to make up for her confused state of mind. She could give him what he needed. She could do that for him tonight.

A few seconds passed, then she raised her wrist to his mouth and pressed her warm skin against his cold lips. The reaction she received was as much startled as it was moved.

“What the bloody hell are you doin’?”

“Go ahead.”

“Bite you?”

“Drink from me.”

“No bloody way.”

“Didn’t stop you while we were...” Buffy’s cheeks flushed with heat, and she was suddenly aware that she was still incredibly naked. “Didn’t stop you when—”

“That was different. That was a lo—a sex bite. I’m not gonna feed off you.” He grimaced and shuddered. “Not a bloody parasite.”

“Oh come on, Spike. Don’t wimp out on me now. Drink.” Before he could say it, she elbowed him sharply. “And no, I don’t have a death wish. This isn’t exactly my idea of fun. Just do it before I change my mind.”

Nothing happened for a long minute. Then, slowly, he took her hand in his, and licked at her inner wrist.

“Ohhh...”

Spike eyed her with a wry grin and waggled his brows. “This turnin’ you on, pet?”

It was and he knew it, but she wasn’t about to admit anything.

The bite came with a moan of surrender. Blood pumped from her ivory skin, rolling into his mouth, and she swelled with completion. She’d given him what he needed, and it was enough. He drank her for long seconds, purring contentedly, and the sensation alone was worth any second thoughts.

A few seconds later, he pulled away with a gasp, his tongue immediately tending to the small wound. He tucked her into his side when he returned to himself, his embrace firm and supportive, and he leaned his head against hers. The gesture was simple but loving. In the small span of their confused relationship, even and especially with what had happened between them tonight, she never expected to experience this. This simple bliss.

“You didn’t have to do that, pet.”

“I know.”

“So why did you?”

She shrugged, attempting and failing to appear blasé. "I wanted to. This is...this might be all we have."

It was a painful truth with even uglier reasoning, but the truth nonetheless.

"Thank you," he murmured softly.

"There's only so much time until morning. Just...let's have this. Have this and..."

"And what?"

She sighed, leaning into him as her eyes fell shut. "And we wait."

SPIKE AWAKENED her twice with his fingers, thrice with his tongue, and once with his cock sliding into her from behind. The night was restless, and she awoke feeling hot and alert and in desperate need.

Granted, that could have been due to Spike's head perched attentively between her thighs, sucking at her clit as he thrust his fingers into her pussy.

Buffy felt her eyes go wide. She clutched his head, thrusting her pelvis against his mouth. "Oh my GOD!"

The reverberations of his chuckles against her body felt so wonderful. She fisted his hair and held him to her pussy, rotating her hips against his lapping tongue. He'd introduced this to her tonight—this wonderful sensation that, thus far, she'd only experienced vicariously through some of the dirty novels she'd pilfered from her mother's collection. And since Spike loved excelling where Angel failed miserably, he'd done it over and over again until her body was quivering in a perpetual state of orgasmic bliss.

Spike grinned against her swollen pussy, lapping at her opening before moving to lick her clit again. "Mornin', baby."

"Uhhh...what are you doing?"

"What does it feel like?"

“Oh god, you’re gonna have to carry me out of here.”

“Would really add to the image, right? ‘I killed your Slayer. She came until she died.’”

Buffy flushed and knocked him upside the head, stretching under him as he graced her clit with a gentle, however ardent parting kiss before prowling up her body until his cock was sliding against her slippery folds. Her body wasn’t used to this, and she figured she would need to spend several days under cold water before she stopped trembling.

“Need you one more time,” he murmured against her mouth. “Need you.”

It was over too soon. An eternity could have passed, and it would have been too soon. She clung to him—for those precious minutes, he was her anchor to the world. He worshipped her with his mouth, hands, and cock, brought her to the edge of paradise and back. The desperation in his kisses near broke her heart.

She cried out his name when she came, pressing her lips to his shoulder and blinking back tears. The last time. The *last* time. It truly could be the last time. The last time she felt Spike moving inside her as he moaned her name against her throat. The last time. When this was over, it might never happen again, and knowing that all but broke her heart.

It was too much to think of right now. The end hadn’t even arrived, and she was already thinking of the long road ahead. When Spike spilled himself inside her and collapsed against her breast, panting, she hugged him tighter and turned her face away, refusing to allow him to see her distress.

There were a few minutes of quiet as they recovered, curled in each other’s arms.

“I don’t wanna leave you,” Spike whispered, lifting his head to suck her nipple. “Christ, Buffy, I don’t wanna leave you.”

She didn’t want him to leave, either. She just didn’t know what would happen if he stayed. Not when Angel was still in the picture and she didn’t know how she felt about him.

“I don’t want you to leave.”

"So I won't."

"You have to."

He pouted, though seemingly in jest, she saw the pain in his eyes. "Why?"

"It's the plan."

"Bugger the plan."

"I'd love to."

"But?"

"Can't."

Spike sighed, lowering his head to her breast again. "Because it's not in the plan."

"That's right."

"I don't like this plan."

"Spike, I need time." She combed her fingers through his hair and exhaled slowly. "I can't do this if you're here distracting me. I'm too confused for anything right now. You confused me."

"I hear I'm good at that."

"I'll say."

There was a long sigh. He raised his head, resting his chin against her collarbone. "I guess I should be gettin' up now."

Her body protested, but her logic-driven brain knew that their time was running short. She nodded and bit back a moan when he slipped out of her. He tossed her dress to her and laughed shortly when it fell atop her head. It was a moment of such random levity that she couldn't help but dissolve in giggles, as well.

She laughed until her sides hurt. Until there were fat tears rolling down her cheeks.

And then she was crying for real. Dressing and crying for real, and god help her, but she couldn't stop.

"Buffy?"

She shook her head and waved him off, fitting her feet into her slip-on shoes. It took a few seconds, but she gathered the nerve to look back at him just as he slipped his T-shirt over his head. His hair was mussed and his eyes were filled with concern and affection, and there was nothing she could do to fix it. Not right now.

She'd never seen him look at her like that, and it about killed her.

"Buffy—"

She held up a hand. "It might be better if you stop doing that," she said, forcing a tight grin. "You never called me Buffy before last night. We need to—"

"I—" He stopped shortly and frowned, then sighed and glanced down. And she knew, then; she knew before he said anything. She knew before he opened his mouth, before his eyes could meet hers again. It was over. All of it was over. "They're here."

Buffy barked a humorless laugh. "*Poltergeist* much?"

"Nother brilliantly funny flick."

"The Council?"

"Yeah." He kicked at the ground awkwardly. "Listen...*Slayer*... what you said last night...about not knowin' and the like—"

"Not knowing?"

"About us. About what you want. I get why you'd do that—tell me to come back—and I appreciate it, but I won't hold you to it."

She blinked stupidly. "What?"

"I'll split. Leave you to Angel, like I should. Won't regret a bloody minute of it, but I don't...you're the Slayer. Can't ask you to..." He trailed off awkwardly.

A flash of fear rushed up her spine. It made sense, of course—his leaving and not returning, since he knew full well there might be nothing to return to. Why drag out heartbreak when there was another option?

But the thought of never seeing him again, of saying this was it and closing that door forever... Maybe she was being unfair, but it was the *last* thing she wanted.

Spike must have seen her answer on her face. "All right, then," he murmured, more to himself. "You don't want that. Good. Didn't bloody know how I'd pull that off."

Buffy grinned in spite of herself, but before she had a chance to reply, the door pounded and voices infiltrated the small, now homey comfort of their panic room. She jumped as sound echoed and bounced off the walls, her heart settling with ache. Spike kneeled

over to collect his duster from the floor. And as he slid it over his shoulders, their eyes caught and held.

"Ms. Summers?" a female British voice drifted coolly through the steel door. The sound was muffled, but articulate. "This is Dr. Hendricks. I'm with the Watcher's Council. Are you all right?"

There was no sense in putting this off. However, she couldn't tear her gaze from Spike's. They looked at each other for a lifetime.

"You better answer them, pet."

Buffy sighed. *It's over.*

"We're in here!" she shouted, not breaking their gaze. "We're both in here!"

There was a scurry of eager feet on the other side of the door. Then she couldn't take it anymore—she broke her restraint in a frenzy to Spike just as he started for her. The kiss they shared was brief, too brief, but his taste would stay with her for the rest of her life. Everything they had shared, and everything they were leaving behind.

When she pulled away, his eyes were large and sad.

"Goodbye," she murmured. That word carried such somber finality.

Spike stopped and smiled, and her heart wrenched. "Goodbye, Buffy."

The door began to open, and she reacted on instinct, smashing her fist against his jaw. She hadn't even realized that her strength was back until she saw him fly across the small space, until fresh air entered their small room. But her timing was impeccable—Spike slammed into the wall and crashed to the ground just in time for their audience to catch the show.

"I told you," she said, her voice shaking, "to stay the hell away from me."

How quickly old habits returned. She prayed he understood.

With a snarky, rebellious grin, Spike pulled himself to his feet, and she saw he did. "And *I* told *you* there isn't enough room in here to stay *the hell away from you*. Besides, our deal was till mornin'. If you hadn't noticed, your bloody cavalry's arrived."

The three faces crowding the doorway favored them with blank stares.

"It's still alive?" the first face said.

"Buffy!" Giles rushed in, and though she hadn't forgotten that she was angry with him, her heart swelled at his concern. She'd just put herself through emotional hell, and she needed to see someone who loved her to get her through this goodbye without crashing completely.

"Buffy, are you all right?"

"She's fine," Spike drawled, his tone bland and disinterested. "Barely a scratch on her."

"Why the hell isn't he dust?" Quentin Travers demanded.

Buffy threw up her hands. "I'm not talking here," she said firmly. "I've already done your little song and dance number. If you need me to talk, fine, but not in *here*. Just let me out."

"Me, too," Spike quipped.

"Bloody likely," Dr. Hendricks snapped. "Just why isn't he dust?"

Buffy spun on her heel. "Because he's not. He didn't kill me, I didn't dust him, and I promised him a way out of here in return for me-not-being-dead. So kill him and you'll have a rejuvenated and very pissed off slayer on your hands. Okay? So shut the hell up and let him move through, okay?"

Giles shot her a puzzled look. "Buffy?"

"Do it. I am not in the mood to negotiate." Then, without thought, she grabbed Spike's wrist and tugged him to her side.

Her hold on her vampire warmed her heart, and she knew, without looking at him, that he was touched as well. However, the decision to bring him to her side made the next minute rather awkward. At the bottom of the stairs waited her tall, broody boyfriend, and he looked ready to kill.

Buffy released Spike immediately and her heart jumped into her throat. "Angel," she gasped.

The next second, she was in his arms, tugged down from her the stairs and tucked into a protective embrace. The growl that rumbled through her boyfriend's chest was endearing, really, only she didn't

appreciate being manhandled. And while she figured they would have an abrupt conversation about it later, at the moment, she was too tired to really care.

Thus, Buffy settled to simply hug him awkwardly. Her eyes, however, were drawn to Spike's.

"Buffy," Angel murmured in his Angel-y way. "Are you all right? He didn't...hurt you, did he?"

"Does she look hurt to you?" Spike snarled.

Her boyfriend released her, his eyes flashing yellow. "If you hurt her, I swear, I'll—"

"He didn't hurt me."

Travers appeared at the head of his stairs, his brows arched. "Well, Rupert," he drawled, sliding his hands into his pockets. "It seems there was no reason to worry after all. Your protégé looks to be very much alive, and certainly back to what she does best."

"I know she can handle herself," Giles growled. "However, when you stick a weakened slayer in with a vampire that has murdered two before her, one does tend to be concerned. I still can't believe..." He paused and turned to Buffy. "He really didn't hurt you?"

"Well, I have some bruises that won't go away for a couple days, but other than that, no."

"How?" Travers demanded, the brow arching higher.

Buffy shrugged sheepishly, avoiding the blue eyes that called her home. "Well, you know Spike. He...he didn't want to kill me when... he wanted a fight."

That sounded right to no one, least of all herself.

Angel's eyes darkened suspiciously. "What are you trying to pull?"

For a horrible minute, she thought that he was speaking to her. The worry died the next instant—in a blur, the elder vampire had his Spike pinned to the wall, gripping him by the throat. They burst into game face on the same beat.

*He knows! Oh god. Oh god, he knows.*

"What did you do to her?"

"A whole lot of nothin'," Spike snarled, struggling against his Angel's grip to no avail. "Bloody hell, Slayer. Help a bloke out, here!"

The larger, brooding vampire slammed his head against the wall. He was going to tear that head off if she didn't step in. "You don't get to talk to her!"

"What else do you think we did all night? Knit sweaters?" Spike turned his eyes back to her, and what he revealed stole her breath from her chest. "Buf—"

*My name.*

That was all it took. The next minute, she was at Angel's side, seizing his shoulder. Her touch was usually all he needed to pull away from the edge, and when it didn't work, she resorted to force. The strength powering her veins surged, and with little more than a blink, she tossed her boyfriend to the other side of the room, fighting the urge to kneel down and assist Spike when he collapsed to the floor.

Everyone froze and stared at her.

"Spike and I had a deal," she said. "He got bored and decided it'd be easier to be stuck with someone other than himself. He agreed not to eat me if I got him out of here in the morning. No harm, no foul. So he leaves unharmed. Got it? I'm not going to say it again."

Travers stepped forward with a frown. "Ms. Summers, as much as I applaud your apparent conversational skills, I find some difficulty believing that you are suggesting that we release William the Bloody. As I am sure you are aware, it is not in the Council creed to—"

"I don't care what is or what isn't in the Council creed, Mr. Travers," she spat. "On behalf of the Council, I made the deal that kept me alive. Spike didn't have to live up to his part of the bargain but he did. I don't think either of us appreciated being locked up in here for the sport of your cause. And honestly—good god—what was the point? You were going to let me die in here if I didn't defeat a vampire when I wasn't exactly at my best? You—"

"We had every confidence in your ability to succeed."

"Well, I succeeded." The strength in her voice was in direct counterpoint to her trembling knees. She made the mistake of meeting Spike's eyes and found herself engulfed in pain. The look he deliv-

ered broke her heart all over again. "Spike and I didn't appreciate being pitted against each other for sport. I'm sorry if—"

"That's not how I understood it," Angel growled, glaring at Spike as he rose to his feet. "Travers told us that you sought him out for this. That you—"

"And if I did?" Spike replied, shoving forward. "What? A bloke's not allowed to change his mind? Was a different game when we got caught in that bloody room, wasn't it? Knew the lot of you'd be here in the mornin' and I'd be dust if the Slayer was drained. So I struck a bargain that worked out for both of us. That's the reason she's still breathing."

"The Council made no bargain."

Buffy glowered at Travers. "I passed your rite of passage test. I managed to stay alive with a very dangerous vampire and no slayer powers. I say I get to make a few rules."

"That's right, y'old ponce," Spike agreed. "Do as the Slayer says so we can all go home. I'm just achin' to get me a bite to eat."

"Seems you've already had your fair share of a *bite*," Angel said softly from the corner. His eyes were fixed on the mark on Buffy's neck. Then, softer, wounded, he turned to her and said, "You let him—"

Buffy jumped, her hand going to her throat. Angel fixed his eyes on her wrist which, she realized a second too late, was the same Spike's fangs had pierced a few hours earlier. Something on his face changed.

*Dammit dammit dammit.*

Spike flashed her a deer-in-headlights look, which struck her as odd, and odder still that he felt the obligation to protect her reputation. To hold up to his word.

"That...ummm..." Buffy heard herself say, well aware of the flush rising to her cheeks. "Was before. Before we got trapped in the room. More than that, it's completely off subject. Let him go. He's not going to eat anyone. Spike agreed to rely on pig's blood until he got lost."

"And you believed him?"

"He knows I'll stake him deader than...well...he already is if he

goes back on it. Again, this isn't up for negotiation." Buffy turned back to Travers, and to Dr. Hendricks, who had suddenly appeared next to her employer. "You guys drugged me and set me up. Spike didn't kill me, even though he had the chance. He gets to go just this once. Don't make more of it than there is. Okay?"

Travers and Hendricks remained silent. Giles just stared at her. Angel suddenly couldn't look at her.

Buffy turned to Spike, her voice hardening. "Get out of here," she said, cursing her trembling voice for betraying her. "I don't want to see you in Sunnydale again."

Her eyes, she knew, told a different story.



"WELL, THAT'S THAT."

Angel looked up from his book as she walked into the main foyer of the mansion. His calm was a source of great envy. It would be nice to see him overreact, even just once. She'd thought he might after they'd left, after seeing more than one bite mark on her body, but he hadn't said a word about it and that worried her more than any jealous demand ever could.

"What is it?" he asked.

"The Council...more specifically...Travers. They beat Giles to a confession." Buffy shrugged and crossed her arms. "Apparently, that last dose of Slayer-neutralizer he gave me wasn't enough by their regulations. It wore off way too early. I shouldn't have been..." With a sigh, she looked down, taking a seat in the armchair opposite him. "I shouldn't have been able to...throw you across the room like that. Are you all right?"

"I don't bruise easily." There it was—a flicker of resentment. And she knew that things would be strained between them for a long while. She couldn't blame him. The guilt that stretched her every nerve was intolerable at times, particularly when she was by herself, studying her cream walls, and counting the seconds that had passed

since Spike had last touched her. Now she was looking at Angel, and she couldn't hide from what she'd done. What she had betrayed.

What she didn't regret.

"What will happen to him?"

She blinked. "Spike?"

"Giles."

"Oh." Buffy sighed again, avoiding his confused glance. "Ummm...he's been fired. They...they're going to send a new watcher in a couple of weeks. Giles put up a fight, though. A big one. Travers said if he tried to intervene with his replacement's orders that..." Something dark rippled through her. "I don't...I'm not going to listen to him. Giles is the only... He's like my father. I won't take orders from some random watcher they throw my way. That's not fair to him. He thought he was saving my life."

"And your life didn't need saving."

"Spike didn't hurt me."

"I know. Care to explain why?"

Their eyes locked and held. Crap. So he was going to ask her about it.

"I've already told you that he didn't want to be bored." Buffy paused. "I mean, come on. You know Spike better than anyone. He hates—"

"Boredom. I know." Angel shook his head and slapped the book closed, rising to his feet. "I also know that Spike is different than any other demon you've faced. Most flee from the thought of facing the Slayer. He always sought her out. I don't see why he would refrain from killing you, regardless of the circumstances. That was only a few hours, Buffy." The penetrating eyes thing worked really well for him. She felt stripped and exposed. "It was nothing compared to the eternity he had to brag about doing in number three."

"Listen, I can't explain his motives, okay?" She jumped to her feet. "And honestly, whatever worked...well...worked. Are you upset? I'm alive and he's gone. What's the big? I was *powerless*, Angel. I...I had to keep him talking. We were trapped, I was weaponless...hence the

need for conversation. That was the reason he gave me, and I accepted it. It kept me alive.”

If she hadn’t felt bad before, she certainly did now. After all, Angel had every right to doubt her. To wonder. To worry. To be jealous. And what made everything worse was the complete lack of regret. She kept searching for remorse and finding none, and she wasn’t sure what that said about her.

“I can’t stay here,” Buffy announced. At Angel’s puzzled look, she sighed and shook her head. “I need time...and to train. Get back into slayer-mode. I feel too out of the game, even if it’s been only a few days.”

“That’s probably for the best,” he conceded after a long minute. “When will I see you again?”

“I’ll come by tomorrow.”



THAT NIGHT WAS the last she saw Spike.

She was in her room, settling in for some much-needed rest, when she glanced out the window. And there he was on the ground below her room, gazing up at her somberly. His mouth was curled around a cigarette.

And that was it. All they did. He watched her, she watched him; they watched each other. She wanted to invite him inside, but knew she couldn’t. No—this was the end for them. The end for right now.

Just for now, she told herself. Only for now.

It couldn’t last forever. After a few minutes, Spike blew her a kiss, turned, and walked away. Walked out of her life into the shadows where she could not follow.

It wasn’t over, she knew. She would see him again. And the rest, for the moment, didn’t matter. She could wait.

It was only time.