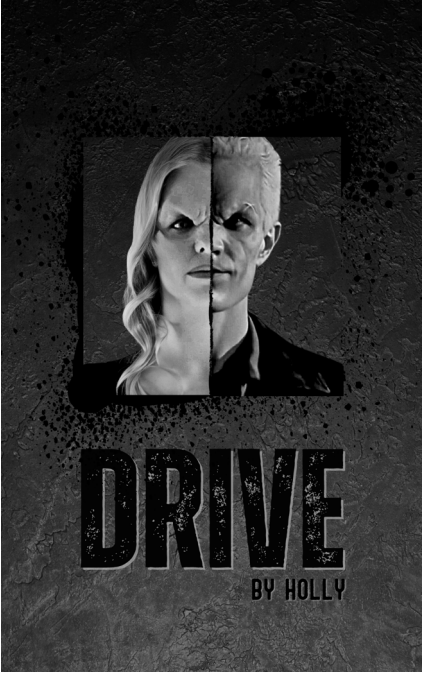


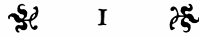
DRIVE



HOLLY DENISE







FOR THE TIMES THEY ARE A- CHANGIN’

THE ACT OF LITERALLY JOLTING AWAKE WAS SOMETHING BUFFY HAD once thought only happened in horror movies. The big gasp, the bug eyes, the dramatic sit-up—all beautifully choreographed and way too theatrical to actually happen in the real world. Then she’d turned fifteen and her life had become one of those horror movies, complete with prophetic dreams starring creatures that would make grown men wet themselves, and she’d been forced to reevaluate.

When she flung herself upward tonight, heaving down breaths that still somehow made her feel like she was drowning, she almost tumbled off Giles’s couch in her surprise. Something in her nightmare had been chasing her—something huge and hulking, and had she mentioned terrifying? Because *way* with the terrifying. Something that really bothered her because Buffy didn’t scare easily anymore. She was the thing that *did* the scaring. Monsters of the world beware.

That monster hadn’t gotten the memo.

“God,” she said, starting again when she realized she wasn’t alone. Xander and Willow were at the foot of the couch, he with a crossbow and she with a stake. Which was wiggy for any number of reasons, not the least of which was last Buffy had known, Xander hadn’t yet returned from his cross-country post-graduation road trip. That he

was not only back, but back and crossbow-wieldy, was a bit much for her over-foggy brain to parse through at the moment. "If you guys wanted to give me a heart attack, there are a lot more subtle ways to go about it, you know."

The pair of them exchanged a look and neither cracked a grin.

"Oh god, what happened?" Buffy asked, kicking her legs over the side of the couch.

"Buffy?" Willow asked.

"What? Is it Giles?" A dull throb decided to make itself known right behind her eyes, and she realized, smacking her lips together, that she was rather parched. Make that *very* parched. Her mouth was the definition of dry. "Is he okay?"

"That remains to be seen," came her watcher's steady, thankfully present voice. Buffy whirled around, her sudden panic falling then rising all over again when her eyes locked with his, which were the beyond bloodshot. In fact, it looked like Giles hadn't slept in a week. Make that several weeks. And considering the last time she'd seen him, he'd been in full Hugh Hefner mode, that was even wiggier than the whole Xander-with-a-crossbow thing. Recumbent Giles had been a glimpse into Bizarro World, but at least he'd been less doomsday-y.

Crap, was that what this was? Had he uncovered a fun new prophecy of the "Buffy dies" variety?

"Okay, you guys are officially freaking me out," Buffy said, her voice shaking. "Can someone please explain to me what's going on? Why you all look like someone died?"

No one said anything, just exchanged more of those loaded looks. Then, finally, Willow lowered the stake in her hand and pressed her lips together. "What's the last thing you remember?"

Buffy frowned. "I...dunno," she said, that panic beginning to creep back up. What *was* she doing here? And how had she gotten here? Why had she fallen asleep on Giles's couch to begin with? That made the sort of sense that didn't. The more she prodded at the black space in her mind, the more resistance she met, like she'd accidentally tripped some security system she hadn't realized she had in place—the sort that didn't just remove memories but created barriers to keep her from accessing them. Like there was something she knew she would

regret remembering once she did. Finally, she raised her gaze back to Willow's, not really wanting to but knowing she had no choice. Whatever was going on here was something she couldn't run from. "What happened? How did I get here? And...why?"

"It was either here or your mom's, and—" Willow began, but Xander cut her off.

"We talked about this," he hissed. "Don't engage."

"But...it's Buffy."

"It's *not*. Not anymore."

"Not anymore?" Buffy echoed, blinking. "What the hell does that mean?"

"I think you know exactly what it means," Xander replied, shooting her a glare of deepest loathing. No, not loathing. Disgust. It was a way Xander had never looked at her—not even after learning Angel was alive again or when he'd been on his high I-told-you-so horse after Miss Calendar's murder. "Is there any reason we can't do this now? It's just gonna be harder the longer we put it off."

"Put what off?" she snapped.

"Let's just say we'll be a lot more merciful with you than you would be with us."

"Did someone hit you on the head or something while you were gone?" she demanded, springing to her feet. The move had Willow jumping and leaping back a step, had Giles going tense in the corner of her eye and Xander getting all kinds of twitchy with the crossbow in his arms. "If someone doesn't tell me what's going on, I'm gonna start breaking stuff. And for god's sake, Xan, put that thing down before you poke an eye out."

"Yeah. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"What I'd *like* is someone to start making sense. *Now*." Buffy stared at her friend a long beat, waiting, then shifted her attention to Willow. More waiting, and she had just about decided to start cracking heads together in the literal sense when the damned barrier that separated her from her memories began to crumble at last. A montage of images rapid-fired across her mind, information spilling in without care or regard.

College. The absolute suckiness that was college. The enormity of

the campus and how everyone seemed to know exactly who they were except her. How she'd hoped to have this shared experience with her friends, but for the first time, her friends were ahead of the curve. Or at least, Willow was. Even Oz was all cool campus guy, completely comfortable in his wolfy skin and not overwhelmed by the vastness of the world, a world they had somehow tricked all the adults into thinking they were ready to brave on their own. The one with a big library that was actually used by students rather than conveniently vacant at all hours, stuffed full of books and computers and all kinds of things designed to make university living more bearable. And the classes with teachers who had such little tolerance for distracted students that it had made her revisit all those doubts she'd entertained the previous year about how realistic it was to even apply for college when, by necessity, she would always have one foot out the door. Then the students and TAs with whom her brainy and brilliant best friend got on like...like...well, like she'd been preparing for this her whole life or something, all the while Buffy struggled to string enough words together to make an even vaguely coherent sentence, and that sentence was still something stupid like, "Everybody's got a brain." And let's not get started on roommates and their Celine Dion posters and their ceaseless snoring that made it seem like Buffy was sharing her dorm with a woodchipper.

Then Eddie. Sweet, lost Eddie who had been the first person who had made her feel like maybe she *wasn't* the crazy one after all. Eddie, who she'd actually thought was cute in a damsel kinda way, and wondered if maybe he thought she was cute too. But then he hadn't been in class when he said he would, and when she'd swung by his dorm to see if he was okay, she'd found all his stuff gone and a note left behind. A note and a book she'd had every reason to think would have gone with him even if he had decided that college was too hard and bailed.

That was right. Something had happened to Eddie. That was why she'd come here, desperate for some adult guidance from her surrogate father. Only Giles had been having gross naked time with his lady friend and less than interested in what it might mean that a perfectly nice, normal boy who had been on campus the day before had up and

vanished. So Buffy had gone out to find answers herself, and she'd found them. Found Eddie, too. With his new outlook on life, the kind that came with the fangs to match.

And that familiar sinking sensation in her chest that accompanied the knowledge that she'd failed someone else. That she hadn't been where he'd needed her to be in order to stop this from happening. To save him before everything changed in such a way it would never change back. But Eddie hadn't known that. Hadn't cared. He'd done what all newly turned vampires did—snarled and gone for the kill. And like all newly turned vampires who thought to take her on, she'd turned him to dust.

It had been the very definition of bittersweet, and she should have seen it coming. The second she'd tried to find him and hadn't, the second she'd found that book he'd left behind...

But she hadn't had time to reflect because the party hadn't been over. No, it had just been getting started, care of a gang of vampires led by some blonde Skankzilla who had sauntered up to her with all the swagger of, well, Spike, but none of the grudging respect. There had been a fight—there was always a fight—and her arm had been hurt. Like seriously hurt, the way she didn't get hurt in fights anymore these days. Then the girl, Sunday, had been over her, smirking and callous, and her cronies had filled in the gaps. One surfer dude, another plump chick with an attitude, and Buffy had forgotten what this felt like. Had forgotten what it was like to actually be afraid of vampires. There had been so many and she'd been hurt, and they'd crowded around her and everything had gone dark after that.

The situation in between her ears became suddenly incredibly loud. Buffy shook her head, slapped a hand across her chest, not sure why until she *was* sure why, and then looked again at her friends. The friends holding crossbows and stakes, and Giles acting like the world was ending, and the dryness in her mouth and how she felt, despite the breaths she took, that she was drowning. That she wasn't getting any air at all.

Or no, that wasn't it. She could feel the air, taste it, appreciate the way it filled her lungs, but once she swallowed it, it seemed to evaporate. It wasn't anything she would have noticed at any other time—

breathing wasn't something she did consciously, rather an instinct. The body going through the motions to make it to the next minute, and the one after that, and the one after that. All things on an autopilot that had been programmed into her as part of the package of being conceived.

But she didn't need to do that anymore. The reflex had vanished and the breaths she took now were echoes of a body that hadn't entirely gotten the memo.

"Oh my god," Buffy said, looking down at herself. It was normal—all normal, which somehow made her escalating panic worse. It should be different, right? *She* should be different, wearing something other than the open rose-colored shirt and her flower patch jeans. Her hands shouldn't be so Hands of Buffy, either, but they were. Even the manicure she'd gotten ahead of college starting remained immaculate.

It wasn't until she raised those hands to pat her face that everything went completely sideways. Rather than the smooth skin of her brow, her fingers met ridges. Ridges she knew well, could and often did see in her sleep. Ridges that had been there once before, and occasionally popped up in the very worst of her dreams. "Oh god," she said again, realizing as she did that her mouth was wrong, too. She inhaled sharply, a breath that hurt for its lack of necessity, and ran her tongue down the length of one pointy fang.

No. No, no, no, no. She had been here before. *They* had been here before. Done this once already.

"Nightmares," she said, speaking neither to the others nor herself. "It's happening again."

"I really wish it were," Xander replied. And she heard it—the sorrow in his voice. It hadn't been there before and that somehow made everything worse. Made this real. "Sorry, Buff."

"But..." Buffy patted herself again, shaking her head. "No, this isn't right. If I were a vampire, I would be snarly and killing you guys. And I wouldn't be here. Why am I here?" She whirled around to face Giles, whose expression hadn't changed. "Why am I at your place and not at the morgue or, or, or in a coffin somewhere? This has to be a mistake."

Another series of looks were exchanged—the sort that told a story, but she wasn't privy to the plot. They did that a lot, her friends. Were

rather adept at keeping things from her, often claiming it was for her own good but there could be nothing good about whatever was happening here. And none of this made sense. That she was here, that someone had *brought* her here. That Giles hadn't taken a look at her and chopped off her head or something to make sure *this* didn't happen. He knew, after all. They all did. She'd lived her nightmare for them.

"It was me," Willow said, her voice slicing through the silence. "I-I got worried when I didn't see you today. You'd seemed a little, you know, off-your-gamey with all things college so I went by your room and, well, it was gone."

"What?"

"All your stuff, I mean. And there was a note." She pressed her lips together as though to hold in a cry. "Buffy, I'm so sorry. I should've known right away, but everything being new and, well, new... I went to your mom's to find you, and she got all worried and we thought maybe you'd taken off again—"

"You thought what?" Buffy blurted, anger burning through her shock, and god, that felt good. Maybe too good. Something inside of her almost purred.

"*Maybe*," Willow squeaked, waving her hands. "Just maybe. There's a lot to take in and sometimes it just gets to a person, you know?"

"The last time I took off, it was because I'd just sent my boyfriend to hell," Buffy replied coldly. "Not because I couldn't decide on a major."

"I know!" More hand-waving. "I know. So I looked all over town for you. Ran into Xander—"

Xander swelled up at being mentioned but didn't speak. Just kept glaring at Buffy.

"And after we'd looked everywhere we could think, I decided to do a spell," Willow said. "A location spell. I didn't know how to do it last year or I would've done it then too—don't know if it would've worked with you being in Los Angeles and me being a little iffy on the spell-casting but I would've tried. And after we got the supplies, I did it today."

"We thought it went wrong at first," Xander said, his voice oddly

calm. "According to the spell, you were on campus. Will had already looked everywhere there. But, you know, no harm in going back and seeing if you'd wandered in later, right?"

Willow nodded. "It said you were in the café, so that's where we went to look. And there you were. Dead."

"Turned," Xander clarified.

"We didn't know that part," Willow whimpered.

"Well, we had a pretty good idea. The bite marks don't lie."

It was a reflex—one she'd been giving into like crazy ever since Angel had been poisoned. Feeling along the bite marks on her throat, that piece of her first love she would carry with her for the rest of her life. She couldn't prod the hole in her heart he'd left behind, had somehow escaped both ends of their relationship without obvious wounds or bruises, but the place where he'd been inside of her there would forever remain. Touching it had been like touching him. Staying close to him even after he'd left her behind.

The contours of that bite were different now, and freshly sensitive. Over Angel's mark. That connection was gone.

There was no reason this should be the moment that it hit her—the enormity of what had happened, the fact that she was still standing there and had yet to wake up, but it was. The strange surreality she'd thought she'd been experiencing hardened into something permanent, something that wasn't going to go away by blinking or wishing or clicking her heels. Xander had a crossbow and Willow a stake, and they had those things because they thought they might need them. Because they'd found her dead after searching for her on campus, her neck freshly chewed on and all signs pointing to vampire.

"Why?" Buffy asked, hating how her voice shook. If she was a vampire now, her voice shouldn't shake. That just wasn't fair. "Why did you bring me here?"

"We were pretty sure, but not all the way sure," Xander replied. He sounded a bit hoarse. Maybe the reality of the situation was hitting him too. "And we didn't want to chop off your head without having a good reason. Not exactly an easy thing to explain to your mom."

"And that's what you're going to do now?" Buffy eyed the crossbow again, forcing herself to put everything else on hold. What had

happened to her had happened and there was no undoing it—all she could do in the moment was focus on what came next. If she meant to survive to fight another day, she needed to get over the whole *vampire* thing pretty darn quick. And, she realized, she *did* mean to survive. Vampire or not, she wasn't ready to cash in her chips. There was still way too much living to do. "Gonna kill me, Xan? Think you can? For the record, I've had to clean up the bathroom at home after you've used it, so I already know that your aim? Not that great."

Willow wrinkled her nose. "Eww, Buffy."

"What? Too yucky for you? I'm evil now, aren't I?" Buffy darted her gaze to the front door, curling and uncurling her hands into fists. "Way with the evil. So I'll talk about all the pee you've left on the floor and Willow, all the times you...you...also did things that were *ick* and Giles sexing up his girlfriend which, *gross*, I can *actually smell!*" She stumbled back, wrinkling her nose at this revelation. All sorts of things were hitting her now. The stink of old man sex, sweat, the flow of blood rushing through arteries and veins, the pounding of hearts against ribcages and all the other things that betrayed the others as human. Betrayed *her* as not. That dryness she'd woken up with—that wasn't normal dry mouth, it was a thirst she'd only felt once before.

It had scared her then, terrified her. But it had been temporary and she'd known it.

This wasn't temporary. She had closed her eyes a human and woken up a vampire, and vampires ate blood. Vampires tore through their human loved ones with nary a care or a worry. Vampires ripped and maimed and killed until someone like the Slayer Formerly Known as Buffy put a stake in their chest. There was no reasoning with them—there was nothing but the hunt.

God, she thought she might cry. Which, yes, was the lamest thing for a fledgling vampire to do. And she should know.

"Buffy."

She shook her head, allowing her newly fanged face to fall into her open hands. Better that than try to look her watcher in the eye. "Does it even matter that I don't *want* to hurt any of you? That you all smell like dinner but I haven't even tried to bite anyone? Are you going to make me fight my way out of here?"

“No,” Giles said, with enough authority in his voice that she knew it was more than a reassurance—it was an instruction. “No, we’re not going to do anything of the sort.”

Sure enough, when Buffy braved a peek between her fingers, she saw a somewhat bemused Xander lowering the crossbow to the floor. Willow was not nearly as reluctant; she dropped her stake as though it had scalded her and did a little hop-jump away from it.

Buffy waited a second before lifting her head. “I don’t get it.”

“Nor do I, I admit,” Giles replied. His tone was neither comforting nor flippant—he was somewhere in the middle, and she didn’t know how to feel about that. “And suffice it to say, I reserve the right to change my mind any time you give me reason to.”

Xander nudged the weapon he’d relinquished with his foot. “So should I pick this back up, or...”

“Considering that the way you were holding it, you were more likely to accidentally release an arrow while it was pointed at someone else—for instance, me—I believe it’s safer where it is,” Giles said dryly. He turned his attention back to Buffy, though Buffy was pretty sure it had never left. He was the kind of grown-up who could pull that off without effort—make someone think they were distracted when in reality, they were very not. “You will need blood. I imagine you’re quite hungry. Most newly sired vampires have an innate need to feed just minutes after they rise.”

Buffy forced her dry throat to swallow. She didn’t want to nod, not with the others watching, but knew better than to try to fool him. “Yeah. I could eat.”

“Willow,” Giles said, not taking his gaze off Buffy, “I believe you will find some blood in the refrigerator. Please prepare it in a mug and heat it in the microwave. Ninety seconds should suffice.”

“You have blood in your refrigerator?” Buffy asked dully. That didn’t seem like a normal thing to keep on hand.

“There was time enough to acquire some after I saw those marks.”

She nodded, somehow resisting the urge to run her fingers over the bite mark again. Also resisting the urge to cry at the rather wide berth Willow gave her as she edged around the room toward the kitchen.

Not that she could blame her friend, she guessed. Buffy was the one with fangs here. If the situation were reversed...

If the situation were reversed, the air would be full of Willow's dust. Willow as a vampire was not someone who would stand around and ask stupid questions while wiggling the hell out about her sudden lack of pulse and iron-rich diet. Buffy had seen Willow as a vampire. She'd been unhinged, a terrifying sort of brilliant and dead set on making the version of reality she had landed inside the same as the one she called home.

It hadn't been Willow, but it also had been. Enough so that the real Willow hadn't wanted to dust her, and they hadn't. They'd sent her back instead.

But there was no *back* for Buffy. There was only this.

"Not to come across as completely ungrateful, but I feel like I'm missing something here." She licked her lips, the terrain of her mouth as unfamiliar as everything else. "Why would you even bother with blood?"

"I suppose it was blind optimism," Giles said, and though he sounded uncertain, his voice was warm in such a way she couldn't help but find comforting. "Hoping that what happened two years ago might happen again."

"Two years ago."

"You became a vampire and you didn't attack us, and you very well could have. By all accounts, there is no reason why any of us survived that encounter with you."

Buffy inhaled sharply, dragging in the first wafts of a warm, wonderful scent that immediately had her mouth watering—well, watering and hurting in a way that was strangely pleasant. Something inside her chest stirred as well, a restlessness unlike any she'd ever experienced before. Deep and primal, and with the sort of instant urgency that made the task of standing still almost painful. She turned toward the kitchen, toward the source, registered the low hum of the microwave for the first time and understood.

It was incongruent with the world she knew, that she should smell blood heating up and think *dinner*.

"You never told me that," Buffy said, forcing herself to tear her

focus away from the wonderful smell. Afraid if she didn't that she'd explode into action, that the beast scratching at her insides would overthrow her better judgment. "I thought it was all... You know, with the nightmare fodder."

"Your nightmare specifically was that you would become no different from the other monsters you put down as part of your duty," Giles told her plainly. "A vampire without a soul, in other words."

"So I...didn't have a soul and I didn't do the bitey-munchy thing."

"The parameters of that magic could, I believe, only recreate the conditions of whatever it was that frightened you. In your case—"

"Soulless vampire. I was still in charge." She forced out another breath and immediately wished she hadn't, for the drowning sensation renewed, bright and painful, and she didn't know how to smother it. How to tell her body that she wasn't drowning—that she didn't need the air at all. "What happens now?" she asked, hating how small her voice sounded. How powerless. Hating how her fangs felt in her mouth and that she didn't know how to shove them back. Smoothly transition back to human as she'd seen so many vampires perform without effort, except Angel that one time when he'd vamped out and been majorly weird about it.

Angel.

As it had so often over the last few months, even thinking his name made something inside of her tighten. Only this was different—different, even, from what she'd experienced a few minutes ago. And why not? Everything had changed. She was a vampire now. She was a vampire and the only vampire she knew, the only vampire she trusted, had left her because normal wasn't a thing he could give her. Because she deserved someone who could see her in the sunlight. Because she would age, wrinkle, and eventually die, perhaps surrounded by fat grandchildren. Or, more likely, in the middle of some act of heroism only she could perform. The Slayer didn't get fat grandchildren. The Slayer didn't get anything but dead.

Or, in her case, undead.

"Angel," she said before Giles could answer. If he'd even planned on answering. Odds were he didn't know what to say any more than she did. "I'll go see Angel."

“Angel,” Xander repeated as though he’d never heard the name.

She nodded, and damn near flinched away from Willow as her friend emerged from the kitchen nook, steaming mug of blood in hand. Blood that smelled divine but didn’t call to her the same way as did the pulse in Willow’s neck, or the fat blue vein the light seemed to catch as she extended the mug in offering. The ache in Buffy’s belly pitched and she could swear her gums were tingling. For a second, she worried she might do something truly monstrous, but she managed to take the mug without biting into anything. And, not thinking too hard on what she was doing or what it meant, threw back a mouthful.

It was disgusting. And it was delicious.

“Yeah,” she said, and swallowed. “He’ll help.”

He had to.

She’d been awake ten minutes and she already knew she couldn’t do this alone.

AND THERE'S SOME RUMORS GOING ROUND

A MONTH INTO THIS GIG, AND BUFFY WAS STILL FINDING HER footing.

For one thing, the whole college experience was pretty much DOA. She'd tried for a couple of weeks, assured by the numerous times she'd seen Angel out and about during the day that getting from class to class wouldn't be a major hardship. But if Angel had any advice on how to maintain her day-to-day routine, he wasn't sharing—among other things—and she'd accepted that if higher education were in her future, it'd be in the form of night classes. All this starting *next* semester to give her some time to adjust to the whole undead thing.

Buffy had remained enrolled just long enough to dispatch her demon roommate, whom she'd caught trying to suck out her nonexistent soul one night. And that had at least answered one question the others wouldn't let die as easily as she had her academic career—that Buffy had to have a soul because she wasn't, in Xander's words, *Angel*ing it up with her newfound vampness.

But no. The soul was very much not there, as Kathy—AKA the roommate from hell—had discovered one night while Buffy had been feigning sleep in the hope that it would turn into real sleep if she stayed still long enough. She'd thought she'd kept vamp hours before,

but apparently had been kidding herself. Her body was in no way ready to power down while it was dark out, whereas the sun seemed to make her drowsy simply by existing during the day. Kathy had been down-right pissed at the discovery, believing that Buffy had gone out of her way to dupe her into thinking she was sharing the dorm with a normal human, never mind that her intention had been to, oh yeah, suck the soul right out of her nose or something. Honestly, glass houses.

Buffy had responded by ripping Kathy's heart out, and then jettisoning it into the hell dimension from which she'd come.

That had really been the final straw. The moment she'd known she couldn't cut it as a student—at least not now. Maybe forever, depressing as that realization had been. Not that she had any guilt over murdering the soul-sucking demon she'd been rooming with, but it hadn't been a deliberate slaying. More an instant *you pissed me off now pay the price* thing, and Buffy really didn't want to bring those instincts unchecked into the classroom.

Hence why everyone had thought she had a soul. Or if not *thought*, hoped. Vampires shouldn't care about stuff like that...or anything in general. If she were a normal vampire, she would have done the whole evil shebang by now. Killed or turned her friends and her mom, spent her nights finding people to pick off rather than keeping to her patrol route through the local graveyards, and possibly plotting an apocalypse of her own. No one to stop her, right? With Faith all coma'd up and unlikely to play the part of cavalry even if she weren't. But no, all Buffy had done was kill her demon roommate...and her sire and her stupid gang, just for the insult that was having been turned in the first place.

That much had been fun, at least. Even a month out, Buffy would find herself thinking about the look on Sunday's face when she'd shown up at the lair, miles from the fledgling the megabitch had thought she had created. To said megabitch's credit, Sunday had recognized immediately that the next few minutes weren't going to go the way she'd initially thought and she'd tried to cover. *Tried* being the operative word there, because Buffy had exploded into a maelstrom of motion, taking off heads, ripping out hearts—she'd found she had a knack for it after Kathy, and the chest cavities of mere vampires were almost paper thin—and wielding her stakes as though they were extensions of her

body. In fact, the whole *killing things* part of the vampire gig was so far her very favorite, even if nothing out there posed much of a threat anymore. She didn't feel burdened when she set out to cull the vampire population, more excited to see the surprise that would bloom across the face of her beastie of the night before they realized exactly what they were dealing with.

Actually, Buffy had to admit she wasn't hating being a vampire nearly as much as she would have expected. It had been terrifying in her nightmares, as being buried alive had been way up there on her irrational fears list *before* she'd been called as the Slayer, but the reality was a lot less frightening. For one, there was the strength. Where she'd been strong before, slayer strength plus vampire strength made her so strong it was almost not sporting to even show up on patrol. Not that that stopped her because, well, evil to slay and all. But all this extra strength took some negotiating to work around. Like she'd accidentally ripped the door off her dorm room using what had felt like no more force than usual. She could also break pens and ceramic mugs just by looking at them, or so it seemed. The adjustment period was still very much underway, but the benefits of being practically untouchable were just fun.

That was another thing. *Fun*. She was still having it. Maybe that shouldn't have been a surprise, but it was. *Fun* and *dead* weren't things that she'd consider compatible once. Yet here she was, defying her own expectations. Not all the time, not even every day, but the possibility was still there and often seemed more attainable now than it ever had. When she needed to shut off her brain, she could. Just *plop*, no more thinking about unfun things for Buffy. Not until tomorrow, at least.

Buffy wasn't dumb—she knew she had changed. Whether or not that was for the better had yet to be decided, but for the time being, she was trying to see the half-full. Her biggest worry about becoming a vampire, the thing that used to jar her from sleep with chest-wrenchy gasps and wild heart palpitations, had been about becoming someone else entirely. Someone who wouldn't care about her friends or her mom or Giles, or anything that made Buffy Buffy. After all, vampire was simply a hollowed-out shell that some demon had picked up so they could wear it like some person-shaped hermit crab. The demon could

rifle through the deceased's memories, adopt their mannerisms, but that was the extent. All that was left was a penchant for death, destruction, mayhem, and all the other vices that spelled a bad time for everyone else.

And that had been the basis of her nightmares. A thing that wore Buffy's face without being Buffy, used Buffy's hands to rip out her mother's throat, snap Willow and Xander's necks like twigs, or torture Giles into insanity the way Angel had Drusilla all those years ago.

Somehow, though, that hadn't happened. And no one could tell her why. Maybe her inner monster was on some sort of time delay. Maybe she would join her friends one night at the Bronze and decide they looked like dinner. Or not even just her friends, but people in general. After all, the world was full of lots and lots of people, and they all smelled varying degrees of delicious. There was plenty of damage to be done if she so wanted, and sometimes she did, but underneath the voice urging her to start ripping skin from bone was another. One that sounded more like herself.

Giles had a theory, of course. Giles always had a theory and thank god for it. Granted, he had taken his sweet time putting this one to paper. Their visits invariably included words like *unprecedented* and *truly remarkable*. As a former employee of the Watchers Council, he had opted to not alert the higher ups that Buffy Summers could be safely put in the *deceased* category, but he was doing what he could to subtly ask any friendly contacts for information detailing what had become of the last slayer who had turned. Which in itself was a hassle because there was practically no information to be had.

Meaning, according to Giles, that whatever had happened to that girl had either been too devastating or too disturbing to document. More likely the latter. Perhaps something involving the poison that had nearly claimed Angel's life just a few months earlier—it would have been one of the safest ways to end a turned slayer. A weapon that could be dispatched at a distance without endangering the lives of those who were doing the dispatching.

Nice and clinical. Sounded like the Council.

Absent any useful historical evidence, Giles believed it possible that Buffy's slayerness had acted as a sort of counterbalance to what-

ever the invading demon had tried to do. Her own powers were demon born, after all. Her turning was by definition abnormal due to those circumstances. So the question became what happened when someone who was not quite human underwent a transformation meant strictly for humans.

“That or some bastardization of nature versus nurture,” he’d said one night before collapsing into a chair in his living room. “Or perhaps a combination thereof.”

“Nature versus nurture?”

He’d nodded and pinched the bridge of his nose. The glasses had been off for a while at that point. “Nature versus nurture posits that there are two influences on behavior—what is, for lack of a better word, genetic, and what is the result of external influences.”

Buffy had stared at him until he’d gotten the hint and continued.

“Most people who become vampires are not aware of what is happening to them when the transition is initiated,” he’d explained. “Very few, in fact, and none I have known personally. It stands to reason that your knowledge of the world’s true nature enabled you to outthink your instincts. You were concerned that you would become a monster, knew that possibility was there, and simply refused to do so. It’s not a *natural* response, rather one learned.”

“But that would imply I’m still me, right?” she’d asked. That thought had been on her mind a lot ever since she’d awakened in Giles’s condo sans heartbeat. Everything she’d ever been told about vampires reinforced the hermit crab theory. Everything except the way Giles had treated her once she’d become the vampire in question. “That I’m not just some demon taking a ride in the body that used to belong to Buffy Summers.”

Giles had pulled a face at that, reached up as though to take off his glasses but they hadn’t been there to remove. A faint flush had filled his cheeks and he’d straightened. “I rather don’t know,” he’d replied after a beat. “Before coming to Sunnydale, I would have said unequivocally no. The person is gone and all that’s left behind is the demon. But then, as I’ve told you, I observed you when you were, ahh, previously a vampire. And admittedly, the entire experience with Angel had me rethinking just how trustworthy that sentiment truly is.”

“Angel?” she’d repeated. It hadn’t hurt, saying his name, which was a definite improvement from the pre-turning days. All she felt now was anger at being abandoned. “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde?”

“Ah, well, there was a reason he hyper-fixated on you beyond the obvious. Angel was never known as a vampire who made a point to hunt down slayers. That was much more Spike’s territory. Angel wanted to destroy you as much as he had Drusilla,” Giles had said. “But even that wasn’t his style. All the scholarship on Angel, or Angelus, indicated that he preferred meek, mild victims as they were easily malleable. The entire time he fought you, he understood he was outmatched in strength and skill. The only consideration preventing you from killing him was... Well...”

“That I was a dope who loved him?”

“I wouldn’t say it in those words—”

“You don’t have to. I did.”

Giles hadn’t replied to that, nor had he explained himself further on the subject of her innate Buffyness. And even now, she didn’t know what she believed. How much of Buffy still remained and how much was just some demon who was really good at charades. The thought that she might not be herself was a troubling one, though, because she very much *wanted* to be Buffy. She wanted everything Giles had said to be true, that she had somehow done the impossible—nature or nurture or whatever—and become a vampire who could choose whether she wanted to be bad or good. That she wasn’t doing an imitation of herself when she took to the cemeteries after sunset and dusted her way through that week’s obituary column.

It mattered. The choice to be good—embracing that it *was* a choice—mattered.

Mostly for her. Partly because she really wanted to stick it to Angel.

Buffy hadn’t known what she’d expected when she’d reached out to her ex-boyfriend to let him know hey, that normal life he said he wanted for her? Completely off the table now on account of the shiny new fangs in her mouth. The other end of the line had gone still—like deathly still, because Angel didn’t breathe, and it had been late enough that she hadn’t heard chattering in the background. Finally,

sounding at least a little choked, he'd asked her if anyone was still alive.

"Like, in the world?" she'd replied, wrinkling her brow. "Uhh, yeah. Lots of people."

"Your mom, Buffy. Giles. Willow." He'd conveniently left out Xander. "Did you kill all of them?"

"What? No. Why would you ask me that?"

"I'm sorry, you did just say you're a vampire, right?"

"Yeah, but I didn't realize that was part of the initiation ceremony," she'd shot back, all her feathers—or whatever vampires had in place of feathers—nice and ruffled. "Do you really think I'd slaughter my family then *call you on the phone*? What kind of sense does that make?"

"Buffy—"

"I'll tell you what kind. The kind that *doesn't*."

"Then why are you calling?"

She'd sucked in a breath—unlike him, she still found herself doing that, even if it felt like a reverse sort of drowning—and tried to gather her bearings. "I thought... I don't know, Angel, you're a vampire, I'm a vampire. Maybe the whole *you leaving me* thing was something you wanted to reconsider since, *again*, I'm a vampire now too."

"Do you have a soul?"

"Do vampires come with souls these days?"

"So Willow didn't curse you."

"No. Apparently, the curse is rather you-specific. And she doesn't speak Romani."

There had been a pause. "Then I can't help you," he'd said. "You're not... Buffy is dead."

"Undead, technically."

"See that? That's the exact thing that makes you not her. She wouldn't joke about this."

That had struck her, and she'd spent the next several seconds trying to determine whether he had a point. Seconds during which he'd rambled on about one thing or another and she hadn't made an effort to follow. Not until she'd caught the word *stake* combined with the phrase *if I see you again*.

"Whoa, what?" Buffy had demanded, tightening her grip on the

phone so much she felt the plastic start to give under her fingers. She'd forced herself to relax immediately but feared a trip to the store was in her future. She'd gone through so many phones already. She'd need a phone budget. "Did you seriously just threaten me?"

"I threatened the thing that killed the woman I love," he'd replied nobly. Or at least he'd probably thought he was being noble or sacrificial or something. "I don't want to have to do that, but I will."

Buffy had sat frozen with her mother's probably-broken phone cradled against her ear, listening to the vacant space where her heart-beat would have been had she still been alive. But if she'd been alive, she wouldn't have heard the beating, just taken comfort in the knowledge that it was there. Pumping blood through her arteries and supplying oxygen to her brain and working like some wondrous, unseen machine in perfect harmony with itself to keep her warm and talking and moving and just human enough for Angel to love.

That shouldn't have hurt. It shouldn't have *anything*. Soulless vampire and all, right? Buffy shouldn't give a damn about what Angel thought or said or what plans he had for the next time he saw her, but she did. She did and no amount of telling herself to get it together made that sense of abandonment any easier to bear.

It was things like that—this ability to still hurt, to feel that throbbly place inside of her where Angel used to live, that made her think maybe she was still Buffy after all. Just a different version of Buffy. A Buffy who stuck to a liquid diet, had dropped out of college and once again lived at home with a mother who loved her but also had garlic hanging up in her bedroom and carried a vial of holy water on her person at all times *just in case*.

The vampire part wasn't what required acclimation. It was everything else. How the people she loved—and she did love them, she was certain—looked at her these days. How she didn't know if Giles viewed her as his surrogate daughter or as a really interesting thought experiment given shape. Her friends were still her friends in that they hung around, made jokes, and did their best to appear normal, but with little exception, it all felt phony. They were all pretending and none of them had the courage to admit it.

And Buffy understood. That was the worst of it. She absolutely got

why the others were keeping their distance. She would have done the same in their shoes.

No, in their shoes, she would've slain them. Viewed it as her tragic obligation.

She didn't know what that said about her, and *that* uncertainty was the worst. More than the whole being dead thing or drinking blood—which she only hated because she felt she couldn't be open about how much she *didn't* hate it—was the never-ending question. Was Buffy Summers doomed to be some freak of nature in death as she had been in life? Not monstrous enough to be a real vampire and not human enough to be an actual person. Just some oddity no one could explain despite trying. Not belonging anywhere.

But those thoughts, while definitely there under everything else she was carrying around these days, weren't the sort to dog her around as they would have once. They were there in the moments of quiet, ready to follow her into her dreams so her resting subconscious could see what it made of the whole situation. When she was awake, she did what she could to fill her silences. Staying in motion because motion meant noise, and Buffy liked things loud these days.

Though on her own terms. Not like the loud of the music blaring out of the speakers at the frat party she'd let Willow guilt her into attending.

"Still bad?" Willow asked, having paused in whatever she'd been in the middle of screaming upon catching the look on Buffy's face. "I can ask them to turn it down."

Buffy shook her head and tried to convince her hands to fall back to her sides. "It's okay," she lied, plastering on a smile—or at the least something smile-adjacent. "Just another thing to get used to, I guess."

Her friend offered a smile of her own. "But you're good, right?"

Good was probably pushing it. It also wasn't what Willow was really asking. They had done this a couple of weeks ago, the whole frat-party scene thing. Only that time Willow had been armed to the teeth with every vampire-fighting accessory under the sun, pun very intended, and ready to jump in at the slightest hint of distress. Other people's distress, that was, not Buffy's. They had been trying to determine how much danger Buffy posed to those around her, specifically those she

had zero reason to care about. If she could control herself when presented with a roomful of temptation in the form of blood-filled arteries, or if she'd become the sort of animal she had been cosmically chosen to put down.

And though Buffy hated to admit it, it had been a struggle. Like being at a cookout or a bakery, assaulted from all sides by the scent of delicious forbidden food. Food that didn't stay in one spot, rather walked right up to her and with a smile and asked if she needed something to drink without any sense of irony. Without knowing that the drink she wanted was pumping just a few biteable millimeters beneath his oh-so-tearable skin.

It had been an exercise in torture, and one Buffy had thankfully passed. Sure, the guy she'd talked to had been on the dull side, but he hadn't commented on her weirdness when her eyes slipped out of focus or when she found herself staring a bit too hard at a particularly fat, juicy vein that was just begging to have her fangs inside it. She'd managed to fool a roomful of humans into thinking she was human too. Never mind that she'd gone home and emptied a few bags of blood down her throat until the throb in her stomach had quieted—the important thing was that she had gotten through it. Even played the part well enough that she'd ended up giving that not-a-meal guy her phone number out of an excess of optimism.

She could do this. She could be the vampire who didn't hurt humans—who went on dates and fought evil just because it was the right thing to do.

And if she wanted to rub Angel's nose in it a bit, well, that was her prerogative. He'd certainly made his choice.

"I'm good," she told Willow now, because that was what Willow wanted to hear. "No homicidal urges or anything."

A little white lie never hurt anyone, so long as that lie didn't grow fangs.

"Excellent," Willow replied, relaxing. And that was what made the white lie worth it—the possibility that someday, Willow would feel comfortable enough not to check in every five seconds to make sure Buffy wasn't about to murder someone. "And you'll be okay if I go try to find Oz?"

Buffy rolled her eyes and made a shooing motion. "Go. Have cozy boyfriend time. Do not let me third-wheel you. Besides..." She rose on her tiptoes to scan the crowd of unfamiliar faces. "That guy I met might be here. You remember, the one from last time?"

"The one who's the TA in my psych class?"

Was he? Buffy didn't remember that part. Maybe because she'd been concentrating on the whole *don't bite him* thing. "Yeah, I think so," she replied. "There was flirtage. Major sparks."

"Sparks are good!" Willow agreed, nodding hard. "Just...be careful."

Somehow, Buffy refrained from rolling her eyes a second time. The concern she got but the constant checking was a bit much. Eventually, hopefully, her friends wouldn't feel the need to remind her she was a vampire every five seconds. "The carefulest," she replied seriously. "You know me. I'm caution girl."

The look Willow gave her before disappearing into the throng was one of highest uncertainty that would have seriously offended Buffy if it weren't one she'd earned well before she'd joined the undead ranks. But her friend didn't hedge or waffle after, either trusting that Buffy was going to be just fine or conceding that if she wasn't, there was little Willow could do about it. And maybe that was the line no one wanted to acknowledge. She didn't know.

Except she also did.

Buffy let out a breath—one she immediately regretted for the way it made her chest hurt, and dammit, she really needed to break that habit—then turned to survey the coeds in the hope of finding someone to help make her forget how hungry she was. Maybe even that TA guy for real, even if he had been a whole lot of boring. Boring could be good for her. It wasn't like her life was lacking in excitement elsewhere.

And even if it turned out boring was, in fact, *not* good for her, that didn't mean he couldn't serve as a useful distraction anyway. Someone to help her forget for a few hours that the guy she'd thought she'd loved more than anything had threatened to kill her if he saw her again.

But no thinking about that. Better to think about the kinda cute coed...a task that was easier said than done because, despite said coed being not-terrible to look at, he'd had the kind of face that was a bit

forgettable. Standard Midwestern stock, or so she assumed, and it didn't help that her attention was competing with a whole host of varying enhanced senses these days, either. There was the barrage of scents that hit her from all angles—some familiar, some not, and all overwhelming. The ever-present thump of double-digit heartbeats and the corresponding rush of blood didn't help things, either. And for a moment, Buffy found herself locked in place, trying to sort through the chaos and coming up empty.

Then she saw him.

It was like her eyes had known exactly where to look—like she had been drawn to that particular doorway tucked inside that particular corner for this particular purpose. Maybe that was why she didn't experience a thrill of shock or confusion that he should be here, of all places. Of course he was here. No matter what she threw at him, Spike just couldn't seem to stay away. She'd known it the second he'd scooped his insane lover into his arms and hauled ass just when Angel had been about to hand her hers. She'd also known it when he'd left in his cheery good mood following the fight with his former cronies. For some reason, Spike was the moth and Sunnydale was the flame. It had only been a matter of time before he found himself pulled in again.

And god, a good fight with someone who might actually make her work for it was so what the doctor had ordered. Which was how Buffy found herself shoving through the crowd of sweaty, sweet-smelling humans without a thought or care for the way her gums tingled. Temptation, it seemed, could be put on hold when a better offer came around.

Spike was definitely the better offer.

He was also smarter than he looked—or at the very least, smarter than Buffy had ever given him credit for. While he didn't try to make a break for one of the exits, he hardly seemed happy to see her. Which meant she wasn't the reason he was here. Interesting. And maybe a sign that he wasn't smart after all because hello, college party and she was a college girl. He had no right to be surprised to run into her. This was her turf.

Something he seemed to realize the second that she got close enough to breathe him in, and damn, that was heady too. Most of the

vampires she'd encountered since turning stank of embalming fluid and dead funeral flowers. Spike smelled of leather and nicotine and something else she couldn't identify but found very easy on the nose. Enough so it was almost worth that drowning sensation that came with the breaths she took.

"Hey Spike," she said brightly, putting herself between him and the space he seemed to be considering for a getaway route. "Fancy seeing you here."

That was clearly not the welcome he'd anticipated. Spike blinked at her, the tension in his face relaxing before tightening anew. "Slayer," he said slowly. And she saw it—the second he realized something was off. That *she* was off, and in ways far beyond not greeting him with a punch to the nose. His own senses, the sort they shared now, kicking in to fill in the blanks. She wondered, faintly, what he noticed first.

"Buffy?"

Probably more than she did, because somehow, the fact that an exceptionally pale Harmony Kendall was at Spike's side had completely skipped Buffy's enhanced powers of observation.

"Oh, Harmony," she said, not bothering to mask her surprise. Then the pieces came together and a giggle burst out of her lips. "Wait, when did you die?"

"Ugh, rude. What kind of question is that?" Harmony made a show of tossing her shiny blonde hair over her shoulder. "What makes you think I'm dead?"

"The fact that you're a vampire now, obviously."

"Oh ho. Look who's talkin'," Spike drawled, eyeing her up and down. "Oh, how the mighty have fallen. But it was always just a matter of time before some nasty did you in. Gotta say, pet, dead looks good on you."

"Don't sound so surprised. Most things look good on me." Buffy snapped her mouth shut, either to prevent the laugh that wanted to bubble free from, well, bubbling free or out of surprise at her own daring. Ever since she'd awakened in Giles's place all heartbeat-deficient, she'd been going out of her way to be as normal as possible so as not to wig out the humans.

Harmony, as clueless in death as she had been in life, scrunched up her face. “Uhh, Spike, what are you talking about?”

“The fact that the Slayer here’s switched sides.”

“She’s gay?” Harmony looked back to Buffy with something like smug superiority on her face. “I so knew it.”

“No, Harm, you nit, she was turned.” He rolled his eyes before meeting Buffy’s with a sort of commiserative expression—like, *can you believe this moron?* Which was way rich considering he was the one who was apparently on a date with said moron. A story Buffy would so make him squeal before she decided what to do with him because holy cow, how the hell had that happened?

“So let’s hear it,” Spike said, dropping his gaze to the mark on her throat. The mark that had once been Angel’s and only Angel’s. “Wanna know who I’m killin’ around here.”

“Killing?”

“The wanker who did you in, yeah. You think that’s somethin’ I’m gonna just forgive?”

Buffy couldn’t help it—she laughed. “You can’t be serious. You want revenge on the vamp who made me? Are you, what, defending my honor or something?”

“Not hardly,” he replied dryly. “Was always supposed to be mine, that dainty neck of yours.”

“Was it? I must’ve missed that all those times I kicked your ass.”

At that, he took what she assumed was supposed to be a menacing step forward, and a low growl she wouldn’t have been able to hear without her enhanced ears rumbled through his throat. “You think I won’t, don’t you?”

Had he always been this much fun? “Won’t what?” she shot back.

“Take you on like this.” Spike dragged his teeth over his lower lip and made a show of looking her up and down. And no, she wasn’t imagining the *something more* in his gaze. Everything he did—hell, even the way he moved was suggestive. Always had been.

Human Buffy had ignored that. That and so much more.

Vampire Buffy didn’t want to ignore anything. And it occurred to her, standing there, that she didn’t have to.

Vampire Buffy was a free agent. Way with the free. And soulless. A

monster, as Angel had been quick to point out. She might be resisting her baser instincts but there were all kinds of other instincts. Kinds involving Spike and that lower lip.

God, maybe she really *wasn't* Buffy anymore. The thought was both unsettling and the sort she didn't want to sit with longer than she had to. Right now she needed distraction, and Spike looked like he was more than willing to deliver.

"You think you could?" she asked, her voice sounding thicker. "You weren't really good at the ass-kicking thing before."

"Never was a fair fight before, now was it?"

"Sore loser says what?"

She expected him to drop the swagger, perhaps lash out with a punch. But he didn't, rather took a step forward—closer into her bubble than he'd ever been when they hadn't been trying to kill each other, his mouth curved into a smirk and his eyes twinkling. Seriously. They twinkled. Just like eyes had been doing in the pages of romance novels since the dawn of time, Spike's eyes *twinkled*. "Always wondered what it'd be like, puttin' down a slayer that'd gotten the upgrade. Asked about it once, if one of you had ever been turned. Story goes it makes you almost unstoppable."

"And you want a piece of that."

"I want the *almost*."

"Oh my *gross*," Harmony said loudly, enough so that she attracted the attention of a nearby group of frat boys who were in the middle of placing wagers in a drinking contest. "Are you two *flirting* with each other? And right in front of me? Rude!"

Buffy snickered and rolled her eyes. "No worries, Harm. He's all yours. I figure if he lost a bet that badly he deserves to be punished."

"Hey!" She turned to Spike with a very exaggerated huff. "Are you really gonna let her talk to me like that?"

Spike kept his gaze on Buffy. "Looks like I am."

"You can be *such* a jerk sometimes," Harmony wailed, wrenching away from his side in thorough melodramatic diva fashion. "I don't know why I let you be so mean. *Don't* come begging for sex tonight because I am *so* not putting out."

And with that, she huffed and disappeared into the crowd of

humans. Drunken, stupid frat-boy humans with biteable throats. Not the best combination, especially since Buffy knew Harmony was the type to eat her feelings—*thank you, Cordelia*—but between the two blond gatecrashers, Spike was definitely the apex predator. The one who actually needed to be supervised lest he cause the kind of mayhem that attracted the attention of yet another former crony hit squad.

At least, that was what Buffy told herself. The fact that she didn't want to chase after Harmony because she was kinda digging the back-and-forth with her once mortal enemy was completely incidental. She was doing the right, slayer-like thing. No difference here and in how she would have reacted under other, less room-temperature circumstances.

"So," she said, fighting back the smirk that wanted to match his own, "you beg Harmony for sex, huh?"

Spike scoffed and made his eyes do that magical twinkly thing again. Another thing she'd have to ask about. "Believe me, pet, when we're together, *I'm* not the one who begs."

"Take it the whole 'torture Drusilla into loving me again' thing didn't go so hot."

Some of the twinkle went away. "Her loss, way I see it," he said, all tried and true *I'm just fine* nonsense that always meant *I am not fine but if I pretend hard enough maybe I will be*. She should know—she'd done the same song and dance all summer. It was the opposite of fun.

"So, Slayer," he said, and now he was so close it was inappropriate. So close that anyone who looked their way would probably think one or both of them were close to sealing the sort of deals typically sealed at these parties. And with another thrill, Buffy realized she could. For the first time since Angel had left, the thought of sex with someone else—of *anything* with someone else—took the drastic turn from possibility to reality.

This was it. This was life now. Life post-Angel. Life post-human. Life post-soul. Everything she'd thought she would be and everything she'd wanted to be could be redefined.

"Now that it's just the two of us," he went on. Had his voice always been that rumble? "Care to share where you got that fetching mark on your throat?"

She didn't know if it was instinct or habit, what had her reaching for inches of imperfect skin her fingers knew well by now. But then, touch was all she had. It was the way she saw it without seeing it, since mirrors didn't do anything for her anymore. The only actual looks she got of herself these days were courtesy of one of those cameras that instantly spat photos out the second they were snapped—a gift from a still-skittish Xander as a sort of peace offering for the whole not-quite-trusting-her thing. Buffy had spent the first night she'd learned how to shift from game to human face taking photos of herself with her fangs out, getting used to the idea of her features settling into that of a demon's. And she'd studied the bite, curious to see how Sunday had warped it. If the contours had changed at all from the way it had looked after Angel had been through with her.

That she hadn't been able to tell much of a difference had been another nail in the whole Angel coffin. It had been a foolish girl's daydream, the idea that the way he'd bitten her had had any sort of actual meaning aside from *slayer blood, don't wanna die*. But that was an idea she'd carried with her until, well, around the time he'd asked her if she'd murdered her friends and family.

But enough about Angel. He wasn't who Spike was asking about.

"It's a boring story," Buffy said, dropping her hand back to her side. "Hardly worth remembering, let alone telling."

Especially to her former-maybe-current mortal enemy. The only vampire aside from Angel who had actually been a challenge. The fact that she'd been turned by some regular nobody was embarrassing enough without other people—*enemies*—knowing about it.

Spike's eyes darkened a shade. "Ah ah," he said, somehow edging closer without brushing up against her. "We're all friends here, aren't we?"

"Get a grip."

"Gonna be hard to kill the wanker if you don't cough up his name."

This fixation of his was weird, even for Spike. Make that *especially* for Spike. At first, she'd thought it idle curiosity, perhaps something he could lord over her. The demise of Buffy Summers and all that. But the more she looked at him, the more she saw that was very much not it. His lips were pulled into a smirk, yes, but the twinkle

had winked out, replaced with an underlying hardness that betrayed how pissed he actually was.

Why the hell would he be pissed? Because he hadn't gotten to kill her?

No, because someone else had. Someone he wanted to kill... because that person had just taken her place on Spike's Top People to Murder list. The vampire who had turned Buffy Summers had become his new trophy, and he aimed to collect.

And that brought her crashing back to reality. Fun flirtation over. She refused to be anyone's consolation prize. She might be soulless and undead, but she also knew her worth and it was more than being someone else's grudge.

God, and *Spike*? Just what the hell had she been thinking? Must have been the bloodlust.

"You're not killing anyone," she said dryly, placing a hand on his chest to shove him back a few steps. Reintroduce personal space to their relationship. "Not who turned me and definitely no one here. So, if you wanna get out of my town alive, you'll go find your little rent-a-skank and do it while I'm feeling generous."

Spike's brow bunched, confusion pouring in where anger had just lived. The look on his face actually almost made the whole thing worth it. "The hell you on about, Slayer?"

"Yeah," Buffy shot back, emboldened. "*Slayer*. As in, she who slays low-life vampires much like yourself, quicker and deadlier than ever before. Something to keep in mind if you're going to be sniffing around, trying to cause trouble, in general being the usual pain in my ass."

He studied her for a second longer before seeming to realize something, then groaned and rolled his eyes. "Of course," he said, his voice rumbling with a dry laugh. "Joke's on me, right? Should've known from the start."

Buffy crossed her arms. "Known what, exactly?"

"Your little mates. No bloody way they'd let you kick loose, is there? Gotta keep you here—keep you tethered." Spike was shaking his head now, laughing harder still at whatever he thought was funny. "They had the blueprints and all, and the little witch to do the ritual

right. Couldn't let you live a little even after you'd gone and snuffed it, could they?"

It took another moment before the clouds in her mind parted and she realized what exactly he'd gotten stuck up his craw. Then it was her turn to laugh.

Oh, this was rich. Angel accused her of being a killer. Spike accused her of having a soul. She couldn't win for losing around here.

"Sorry to break it to you, dipshit, but there was no ritual. No curse. We looked into that and it turns out that's a very specific spell for a very specific vampire and, no, not me." She extended her arms, inviting him to look his fill. "No, this is just what happens when you—"

But she didn't finish the sentence, stopped by the cold fury that suddenly commanded his features. Not surprise or confusion, but full-on rage. The sort he'd never regarded her with, even that night she'd pressed a stake to Drusilla's chest and threatened to dust her right in front of him. It was stark and deep and had every instinct in her body—slayer and vampire alike—standing at attention.

It made the kind of sense that didn't. Hell, it unnerved her to her core, and that was something that hadn't happened once since she'd woken up dead. Something that hadn't happened with Spike at all since she'd fought him the first time, and the unstoppable force Angel had described had become real to her rather than just a boogeyman for slayers.

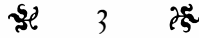
"What?" Buffy asked before she could stop herself.

She didn't expect an answer and she didn't get one. Instead, she got a slow shake of his head, just one, then he was gone. Plowing his way through drunk, flirty coeds and carving a harsh path toward the exit without slowing down or looking back.

Leaving Buffy standing there like an idiot, staring at his back and wondering how the hell she'd managed to piss him off. Without really trying, even.

By the time it occurred to her that a pissed-off, unnerving Spike might not be the sort of vampire she ought to let out of her sights, though, it was too late. She ran outside, spilled into the night, followed her nose as far as it would take her, but it was no good.

He was gone.



CAUGHT BENEATH THE LANDSLIDE

MORE THAN A CENTURY OF CARING FOR DRU, LISTENING TO HER ramblings, trying to interpret the visions that plagued her day and night, and it had still taken the Slayer parading the obvious in front of him before Spike had realized what she was going out of her way not to say. No fault of his own, sure, but he was still cursing himself as he burst into Los Angeles County no less than two hours after bursting *out* of the college party Harmony had dragged him to. All this *without* consulting Harmony or anyone else before leaving, he might add. A whole bloody crew at his disposal—not an easy task, particularly since he wasn’t really the *crew* sort—and what did he do? Let his temper get the better of him all over a girl.

The wrong bloody girl.

But what else was new there? After all, to hear it from the woman that *had* been the light of his unlife, he was all *covered* with her. Her being Buffy. Because nothing in this world made sense anymore.

And right now, negotiating his way around the cars that took up the motorway, Spike was having a time arguing the point, even with the version of Dru that lived in his head. There had been a plan—a good one. Show up in Sunnyhell, find the Gem of Amara, finally take the Slayer’s head off her perfect shoulders once and for all, then track

down his maker for the third and final time to put the whole sodding affair to rest. "Yeah, I was covered in her, all right," he'd say, grinning like a loon and tossing the head into the air. "In all her glorious blood. And you didn't even get to lick it off."

Not that he'd hold that against her, of course. Drusilla would be more than welcome to lick off other things. As much as she wanted. No, as much as *he* wanted. That's the way it would be once she realized the error of her ways. She'd simper and coo and beg him for the privilege of lapping up whatever he dribbled on his cock for the task, and she'd do it with that wicked smile that made all the pain and suffering of the last two years more than worth it.

That had been the plan, at least. But in buggering brilliant fashion, the Slayer had thrown a bloody wrench in it. And infuriatingly, it hadn't even been on purpose. But just what the hell was a bloke supposed to do when he discovered the bane of his existence had up and gotten herself vamped in the time he'd been gone?

Worse, vamped by *Angel* of all people. She was just dizzy enough to have let him, too. Could be the daft little twig had even begged for it. *That* was the sort of desperation that got Angelus going. He'd love nothing more than to get some sweet young thing to crave her worst nightmare before giving it to her so she could see that it was so much worse than she'd always feared. True, Spike wasn't sure how the soul weighed into things, but from what he'd observed before and after the loophole in the curse that had fucked everything up, all Angel had done was change the why of it all, not the how. He'd had the Slayer begging for table scraps, same as any of the girls he'd stalked and slaughtered over the time he'd led the family. He'd dangled her along, giving her just enough to keep her interested, bloody well enthralled, before moving in and going for the kill. Or whatever passed for the kill when one had a soul mucking up everyone's good time.

It had been the same when Spike had gone back last year. The world hadn't been sucked into Hell, so he'd assumed, rightly, that the Slayer had bested the beast and won the day. What he hadn't expected was for Angel to still be around and annoying people or for the soul to be back in place. Seemed to him if that had been an option all along, it was one Buffy had taken her sweet time getting to. Would've saved the

lot of them heartache and more besides if she'd just shoved the rancid thing back up his arse where it belonged.

But no, she'd dawdled, for whatever reason. Maybe because as insufferable as Angelus was, he was at least a bit more upfront about his intentions. Anyone with half a brain cell could sniff out his agenda from a mile away. The souled version was a harder sell for anyone who didn't know the other one as well as Spike did. And somehow, that souled sap had gotten the Slayer to beg for the one thing Spike would never have expected of her. Not only that, he'd given it. Then done what Angelus was wont to do once he had his way.

Leave the poor, hapless sods in his wake to suffer by themselves.

At the realization, something inside of Spike had snapped.

It had been bad enough when it had been Dru, but *that* he'd had no choice but to accept. There was no changing it, no getting around it. The state of the world into which he'd opened his eyes as a newborn fledge, mad for the mad woman who had made him. Belonging to her, body and soul—except he didn't have a soul, but would have been willing to hunt one down just to offer it up to her. Willing to give her anything her heart desired.

Then the learning that she belonged to someone else, and the painful acceptance that she always would. That even if the owning wasn't mutual, even if Angelus would never be *hers* in any form, she still wanted to be his. It was something she'd chosen. Something Spike could never change because *he* was the interloper. *He* had been absorbed into a dynamic that already existed and didn't have the luxury of challenging. Even if he had, Dru would never have let him.

But that was Dru. That wasn't Buffy.

Except apparently it was.

And Spike couldn't bloody stand it. Not again and definitely not her. He might hate her but he'd respected her, and she deserved better than what she'd been given.

He didn't know what he planned to do upon cornering Angelus. Hell, trying to get his spinning mind to slow down enough that it could dredge up the address he'd forced himself to memorize was a chore in itself. But he managed to do it, snatch that bit of info before it could be rushed away in a fresh bout of outrage. And that was how he found

himself pulling up to a building that looked like it might have been some sort of government complex in a previous life. Now home to Angel Investigations, because his wanker of a grandsire had abandoned the woman he'd spent the better part of three years toying with to play detective.

Spike didn't bother trying the door, rather kicked it open with enough gusto that splinters of wood and sawdust went scattering about the floor. Then he had to do it all over again once he found the right set of offices within the complex itself. Thankfully, Angel's stink was thick enough to confirm he was on the premises. Probably off somewhere having a good brood over what a tragic little hero he was, or whatever story he told himself these days. Spike helped himself into a modest reception area, complete with water cooler, and, when Angel failed to come charging around the corner, drew in a lungful of air and bellowed loud enough to make the walls shake.

"Oi, come out now! You had to know this was comin'!"

Spike waited a beat. Another. Then, at last, there it was. The sound of footfalls, somewhat muffled but close enough he knew whose weight was behind each step, even if he *couldn't* smell the stink of unearned righteousness and whatever else the sod wallowed in these days. There was no surprise on Angel's face when he emerged from the adjoining office, rather a flash of resignation, as though Spike were little more than an unwelcome but expected inconvenience. Maybe Buffy had rung him up to give him fair warning. The thought positively grated.

"What do you want?" the pillock had the audacity to ask.

And that was it—all he could stand. Spike was moving the next second in hard, heavy strides, his fist balled and his muscles tense and everything inside of him screaming. He fully expected Angel to try to bob and weave away from what he had coming, but the big oaf just stood there and let him pop him a punch, which just brassed Spike off all the more.

That's right. If he couldn't be the hero, he'd be the bloody martyr.

"Happy with yourself?" he spat, hitting him again just because he could.

"I'd be happier if I knew what the hell you were doing here," Angel

shouted, finally bringing up an arm to block Spike's fist. "I really don't have time for this."

"What, you need me to book an appointment?" Another punch. He was on a bloody roll. "This you playin' human?"

"Spike, just get to the point before I start fighting back. I am not in the mood."

That was rich. And fuck, if Angel wanted to be a martyr, who was Spike to stand in his way? He'd steady the nails for the hammer. Speed things along. "Not enough to torture the girl, was it, *Angelus*? Always knew that soul rubbish was just a smokescreen."

"All right, that's it." Angel heaved a sigh of the well-put-upon and met Spike's next blow with one of his own. A good blow—the sort he used to deliver back in the days of yore, before William had discovered what all could be done with railroad spikes, when *respect your elders lest they beat you to dust* had been key to staying alive. But that blow was as far as it went, landed with the confidence of a man who didn't feel threatened. Didn't feel the need to assert his authority because it was already established, and that was just the way of things with Angel. Always had been.

Spike found himself knocked back far enough that the small of his back caught the edge of the reception desk, then Angel was stalking forward, his expression not changing. Not that it ever did.

"One more time before I get cranky," declared the Great Forehead. "What are you doing here and what are you talking about?"

Spike glared at him, felt along the place on his jaw where Angel's knuckles had made impact. "Really gonna pretend you don't know?"

In lieu of a response, Angel just stared. And if he were keen to play, that could go on for hours. Hours Spike didn't want to spend here, least of all with him, when there was so much waiting for him back at the sodding hellmouth. He was here to say his piece and possibly stake the bastard if he could figure a way to do it. It might be too little too late where the damage was concerned but it was sure as fuck make *him* feel better.

"Funny thing happened tonight," Spike spat once the silence had stretched too long. "Swung by to visit an old chum of ours. You might remember her. 'Bout yeah high. Shampoo commercial hair. Perky little

arse. Strangest thing, though. Seems she's sported a pair of fangs since we last talked. Wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"You've seen Buffy."

"Saw what you left of her, more like."

"What *I* left of her," Angel echoed, his tone flat. "That's the story she's telling these days."

Spike shook his head, going tense all over again. It shouldn't matter—fuck, none of this should matter. He shouldn't be here at all, but he was, and there was no sense questioning it now. It, Dru, or the beast that had awakened in his chest back at that bloody frat party and demanded he finish this himself. That he finally be the one to make the wanker look at the mess he'd made and the people he'd ruined just for kicks. Do that or dust trying. There had to be a line somewhere.

"You'll be happy to hear she's still your little soldier," Spike said. "Didn't say a thing. Had to figure it out myself. You never shared how you breed 'em so loyal."

At last, a flicker of surprise dashed across Angel's stupid face. "Wait—"

"Don't think I will, thanks."

"Why in the world would you think I turned Buffy if she didn't tell you that herself?" A bit of anger now to match the surprise. Nice to know the git had more than one setting after all. "Of course I didn't have anything to do with that."

"Saw the girl, didn't I?" Spike shot back, that tension starting to coil tight. "She stinks of your handiwork. Same as that bloke back durin' the war. Took me a minute after to put it together, what was off about him, but it all made sense once Darla let me and Dru in on your little soul problem."

"What the *hell* are you talking about?"

"You turn 'em wrong."

"I didn't turn anyone!" Angel snapped. Then he blinked as though having just realized something and held up his hand. All the better for Spike to snap it off. "Wait. Wait. What do you mean, *wrong*?"

"I mean I figured it out—what that curse of yours is really good for. Not just you it buggers up, but anyone you sink your fangs into. That includes your new masterpiece." He smirked, though there was little

feeling behind it, especially with everything inside of him screaming to just launch at Angel and have it over with. “Really pulled the wool over the girl’s eyes. Probably made her so untouchable no one’s gonna get close enough to do her proper unless she aims to put herself out of her misery. Stunning bit of artwork there, and we know how much you always appreciated your art. And here I thought you were supposed to love the bird.”

There was nothing for a long moment except more of that useless staring through eyes that had gone blank once more. Angel liked doing that—liked to fancy himself unreadable, unpredictable, but Spike knew better. Always had. It was the women who couldn’t seem to see him for what he was. Tripping over themselves to earn his favor when everyone knew the only person he truly cared about happened to be the chit he’d plunged a stake through a few years back. And if that didn’t tell you what kind of bloke he was, Spike wasn’t sure what would.

“You always did love jumping to conclusions,” Angel muttered at last, backing up a step and shaking his head. “And you’re even stupider than I’ve given you credit for. For the record, Buffy was turned by some vampire on her college campus named Sunday. There was a gang of them, or so she told me. They had this thing they pulled on incoming freshmen. She was looking into it when they got the jump on her.”

It happened that quick—the indignation, the absolute fury that had pulled him to Los Angeles snapped out in a blink. Spike opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again, the rest of him scrambling for words. Or *word*. “Bollocks.”

“You thought I’d turned her. Me. You thought I’d ever do anything that selfish.”

Spike snorted before he could help himself. “Oh no. Not you, blessed saint Angelus.”

“That’s not me anymore.”

“Who you tryin’ to convince here?”

Angel rolled his eyes and turned—actually turned his back on Spike and started to make his way back toward the hole that led to his very own bat cave. Doing so was the supreme insult, and they both knew it. Spike wasn’t even threat enough to keep an eye on until the coast was

clear. Nothing to see here, folks, and definitely nothing to worry about. Just Angelus being Angelus because he bloody could.

"If that's all," his royal grandness drawled, "you can show yourself out. Don't be here when I wake up or I'll have to do something about it."

For a second, Spike was stunned stupid. Then he was moving—barreling toward the revered elder with a mind to shove him or stake him or both. Just instinct, the fury from before swapped out for something else. He was gearing up to thump the back of Angel's head into the wall when the other vampire swung around and caught his fist with a snarl.

"I think I've been a rather accommodating host," Angel spat out between clenched teeth, his jaw muscles pulled tight. "You come into my home throwing punches and making accusations and I was going to let you *walk out the door*. You want a fight, Spike? I'll give you one. Seem to remember they never lasted all that long."

Spike swung again, his right fist this time. It had been a minute since he'd been up against Angel like this—really up against him. He'd staffed out most of the fun in Sunnyhell before the lot of them had started playing a round of magical souls, determined that everything go right for Dru's sake and cognizant enough of his own bloody shortcomings to know that Angel would expect him to do the dirty work himself just for the thrill of it. But he hadn't. Getting Dru restored had been too important, and he hadn't been willing to risk it.

No, the only time he'd gotten to unleash his fury on Angel had been tragically short-lived. Give him a few hours alone with the prat and a crowbar and he might finally exorcise some of those grievances that he'd been harboring since the second he'd crawled out of the bloody grave.

"You're tellin' me," he practically roared as his fist made contact—and fuck, that was brilliant. Catching the surprise on the wanker's face, relishing the way he stumbled back, "that the girl got herself in a fix and you just bloody left her?"

There was another snarl, this one more guttural, and suddenly he was looking at his grandsire's gleaming yellow eyes. "Why do you

care?” Angel demanded, throwing back another blow of his own. “Seriously, Spike, what the *hell* are you doing here?”

The fact that he’d been asking himself the same bloody thing since he’d stormed away from the Slayer didn’t make the question any easier to swallow, particularly when it was wrapped in Angel’s stupid voice. Spike just fixed the bastard with another glare, willing himself not to give anything away, his own confusion and frustration most of all. But the question remained there in the air between them, scratching at him with more insistence than before. It seemed he’d made the trip for sodding nothing. Buffy hadn’t been done in by lover boy after all. So all Spike was left with was a load of outrage with no outlet that would satisfy him. Sure, he could pummel Angel for a bit—god knows the berk deserved it—but it would be hollow in the end. Fun, yeah, but hollow. And a waste of bloody time when he had a gem to find.

But he was here anyway, and the Slayer he’d come back to finally put in the ground had been killed before he’d had the chance to take his proper turn. The girl had deserved a warrior’s death, and what had she gotten? How bad had things been that she’d let herself get knocked off by some lazy two-bit trollop who couldn’t even do a proper hunt? Picking off incoming freshmen? No sport in that at all.

And if it wasn’t Angel, wasn’t his stupid wet blanket of a soul that had made the turning go wrong, then what?

“She said she’d stake me,” Spike mumbled, not really meaning to but needing the words to go somewhere. He couldn’t keep them to himself anymore. Maybe Angel could break with bloody tradition and make himself useful for once.

“Who did?”

He looked up, having not realized he’d looked down in the first place, and regarded Angel with narrowed eyes. “Who do you bloody think?”

“Buffy?”

“She was at a party, mate. A veritable all-you-can-eat buffet for creatures like us. Plenty of saucedup flesh bags for the pickin’. She told me if I so much as took a nibble, she’d dust me proper.”

Angel’s expression didn’t change, though he did work his throat. Not much of a tell to those who didn’t know him, but Spike knew him

far better than he wished. “So you drove here from Sunnydale to accuse me of turning Buffy because she...what, was staking her territory?”

If only it had been that simple, but Spike knew it wasn't. That's why he was here—what had driven him out of the frat house and behind the wheel of the DeSoto. He'd spotted the hunger in her eyes, the sort of hunger only a vampire could truly understand. He'd also seen something else. Something he would have sworn didn't exist, had spent the better part of a century believing to have been some cosmic accident of a world gone wonky. The first fumbling steps of a newborn learning the purpose of its legs. Hell, until tonight, he would have sworn that what he'd seen wasn't something that could be *seen* at all. When he'd known it last, he'd been a fledgling himself. Fresh out of the grave and in his mum's parlor, spilling what he'd thought had been his soul to Drusilla, not realizing until after everything was done that his ladylove had thought him a right nutter, and not without reason. He'd been out of his bloody head but convinced he'd found it. Convinced that the life he'd been living was the same one he was about to pick up, only with all this new strength and understanding on his side. Tearing out spleens and bathing in blood had been a distant thought—not so distant he hadn't fallen into it at once, and had a jolly good time in the doing, but distant enough that it hadn't been his first instinct.

No, his first instinct had been to come home. Give his mum the cure he'd always prayed would land in his lap. Be the son she deserved at long bloody last.

That wasn't to say he'd stepped into his home that night with clean hands. He hadn't. Not hardly. He and Dru had celebrated in style, drinking blood and booze alike, though the act of killing hadn't been compulsory. She'd led him into a pub, giggling against his mouth, and then, casual as you may, ripped into the barman's throat, soaking her pretty dress in the man's blood and cackling all the while. Spike, then William, had watched with a mixture of horror and awe until he'd realized how damned hungry he was and how nice the barman's gushing blood smelled. And then he'd been drinking and laughing and stealing kisses from the giddy goddess who had decided there was a place for him in her life. There had been general pande-

monium from the onlookers that Dru had handled as only she could, and soon, they'd been fucking amid a tavern full of corpses, rolling in blood and drunk on each other, and it had been everything. Just everything.

After that first flash of shock, it hadn't occurred to him—dear sap William—that anything strange had happened, aside from the fact that he'd just blown his load inside a woman for the first time. The blood and gore and all else had just been scenery. He'd still been his mum's son. Still intent on saving her with this miracle cure. Just not pathetic anymore. Not sniveling. Not wasting away for the love of some pompous bitch not worthy to lick clean his Drusilla's boots. Just back to his life, or so he'd thought then. Not knowing yet that William was dead.

Spike hadn't had much occasion to think on that night beyond the glory of reliving the highlights. Not until tonight. Not until he'd seen Buffy with her new lack of a heartbeat, her skin having lost the sweet luster given by the sun. Stunning as ever, because the Slayer could never be anything less than gorgeous—one of her more annoying qualities—and still, somehow, herself. She'd grinned and flirted a bit, a bloody rush of its own, but she hadn't been there to kill. That he knew for certain.

More than that, she'd been ready to fight him to keep others safe. Humans. Her food supply. The ants under her shoes.

"No, she was there bein' the Slayer," he said hoarsely. He felt rather than watched Angel bristle and thought, *let him*. The sod didn't believe him—fine. He hadn't been there. He hadn't seen what Spike had seen. If he had, he'd understand. "She was actin' like nothin' had changed."

Because she hadn't changed. Not at all. At least, not in the only way that mattered.

And if Angel wasn't the cause, if Angel hadn't been the one to muck her up and leave her, then Spike had no idea what the hell that meant.

But he was damn sure going to find out.



THE LAST FEW hours had been incredibly confusing, and Buffy was ready to be unconfused.

It was Spike's fault. At least that much *wasn't* confusing. Not confusing and, weirdly, kinda nice, knowing that for however much things changed, other things remained the same.

After Spike had made with the dramatic exit, Buffy had decided to follow suit and ditch the frat party, but only after doubling back to make sure the newly turned Harmony didn't leave her any messes to clean up. She'd found the walking dumb-blond joke about to make some tallish, goodish-looking guy her snack and had intervened before fangs could pierce skin. There had been words and the threat of hair-pulling, and in the end the guy, Parker something, had gone home with a bounce in his step thinking that he'd been the subject of a girl fight. Buffy had been tempted to yell something like, "Not even with someone else's vaginal!" after him, but decided it was probably better to let him bask in the delusion that he was hot stuff than get a whiff of the truth.

Instead, she'd turned her attention to Harmony, who only then remembered who Buffy was—or had been, if she wasn't anymore—at precisely that second. There had been lip wobbling and a smattering of crocodile tears, then a promise to pay her back once Spikeypoo came back.

It had been intuition rather than mercy that had convinced Buffy not to dust the undead Barbie, and an intuition that had certainly paid off. She'd followed Harmony at a distance, carefully at first then with less concern once she'd realized the ditz wasn't making any effort to see if she was being tailed. Rather, Harmony had strolled into some cave-like lair, hips in full sashay mode, negotiated her way between a bunch of vampires wearing hardhats and carrying around power tools, and called out for Spike. But Spike hadn't been there.

"It makes no sense," Buffy had said later to Giles while also waiting for him to pat her on the back for not giving into what had been her innate urge to just start ripping through cronies until someone squealed. The need had been there, the drive, itching just under her skin and whispering how good it would feel to unleash the raw and true power of vampire Buffy on the idiots Spike had conned into

working for him. But she hadn't because Buffy—the human version of Buffy—would have been outnumbered, which would have forced her to slow down and start asking questions. Like what the hell was Spike doing in town and what was up with the excavation squad?

Giles should have known this. Should have seen how hard it had been for Buffy to walk away from a fight like that, but he hadn't. He'd just started rambling on about Spike, how he always had a reason for returning to the Hellmouth and that his reasons for being here now were likely of the bad variety. As though Buffy had needed this spelled out for her. Really, the more she'd stood there, the more irritated she'd become, which had in turn wigged her out because *irritated* plus *vampire* equaled dead bodies and she very much did not want Giles to be dead. Or anyone for that matter.

But these weren't thoughts she hadn't had already. Furthermore, she knew Spike's motives usually tended to follow the same theme—Drusilla. Get Drusilla healthy, get Drusilla *back*, and this time... Well, Buffy didn't know, but smart money was on the bet that Drusilla was at least part of his overall motive. If only she had been thinking like a slayer during her conversation with Spike and not someone trying to get laid.

Maybe that was more evidence that she wasn't the real Buffy, just some demon playing pretend. Kidding themselves into thinking that she could be anything other than what she was now.

But the more she thought about that, the less sense it made. If she were just a demon who had no relation to Buffy Summers, wouldn't she have memories of her life *before* the whole turning thing had happened? Sure, the Buffy Summers memories would be there—the demon, after all, was now sharing Buffy's brain—but a demon *taking over* the body meant the demon had to have existed before, right? That was how she'd imagined it for the longest time, and she was pretty sure the way it had been explained to her. That was until she'd met Angel.

Not that any of that mattered now. What mattered now was finding out what Spike was up to and trying to get ahead of it. Do the thing that a non-vampire Buffy Summers *would* do if she were here and in charge. Fake it till you make it, right?

Which was how Buffy had found herself standing in the little

courtyard outside her watcher's townhome trying to figure out what her next move should be. The night had grown long, but sunrise was still a few hours away. If she wanted, she could easily find her way back to the cavern Spike had evidently established as his base of operations and see if the man of the hour had returned. Maybe give into her earlier impulse to dust all his cronies, since her restraint seemed to have been for nothing.

Buffy rolled her head back, then decided, whatever. Her human reasons for not going just weren't valid anymore. It wasn't too late for vampires; she had no early morning class to catch or roommate to lie to, and while her mother seemed to be adjusting well, a small, sad part of her felt that maybe *not* being in the house would help Joyce get a better night's rest.

Plus, she needed to kill something, and lucky her, she knew just where to find a lot of somethings in need of a good killing.

So she pulled out her trusty stake and let her nose lead her back to the cave with all its burly vampire workers. Why put off to tomorrow what could be done today? She was pretty sure Willow had said that to get her to do her homework, but the phrase was just as applicable in this scenario.

Twenty minutes later, standing amid the dust piles she'd made of Spike's work crew, Buffy privately congratulated herself on making the right call. At the very least, the tension she'd been carrying since the frat party had been well and thoroughly exorcised. Not as well as if Spike had actually been there to put up a halfway decent fight, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

Maybe that was her problem. In trying to avoid becoming a monster, she'd been forcing herself to think like a human. Enjoy the perks and the added strength, sure, but don't do anything normal Buffy Summers wouldn't do. And really, what was the damage if she gave in? Would it still be a slippery slope to munching on the average citizen if she knew the slope was there?

There were certain things she just wasn't anymore. Maybe it was time to embrace that.

"Let's try this again, shall we?" Buffy asked, tilting her hand so the point of the stake she held touched the center of her wrist. She'd only

left one person standing, mostly because it was just wiggy to stake someone you'd known in high school. Also, Harmony was her kind of dumb—the kind that would give away the farm without realizing that was exactly what she had done. “What is Spike’s game? Why is he in town?”

Harmony watched the stake move with the sort of attention her high school teachers could have only ever dreamed about. “If I tell you, you’ll kill me.”

“And what do you think is going to happen if you don’t tell me?”

“Spike is gonna be so mad when he gets back, you know. He doesn’t like it when people are mean to me.”

Buffy stifled a laugh, torn between amusement and pity. The girl had been clueless in life; in death, she was just kinda pathetic. “I was barely afraid of Spike when I was alive,” she replied, taking another slow step forward. Relishing, the way a soulless creature would, the way Harmony’s eyes widened. This should probably scare her—and in some ways it did—but it also felt good and she didn’t want to stop. “You saw me go through all your little lackey guys, right? Do you really think Spike would even slow me down?”

“Always game to find out, Slayer,” came from behind her.

Buffy whirled around, jolting with a mixture of shock and delight. Somehow, she hadn’t heard him approach. “I was wondering where you went off to,” she said, lowering her stake hand. “You got all angsty and left. Was it something I said?”

She expected him to crack a grin, or at the very least, for his eyes to light up. He didn’t. They didn’t. And that kinda wiggled her out. Spike was a lot of things but stone-faced was not on the list. The guy was a walking mood ring most of the time.

“What?” she blurted before she could help herself.

He didn’t answer, though. He didn’t get a chance. A shadow moved behind him and a lot of things happened at once. Ropes of electricity exploded from the darkness, heralding a rush of men in army fatigues. They seemed to pour out of the crevices and dark spaces, though Buffy didn’t know how, couldn’t see, because she was focused on Spike and Spike was down for the count. On the stone floor, writhing and snarling but also fading. She could see that. Fading.

“One hostile is down,” someone called out.

There was another burst and Buffy turned just in time to watch Harmony hit the ground. And several things fell into place.

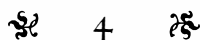
These were men. She didn’t know how she knew—she couldn’t smell them, couldn’t hear their heartbeats—but she knew.

Men who were hunting vampires.

She was a vampire. And she was next.

Time did a funny thing, both speeding up and slowing down in the same stroke. She whipped her head around, considering the human men with their human weapons, the blockade standing between her and the exit, how much force she would have to use to hope to make it out. It was inevitable that her vampire instincts and her human sensibilities would clash one day—she just hadn’t expected it to be this day. Now. So soon. She hadn’t expected it *tonight*.

In the end, her hesitation cost her, and she went down with the others.



STUCK INSIDE THESE FOUR WALLS

SHE HADN'T KNOWN SHE COULD STILL HURT LIKE THIS. IN THAT WAY, the pain was kinda nice. Reminded her that while she might technically be dead, she was actually still alive. And wasn't that just the sort of insightful thinky thought that would make Giles proud? If she remembered to share it with him, maybe he'd reward her with a cookie. The blood-dunking kind.

But still, pain was pain, and it seemed she'd missed the masochism gene when she'd become a vampire. Or maybe she just hadn't grown into it, because this pain? Buffy was not a fan.

For what felt like a very long time, she didn't move. Didn't even fight to open her eyes. That was something she'd picked up over the years—when you didn't know where you were, best not to clue in anyone who might be watching. The moment they caught you frazzled and disoriented was the moment you lost any available upper hand. So she remained still, soaking in her environment with everything her other senses could tell her. Which, lucky her, was quite a lot.

For instance, the space on the other side of her eyelids was bright. Someone had stocked up on hospital-grade fluorescents and really wanted to show off the wattage. The air also had a sterile smell, like it had been sanitized within an inch of its life, which was strange because

the scent profile didn't match the soundtrack. Clean places typically weren't paired with the rumble of demonic growls and snarls. Unless someone had finally answered that Martha Stewart question for her.

Okay, so wherever she was, she wasn't alone. That could be good. Or bad. Probably a mixture. Good for her, bad for whoever was in her way.

Except just what the hell had happened? There was a fuzzy place in her memory just out of reach, disjointed images lying scattered around it. A cave full of vampires. No, wait, the vampires had been gone. She'd dusted her way through them to get to something. Someone. Harmony. Harmony Kendall was a vampire now—a vampire who doubled as Spike's new bed-warmer. Or was it bed-colder if the person was room temperature? How did sex work as a vampire, anyway? Did they get hot at all anymore? *Ever*? Why hadn't she asked this before?

Because it wasn't relevant, that's why.

Focus, Buffy.

She'd been talking to Harmony—or threatening Harmony. Spike was in town and he'd been all weird and storm-outty earlier, but then he was always weird so what the hell did she know? Nothing. That's why she'd sought out Harmony. Needed to figure out what the pest was up to before he caused the sort of trouble that couldn't be undone.

Then he'd been there. Presto. Spike with his well-timed entrances. And his random battalion of guys in military fatigues. No. That made zero sense.

Guess it was time to open her eyes. Thinking had taken her as far as it could.

Buffy braced herself, then flinched against the bright. Bright overkill, really. Between the overhead lights, the white tile that made up the floor, and the glass barrier that guarded the mouth of her cell, her retinas felt like they were being personally assaulted. Still, now that her eyes were open, she forced herself to keep them that way. Take in everything she saw. Add it to the flood of information filling in from her other senses.

Like the fact that a shvelack demon was in the cell right across from hers. To its left was another demon—she didn't know the name of this one—with cloven hands and tentacles for a mouth. Another

demon was to the right, again a breed Buffy couldn't name. It looked like a bastardization of the Creature from the Black Lagoon, if the Creature from the Black Lagoon had long poky things coming out of its arms. None of the monsters appeared to be particularly thrilled to be here which told her they had probably all come in the same way she had. Demonnapped.

Who in their right mind would want to capture a bunch of demons?

Ugh, she *so* didn't want to know the answer to that question.

Buffy grunted and forced herself to sit up, but almost immediately wished she hadn't because whatever the army guys had tranqed her with had yet to fully wear off. Everything before her took a hard dive to the right, like the last half hour of *Titanic*, and the blood she'd had for lunch gave a sick little gurgle in her belly. She sucked down a lungful of air—another instant regret for the pain—and lurched to her feet as though she could outrun nausea.

The view did not improve. All it did was reveal that the row of monster cells stretched down an endless hallway in either direction.

Okay, so, unique problem. She could handle this—whatever *this* was—once her vision stopped swimming and the foggy bits of her mind cleared up. Easy peasy lemon squeezy. And if that bravado sounded false, well, a person would be smart not to mention it.

Buffy edged closer to the glass partition, the senses screaming caution starting to lose volume. There was no immediate threat—at least none she could see, which meant she needed to switch hard back into information-gathering mode. Starting with finding out just how endless these cells actually were. So, she leaned forward, palm up to brace herself against the glass.

The effect was immediate. A small explosion of electricity went off against her skin, lighting her up with currents hot enough to cook her insides. Buffy hissed and felt her fangs come loose as she stumbled back, shaking her hand and fighting off the jolts ripping through her at warp speed.

All right. Lesson learned. Don't touch the glass. Except the glass was going to easily be the weakest point of entry. The other three walls looked to be stone or cement or some other s-soundy-word that

meant *really hard to break*. Glass was not really hard to break. Glass was glass, and even the reinforced stuff could shatter if the right pressure was applied. Buffy *was* the right pressure.

She should try again. Now that she knew what to expect, it couldn't be as bad as all that.

Buffy drew in a deep breath, winced—*stop doing that*—and took the glass wall at a run. She didn't let herself hesitate or second-guess, just smashed full-body against the surface with enough force that it should have resulted in a Buffy-shaped hole in the pane and perhaps the sounding of a gazillion alarms. Instead, she rebounded hard and crashed to the floor with a soft cry, wrapping her arms around herself and waiting for the worst of the jolts to stop jolting.

Okay, so the electric barrier *was* a problem. A big problem. Which left the stone or cement or something along those lines. Not ideal but also not impossible. Odds were she could punch her way through if given enough time. Just call her Andy Dufresne. Maybe if she was good, they'd even give her a pinup of Ryan Phillippe to disguise her progress.

Though she probably shouldn't count on it.

How much wall can you dismantle before they come to stop you?

Who's they?

Does it matter? There's obviously a they. You didn't abduct yourself. You start beating the walls, what's to stop them from putting you in a straitjacket?

I'll bust out of the straitjacket.

No, you're not listening. Look at where you are. There's a goddamn force field around that glass. Do you really think they don't have you on some monitor somewhere? That you're not being watched? They have the upper hand. If you wanna live, you gotta accept that first.

Buffy didn't want to accept it. Aside from the insult of not knowing exactly where she was or what was going on, it seemed a total waste of being a vampified slayer to not immediately be the threat in the room. The one good thing, she supposed, was whoever had grabbed her likely had no idea what exactly they had grabbed, even if they were in the habit of collecting monsters for their demonic petting zoo. Which meant she would have the chance to seize control if she just stayed patient.

If only she had ever made any headway on that whole *patience* thing.
 “That you in there, Slayer?”

Buffy whipped her head up, darting her gaze around the vacant square footage of her cell. Where had that come from?

“That depends,” she said cautiously, climbing to her feet and forcing her fangs back. “Do disembodied voices have names?”

A sigh. One heavy enough she practically felt it whoosh through her on its way out. She knew that sigh.

“Spike?”

“Yeah, who do you think?”

There was absolutely no reason in the world to be relieved, and yet, here she was. Relieved and more than relieved. Almost giddy. The walls remained but somehow she didn’t feel nearly as alone as she had a few seconds ago. If Spike was here... Well, she didn’t know what that meant except that *Spike was here*.

But then, of course he was here. He’d been there when the guys playing army had made with the grab. Which meant they hadn’t been his army guys...a fact that should have been all facty from the start, but her head was with the mushy and the slightly panicked and didn’t care about things like logic. All that mattered was Spike was here and Spike was her link to the outside.

“Don’t suppose you have any idea where we are, do you?” she asked, sidling up to the wall closest to where his voice had originated.

“Not the one who lives in this sodding town, am I?”

She supposed that was a fair point but she didn’t want to concede it. “No, but you’re the one who was digging up something all over campus. Maybe the administration is just really pissed you didn’t get your permit first.”

Unfortunately, Spike didn’t seem to be in the mood to appreciate her wit. “Bloody hell,” he grouched. She could just picture him pacing. Though she had never caught him in the act, he seemed like the sort who needed to pace. “This is your fault, you know.”

“My fault? You were the one with minions in hardhats. What the hell were you even looking for down there, anyway?”

“Never you mind.”

“Spike, I hate to break it to you, but I think the jig is up.”

“Shows what you know.”

Buffy dragged a hand down her face and put her back to the wall. So he wasn't going to be a team player. No big surprise there, but it would make the whole proposal that they help each other out of this place a lot harder to sell. It wasn't like she had anything of value to bargain this time, with all signs pointing to Drusilla very much being an ex and Angel not around to offer as a punching bag. Earlier, she'd had the thought that maybe Spike was interested in *her*—at least enough to get her dormant post-Angel sex-life out of neutral. But then he'd gotten all weird and bad-moody and made with the dramatic exit.

Which, since she had him here and time to kill... “Where did you go?” she asked, sliding down the wall to the floor.

“What?” Spike demanded almost at once, though she was certain he'd heard her loud and clear.

“Earlier tonight. With the being a big grump and leaving.”

“*Grump?*”

“Just call it like I see it.”

“You're off your rocker.”

“Then how would you describe it?”

“Describe what?”

“You getting all surly and stompy after I mentioned that I don't have a soul? Here I'd kinda been hoping to learn the secret handshake. Way to leave a girl hanging.”

There was no response, rather a stretch of nothing that made the backs of her eyeballs itch. Seriously, the Spike in her memory had a mouth that wouldn't quit, especially when she wanted it to. It just figured that the second she needed him to fill the quiet would be the one he'd take an oath of silence.

She was just about to thunk the wall that separated them when he finally started talking.

“Remembered some business I had to tend to, is all.”

“Business.”

“That's right.”

“Must've pissed you off, this business. You looked about ready to murder someone.” A thought occurred to her. “You didn't, did you? Murder anyone?”

"*That*," he snapped, and it was there again. The anger from before. Hot and rich and tangible, almost enough for her to taste. "That's the business I had to see to. Thought I had it figured."

"You had to see to murder?"

"To see *him*."

"Who's him?"

"Who do you bloody think? Come on, Slayer, use your noggin."

Buffy furrowed her brow, combing her mind for the apparently obvious thing she'd missed and still coming up empty. Not that Spike's actions had ever made much sense to her, but the whole huffy departure had been so out of left field she doubted even the actual explanation would do much to clarify things. "Sorry," she said after a minute. "My noggin is too rational to understand your noggin."

He snorted but didn't reply.

"Are you seriously not gonna tell me?"

"Dunno why you wanna know."

She blinked and glanced around the empty cell that was her home for the foreseeable future. "Okay. Fine. You could tell me the story of how Dru dumped you again instead."

"Oi! Maybe I dumped her, ever think of that?"

"Get real. Like you could do better than Ms. Looney Toons. Am I supposed to believe you fell madly in love with Harmony?"

A distant but distinct, "Hey!" sounded from a cell farther down the line and Buffy swallowed the laugh that wanted to come out.

That's right. Harmony had been captured as well. This just kept getting better and better.

"Sucks that Drusilla wasn't in a mood to make up," she said, resting the back of her head against the wall. "And here I was really pulling for you two. Would've been nice to believe in the sort of love that lasts."

"You're one to talk," came the snide reply. "Tell me, how many more times did Angel lose his soul before he decided you weren't worth the effort?"

The pang that always struck whenever she thought of her doomed relationship put in its expected appearance, though it seemed to hurt less every time she felt it. That was nice. And not nice. Definitely confusing. Story of her life these days, trying to parse apart the bits of her that were

Buffy and the bits that weren't. Loving Angel beyond reason was definitely a hallmark of Buffy Summers. Without it, she felt like anyone but herself. Even with everything that had happened—even knowing what he thought about her now. It was dumb but she couldn't help but hold onto the hope that he would change his mind once he saw her and realized she hadn't been playing games when she'd told him she was going to be good. That while the bloodlust was there, it wasn't something she wanted to let herself be ruled by. She was better than that. She was the Slayer.

But then the resentment set in. That feeling of utter abandonment that had been damn near devastating when he'd first made the decision to leave, even if she'd pretended she'd understood his reasons. Told the others that the breakup was for the best, all the while nodding through her tears and trying very hard to convince herself she believed the shit she was saying. It had been hard enough when she'd been alive, buying the line he'd fed her about living a normal life with a normal guy who could do normal things with her and yadda yadda. Once she'd become a vampire and any semblance of normal she might have once enjoyed had slipped away entirely, his rejection had been something beyond hard. Something she was still struggling to overcome.

And of course Spike would rub her nose in that. He was the one, after all, who had made the astute observation that she and Angel could never work as anything in the first place, only he'd been wrong about the whole *being in love until it kills you both* thing. Angel had no trouble whatsoever dropping her like the proverbial hot potato. He'd never even flirted with the idea that there might be another way to win her soul back if that was so important. He hadn't wanted to help at all. Hadn't been interested in seeing what she could do if she just tried.

So for a second, Buffy toyed with the idea of responding to Spike in kind—all snark and derision. Rub *his* nose in his failed relationship of more than a century even more than she had, see how he liked it. But the second passed, taking her bitterness with it, and she realized she didn't have it in her to be that person right now. Maybe once they were out of here mutual hostility would be more attractive. At the moment, all she was interested in was survival.

"He broke up with me right before prom," she said, doing her best

to keep her voice even. He could have her honesty—he couldn't have her pain. "Said it was for my own good and I should find a guy who could give me the stuff he couldn't. So he left."

There was a beat. "Wanker."

"I don't even know what that means but I agree with you."

"And you were so lost in your misery you got yourself killed after, is that it?"

God, this again? "What is your obsession with me being a vampire?"

"You're *not* a vampire. You're a bloody abomination."

Buffy flinched and was immediately glad he wasn't in the room with her. She didn't know why the words hurt, why *anything* Spike said mattered to her at all, but they did, and *it* did, and the kind of hurt she found difficult to just shake away. "Says the guy who can't even convince a crazy lady to stay with him," she said after a beat, needing to fill the silence. Her voice didn't have the right level of bite, though, and she knew he'd see right through it. "Are you still not *demon enough* for her?"

"You shut your gob."

Maybe that had landed better than she'd thought. "Or what? You'll kill me with insults?"

"Just wait until we're outta here, Slayer. You might have the extra muscle but that's all you have, innit?"

"Whereas you have a long and colorful history of getting your ass kicked every time you show up in my town."

"Somethin' tells me the Slayerettes aren't gonna be quite as keen to rush to rescue now that you've got those fangs," he retorted, and again, the words did what he meant for them to, and again, Buffy bristled, annoyed with herself. She didn't need her friends to flatten him. She was a force of nature now—or *supernature*, as it were. There wasn't much in this world that posed a challenge anymore.

Yeah. Tell yourself that again once you're on the other side of the glass.

She forced the thought down, not wanting to acknowledge it. Maybe she'd been a little overconfident before. Or even a lot overconfident. Her nightly patrols were a lot of fun now, yes, but fun for the

same reason that Christmas was fun, therefore vulnerable to the same dangers. There could absolutely be too much of a good thing.

"So is it just for bragging rights?" she asked. "You bag a turned slayer and, what, your street cred goes up?"

"Told you earlier, always wanted to give it a go."

"So why didn't you? Earlier? I was there and you know I'm always game to make sure you don't get what you want." Never mind the fact that there had been flirtage—real flirtage, dammit, and not just in her head. He could say what he wanted, but she hadn't missed the way he'd looked at her or the invitation—explicit or not—in his voice. And if that *wasn't* what that had been, someone better just stake her now because she knew for damn sure she'd been standing there like an idiot, visually undressing him and realizing for the first time what it meant that she and Angel were officially, completely, and forevermore over. Understanding that she could go after what she wanted without fear of consequence, and why not with Spike? He might be a monster but so was she, and she needed something that was just for her, especially with all the playacting she was doing for everyone else.

Maybe that wasn't a decision the real Buffy Summers would make. Or was it? Though she would have rather died than admit it aloud, Buffy had never been immune to the fact that Spike, while completely a major pain in the ass, was also a Grade A hottie. It had been the first thing she'd thought when he'd stepped out of the shadows that night at the Bronze—something she'd assured herself then had been a fluke, the slayer part of her that was drawn irrevocably to danger. The stirring had been deep and primal, and also easy to label as something built on instinct rather than attraction. Of course she would be drawn to the sexy vampire—it was her job to be drawn to them. Identify them. Understand them. Hunt them. Slay them.

But that hadn't been it. The truth was danger was an inherent part of the attraction. Hell, it was what had drawn her to Angel in the first place. Even before she'd known he was a vampire, she'd known he was someone who had more information than she did. Someone who was deliberately keeping her in the dark, showing up and disappearing at the exact right moments. Someone she hadn't trusted at all, but had intrigued her beyond measure.

Spike had been the same, only he'd been more straightforward about it. Make that a lot more straightforward.

Way more straightforward than he was being right now.

"Seriously, what is up with you?" Buffy demanded a second later, realizing he hadn't said anything. "Of all non-people, I really thought you would be the happiest to find out I'd switched teams. Has Opposite Day actually been a thing all this time and no one told me?"

"You didn't switch teams," Spike snapped. "That would've made things interesting. But not you, Summers. You could have the world at your bloody feet. Do whatever you want. Play by the rules you set and fuck all else. Instead, you're the same annoying bint you always were. Just got the power up to make the playin' field even less even than it was before."

His problem was she *hadn't* changed? "Believe me, that is not true." Just ask her mom. Or her friends. Or Giles.

"Yeah, it is. You weren't there lookin' for a vein to open."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"You still feature yourself the Slayer. Protectin' the pulsers from creatures of the night."

"And again I ask why you care so much."

"Because it's not right!" There was a *thunk* at her back, heavy enough that she felt the vibrations through the wall. "It's not the way it works!"

"So in order to learn the secret handshake I have to eat people? Why can't I decide what kind of vampire I am?"

There was a huff. "Wanna know where I popped off to? Got it in my head that there was only one explanation for you still insistin' on being the thorn in my side. That rotten curse had to be at work."

No part of that made any kind of sense. "What?"

"Reckon it was obvious. Angel's not much of a vampire these days. Could be he also makes 'em soft in the fang, and god knows it wouldn't be the first time he's fixed himself a new toy and gotten bored with it."

Buffy pressed her lips together, not understanding at first, then understanding all too well. The clouds parted and she saw what she hadn't before. "You thought Angel was the one who turned me? Why would he do that?"

"If you're askin' yourself that question, love, you really never knew him to start."

"What do you mean?"

"What, you think Dru just popped into the world naturally toys in the attic? It's what he does. Finds a pretty thing he fancies and breaks it down until it wants nothin' but to please him. Then he ties it to him forever so it'll never escape."

Right, she knew that story. Or as much of it as she'd ever been brave enough to ask which, now that she thought about it, wasn't all that much. The entire subject of Angel's life pre-Buffy had been one of those conversational minefields she'd always thought it better to avoid trying to navigate. The past didn't matter, after all, because it was the past, and she'd trusted him when he'd told her he was different than he had been. But she did know bits and pieces—that, according to him, driving Drusilla crazy before turning her into a vampire was the worst thing he'd done. She'd never asked about the *how*, though. What exactly he'd done to make her the nuthouse she was these days before deciding to take the only thing of value she had left? It hadn't mattered, and by the time it had, it had been too late to ask.

And then after... Well, it wasn't like they hadn't had plenty of other things to talk about.

"He did that without a soul, though," she said at last, and was glad Spike couldn't see her face for the way she winced the second the words were out of her mouth. It was such an asinine argument to make under the circumstances. Hell, maybe it always had been and she just hadn't seen it. Anything was possible.

"You don't have a soul either. Wanna tell me how different you are?"

"I thought that was the problem, according to you—that I'm *not* different. So not different that you thought Angel's soul might have something to do with it."

"Yeah, and what of it? Wouldn't be the first time one of his turned out sloppy."

"You keep saying that and I still don't know what the hell you mean."

"I mean he's been here before. There was that other one—the

bloke he turned in the forties. He came out a bit soft. Never thought much of it till I caught wind of that sodding soul he got strapped with.”

Buffy closed her eyes, waiting for the pang that always came when she learned something new about Angel. Another piece of the puzzle that was him that he had decided to keep from her, even and especially when it was relevant. It wasn’t fair that she could still feel this way without a soul—that she could feel anything at all. Betrayed for all the things he hadn’t shared, only receiving the bits of him for which she’d been starved after it was too late to do any good.

Another lie, then. How many had he told? Worse, how many had she let him get away with?

“Why did it matter?” she asked, desperate to keep her mind moving forward. Focus on the here and now rather than the many mistakes of her past.

“Huh’s that?”

“Even if Angel had been the one who turned me, what did it matter? Why do you care?”

She expected an immediate answer, complete with perfectly barbed words ready to be hurled like a weapon. What she got instead was silence. At first, at least.

Then he was talking again, his voice low, almost as though he didn’t want her to hear.

“Told you. I’ve seen it happen a time too many.”

“Seen what happen?”

“What he does to people, women in particular. What he did to her—to Dru. How twisted she was for him and still bloody is.” There was a beat. “You’re a lot of things, Summers. And yeah, I can’t stomach most of ’em, but the one thing you had goin’ for you was you’re a bloody warrior. One of the best.”

That was weird. Spike complimenting her was *weird*. “Okay...”

“Too good to moon after him for the rest of eternity the way she does. Be just another thing he broke after he got bored. You deserve to go out in a blaze of bloody glory. A real fight—a good one. The fella that takes your life should appreciate what he’s doin’. That it’s an honor to have fought and a miracle to have won.” Another beat. “You

deserve not to be bloody brow-beat by someone like Angel. Give him everythin' and what does he care? Not a lick, that's what. Whoever does you in oughta care a little."

Well. Buffy didn't know what to say to that. Any of it. The picture he'd painted, the sincerity in his voice, or the glimpse of her reflection buried in the words themselves. At once, the months she had just barely managed to survive started to run back through her mind as they never had. Waking up with Angel that morning after they'd overslept and how she hadn't known that was it. The last carefree moment she would have with him. The way he hadn't wanted to fight for their future, painted some picture of a life she could never live and told her that picture was what she should want instead of him. Had it been because he loved her or because he'd, as Spike said, gotten bored? No more back-and-forth, tug-of-war, no more gut-wrenching conversations that left her feeling aimless and hollow. They had done the forgiveness thing. The trying to be friends thing. The break thing. They had done jealousy and uncertainty and she'd called it off and he'd said he didn't accept it. Then he'd stuck around and made damn sure that he was on her mind, that she could never outrun him, no matter how hard she tried. He'd threatened to meet the sunlight to answer for his crimes and had smacked her when she'd been there, begging him to not make all her pain meaningless.

And then that morning at his place, the way he'd looked at her then. The way he'd looked at her in that sewer as he'd shattered her heart. Maybe she had been a conquest—a story he could tell himself. A story he no longer needed once they got past the conflict and were looking at something real. Normal, or as normal as they could manage, which would always be a thousand times more achievable than that picture he'd tried to sell her.

Normal wasn't in the cards for a slayer and certainly not for a slayer who had been turned. He'd given her up for himself and told her it was for her.

Was she like Drusilla after all? Someone so twisted up on the idea of this guy who had bullied his way into her life on his terms, lived in it on his terms, and left on his terms? So much so that, a century later, it hadn't taken anything but the timely escape clause of a Romanian

curse for Drusilla to ditch the guy who loved her without looking back?

Buffy didn't know what to think. She didn't know anything at the moment, except the possibility that any of this was true left her feeling hollow.

"Slayer?"

Buffy swallowed and gave her head a shake. "Yeah?"

"Know this doesn't mean I don't hate you."

She somehow managed a grin. "I know."

"Good." He paused. "So don't take this the wrong way, but you know how you muck up every decent plan a man comes up with?"

"You mean every time you come to town with a half-assed, hare-brained scheme that was doomed to fail anyway?"

He surprised her by snickering. She surprised herself by laughing back.

"Yeah, well, I figure this is the one time that habit of yours is gonna come in handy," Spike drawled. "What do you say we show the gits who shoved us in here what for?"

"I'd say the last time I truced with you, you bailed halfway through the fight."

"Still saved the day, didn't you?"

"Not the point." But it wasn't like she was replete with options. "You pull that crap again and I really will kill you."

When he answered, it was with a smile in his voice. "Would think less of you if you didn't."



OOH, BABY. IT'S MAKING ME CRAZY

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG TO CONVINCE HIM IT WAS TOO SOON TO COME up with a plan. They needed more time, more knowledge—especially since plans were those things Spike was kinda the worst at, evidenced by the fact that every plan she'd ever seen him come up with had been a big ol' flop. Sure, his rather impressive string of failures was probably due to Spike being an idiot, but she couldn't rule out the possibility that soulless creatures had some sort of cognitive deficiency. Case in point—she was a soulless creature, and she was relying on Spike. Definite cause for alarm.

Probably didn't help that she couldn't stop thinking about all the things he'd said and all the things he'd made her think *because* of the things he'd said. All the stuff she kept shoving to the back and hoping would never become relevant, the dramatic and unavoidable ways her life had changed. Now, thanks to Spike, it was all starting to sink in, what the vampire thing meant. And yes, maybe she was a few weeks past her scheduled freak out, and even more yes, maybe this wasn't the time to indulge, but Buffy found the more she pushed it down, the more everything pushed back. Like trying to stuff lava back inside a volcano before the villagers realized an eruption had occurred.

But she couldn't give in now. She really couldn't. Not if she meant to be any help whenever they staged their escape.

At the moment, though, Buffy was in information-gathering mode. Making observations and stringing together a loose path forward based on common sense. For example, when you wake up in a large science lab, don't be a dummy and sink your fangs into the blood packet that comes tumbling out of the ceiling, no matter how hungry you are. And yeah, Buffy was starved...but she also wasn't stupid (there went the soul equals smarts theory, ha!) so she'd done what a smart vampire would do and slid the blood pack across the floor until it was safely in the corner farthest from her. Then she'd remembered that her temporary partner-in-crime *was* unfortunately a dunderhead and yelled at him not to indulge because obviously they were being watched and this was a test. A test they needed to be alive to pass.

Spike had grumbled but agreed. So had Harmony, though no one had asked her. Buffy would have liked to have said she'd forgotten Harmony was there, but given she was about as good at reading social cues in death as she had been in life, that had been hoping for too much. And maybe times like this was where the soulless thing came in the handiest, for she'd felt relief rather than guilt when, twenty minutes later, Harmony had insisted it was too hard to resist and torn into her bag with enough gusto the sounds alone had made Buffy's already rumbling stomach rumble even more.

"Stupid bint," Spike had muttered.

"Well, at least now we'll see what happens when you drink the blood," Buffy had replied.

When he'd spoken next, there had been a hint of pride in his voice. "Did you do that on purpose, Summers? Tryin' some reverse psychology on for size? Nice and manipulative. Might've been wrong about you."

Another beat in which her soullessness made itself obvious—rather than disgust, she'd felt a little thrill at the prospect of impressing him.

It wasn't just the vamps who were fed, either. Bits of what Buffy was sure were a dissected human body had fallen into the shvelack demon's cell across the hall, and exhibiting a very on-brand amount of stupidity, the demon had pounced the second the meat hit the floor.

While she wasn't quite so dainty anymore as to need to look away while entire limbs were devoured, Buffy did find herself wrinkling her nose in what was mostly disgust and only a little bit hunger.

"What now?" Spike asked.

"We see what happens."

"Bloody knew you'd say that."

"Uh huh. Must be killing you to have to rely so much on patience."

A chuckle answered her, deep and rich and way more pleasant to the ears than it had any right to be. "Could say the same, love. Think we have that in common."

Yeah, she knew that, but didn't appreciate that he did, too. It had always been more comfortable to assume that Spike wasn't as perceptive as he wanted everyone to think and instead just a really good guesser. Even after she and Angel had started things up again last year, everything else be damned, she hadn't quite let herself forget everything Spike had seen and told them in a bold, out-of-fucks kinda way that she imagined had been amplified by liquid courage. In truth, she and Spike hadn't spent too much time together. There had been a handful of fights before she'd dropped that organ on him, then the run-in with the Judge and Angel going bad and then nothing for months until he'd popped out of the shadows to rescue her from certain arrest and probable world-endage...but even then, everything had been natural. Natural as in *way too*, and she hadn't known how to handle it. Falling into step with him, effortlessly knowing where to go and what he would do if she did *this*, as though they had been training side-by-side for years. And now here he was again, back in her life, seeing things and yes, finally, leaping to the wrong conclusions but not for the wrong reasons. Everything he'd thought he might have seen had a reason for being there—just not one she cared to explore too much.

Buffy stopped herself this time before she could force out a breath and instead wrapped her arms around herself and backed away from the charged glass wall at her front—though not too much, else she might get a whiff of sterilized blood that was too much for her fangs to ignore.

And again, as though sensing she needed the reminder, Spike said, "Don't even think about takin' a nibble."

"I'm not," she lied, fixing her gaze on the shvelack demon as it chomped through skin, muscle tissue, and bone. "I have more self-control than that."

"Bollocks."

"Way more than you, I bet!"

"Slayer, you're a bleeding newborn. Newborns have fuck all when it comes to self-control."

"How exactly are you one to talk? You have met you, right?"

A faint rumble, like a low groan of frustration, sounded through the wall. For some reason, hearing it made the tenser parts of her relax.

"It's always a choice when I do it," he said.

"Your rather impressive track record of everything blowing up in your face begs to differ."

"When it's important enough, I can outlast anyone in terms of patience."

"Yeah, I'm not too hot on my literary references, but I think Steinbeck said something about protesting too much, and—"

"That's bloody Shakespeare, you insufferable bint."

Buffy rolled her eyes and crossed her arms with a sniff. "Like you would know the difference."

"Well, one of us has a Masters degree from Cambridge and it bloody well isn't you," Spike snapped back. "And I got that degree before *Steinbeck* was a twinkle in his old man's sack, so bite your tongue now if you're not keen on me ripping it out later."

She had to admit it—she was shocked. Like totally, completely shocked. It wasn't that she'd never given any thought to what Spike had been like before he'd been turned, it was just... Well, she guessed she *badn't* thought about what Spike had been like before he'd been turned. Nothing against him personally—aside from the obvious—but Buffy had found, back when she'd started slaying demons, that wondering about the human lives of the creatures she turned to dust was a bit of a downer. Easier to look at them as monsters who had killed the person they were wearing and righting a wrong than people with their own thoughts and feelings and histories.

But that was just getting back to the fundamental question she'd

been asking herself ever since she'd woken up dead. How much of her was Buffy Summers.

"You went to Cambridge?" she heard herself asking a moment later. "That's like...a really good school."

Spike snorted. "They did insist on knowin' your Shakespeare from your Steinbeck."

"I thought you said Steinbeck came after you graduated."

"Yeah, he did. Got the author, the century, and the continent wrong, and you're bloody fortunate that's where I'm stoppin' the count."

She wanted to keep fighting—it was her default setting where Spike was concerned, never mind that letting him triumph in any argument was not in her wiring. But then she eyed the blood packet in the corner, remembered what they had been arguing about before she'd misattributed her Shakespeare, and realized that she hadn't been thinking about her rumbling stomach at all over the last couple of minutes. Maybe that was the secret to conquering her hunger. "So, were you, like, a big brainy guy before you were turned or what?"

He gave a short huff. "Got some real fanciful ideas about yours truly, don't you, Slayer?"

"God!" came a petulant whine from farther down the cell block. If their captors had put anything in Harmony's blood supply, it apparently had yet to take effect. "Don't you two ever stop talking? If I have to sit here and listen to you flirt all night, they might as well stake me and get it over with."

Buffy lurched forward. "We are so *not* flirting!"

There was a telltale Harmony Kendall scoff that anyone in Sunnydale High's graduating class of '99 could identify in their sleep. "He's already said, like, bunches more to you than he ever has to me! And I'm, like, his *actual* girlfriend."

"No, you're not," Spike said, the words hard and biting. "You're the bint I picked up to keep my dick wet. Just as soon stake you as shag you. We're nothing."

Buffy couldn't help it. She winced. That was...harsh. Like she kinda felt bad for Harmony harsh, and that wasn't something that had

happened ever. "Guessing they didn't teach tact at Cambridge," she muttered.

"You are so mean to me," Harmony wailed. Like seriously wailed. Her voice had gone warbly with upset, almost offensively shrill against the air. "And now look at where we are. All for the stupid Gem of Amara which you never even found anyway and probably isn't even there. God, to think I wasted the best bunch of months of my life on you."

"Harm!"

"Oh, what, like it's some big secret?"

"The Gem of what now?" Buffy asked, perking up.

"Never you mind," Spike spat, because he was an idiot who didn't realize that saying things like that tended to have the opposite effect. "Got bigger things to focus on here, don't we? Like—well, looky there, Slayer."

"What?" she demanded before she could help herself. Dammit, he would not distract her from the gem thing. If it was why he'd come back to Sunnydale, she absolutely needed to make it her business. The reasons behind his visits had a tendency to become her problem no matter what he did, so she'd just as soon keep ahead of it this time. Especially considering it had already inconvenienced her to the degree of being trapped in some elaborate science lab.

"Seems your chum over there took a nip of somethin' that's not sittin' right."

She whipped her head back toward the glass. Indeed, the demon across the hall had started to stagger drunkenly around the cell. It was unlike anything she'd ever seen—and considering the laundry list of incredible sightings she already had under her belt, that was saying something. Shvelacks were not dainty creatures by any stretch of the imagination. They were great, hulking masses with thick, leather-like skin, piss-yellow claws three inches long, and mouths packed with three rows of piranha-like teeth. In other words, pure nightmare fodder, and it was beyond wiggly seeing nightmare fodder sway like that.

"And down he goes," Spike said as the shvelack finally lost its

balance and crashed to the floor, making it shake with impact. “Wager Harm’s not too far behind.”

Indeed, a *thunk* followed that observation just a handful of seconds later. Buffy tried not to feel too bad about whatever was going to happen next. Harmony might not be someone she’d regret turning to dust, but it was still wiggy, having known her before she’d become a vampire. And now Buffy was going to study whatever happened to her next to save her own ass, and likely the ass of her mortal enemy to boot. She wasn’t certain, but this entire setup seemed like the sort of thing that human Buffy Summers would find morally objectionable.

You don’t need to save Spike, either, whispered a mutinous little voice. It was perfectly true. She could decide to focus on number one and leave everyone else behind. Not like Spike wouldn’t sell her out in a hot minute, and she’d already heard loud and clear just how much he valued his relationship with Harmony. There was no reason to think he’d treat her any better if push came to shove.

Only, no, she didn’t believe that. Not if he’d been so upset thinking that Angel had turned her that he’d decided to drive to Los Angeles to tell him so. That was... Well, she didn’t know what that was, but it was something beyond mortal enemy territory. She had no trouble believing Spike had never shown Harmony that much interest.

That should probably bother her, but it didn’t. Maybe it would when they were on the other side of whatever *this* was.

Maybe.

But somehow, she didn’t think so.



THIS WAS why all his plans went to hell. The waiting. It wasn’t that he couldn’t be patient—he could, but it cost him something. Made his legs tingle and his fangs itch. Made him feel like little more than a trapped animal—and considering this time he very much was a trapped animal, the wait was that much more unbearable.

But it could be worse, he supposed. Could be alone. Instead, somehow, he was sharing this special hell with the Slayer.

If that weren’t barmy enough, he was glad she was there, if only

because the plans that didn't go to hell because of the waiting typically went to hell because of her. Working with her meant they were already out of this pit—the actual escaping part was just a formality.

And when they were on the outside, he could go back to what he'd come here to do. Find the gem. The *killing the Slayer* part of the plan would be the right sort of challenge after that. Sure, she had the enhanced strength and speed, but he'd be literally indestructible and those were the sort of odds he liked.

Though he still had questions. That fever that had driven him to bloody Los Angeles earlier tonight hadn't gone anywhere, despite how hard he'd tried to shake it off, get his head back in the bloody game. What did it matter, after all, if she had remained her annoying, uptight self in death? So what if he hadn't been the one to give her the death she'd had coming, either? He'd do it proper this time around. The gem would see to that.

Only he hadn't really believed it, listening to it in his own bloody head. Trying to shake off the need to dig more, push harder, suss out why the girl was still playing the game now that she was above it. The second he'd barreled back into town, he'd headed straight for the bloody caverns where the work was being done, intent on pouring his frustration into finding the toy prize he'd come here to claim. He could work out what he wanted to do with the Slayer after.

Instead, she'd been there. Standing in a settling storm of dust that comprised the lackeys he'd recruited to do the bulk of the grunt work, exactly as he would have expected from the living, breathing Slayer, only she wasn't either of those things.

Now here they were. Alone together again. Funny how that seemed to keep happening with her.

Or maybe it wasn't funny. Maybe it was everything Dru had thrown in his bloody face before kicking him to the curb the first time around.

Spike sighed, cast his gaze to the ceiling for the hundredth or so time, scouring for the camera he was certain was buried there somewhere. He hadn't worked out just how they were being monitored, though it stood to reason they *were* being monitored. No other way for the men in the funny little lab coats to know when it was time to come collect one of the felled specimens—Harm and the other beasties had

been carted off within about ten minutes of becoming dead weight—which meant it was likely that they would know he and the Slayer hadn't torn into the tainted blood they'd served up. There didn't seem to be a good way to pour it out, either, in a way that the tossers in charge wouldn't notice.

He'd have to hide it somewhere on his person. And there weren't many options.

Well, wasn't like his coat hadn't been through worse, he supposed. Spike debated for a second longer, then sucked in his cheeks and decided *to hell with it*. He stalked over to the bag of blood they'd tossed at him earlier and snatched it from the floor. Then he turned, the bag splayed in his hand, and made a big show of ripping open the plastic. There was only one time doing this so he needed it to look convincing.

"What are you doing?" came from the Slayer's side of the wall.

"Having a nip."

"I told you to leave the blood alone!"

"No point in keepin' alive if the punchline is I'll wither away from hunger," he snapped back. There was no way to convey he was setting a stage, so he didn't bother. Either the dizzy bint would believe he was as thick as Harm or she'd cotton on that on occasion he did come up with decent enough plans. Besides, wasn't like he heard her offering up a brilliant alternative.

"Fine." There was a sound, a clap, like she was brushing her hands together. "Do what you want. I'll get out of here on my own."

Yeah, he'd like to see that. Might be worth sticking around if she intended to put on a show. Spike didn't say that, though, instead gave the bag a very obvious sniff. It had been a minute since he'd done any sort of sleight of hand trick—not so long that he'd forgotten the principles but enough that it took him a second to work out what might be the most convincing. If there were cameras, and there had to be, they'd be focused on the cells themselves, not the corners. So he put his back to the room like he imagined the Slayer did whenever she had to eat in front of her mates—best not offend their delicate sensibilities, after all—and raised the bag to his mouth.

He was prepared for his fangs to itch when the scent hit him and they did not disappoint, even if the chemical waft of whatever these

wankers had used to doctor the juice was on the potent side. Perhaps not enough to lend the younger crowd pause, but as someone who had been scenting out blood for more than a century, he didn't need more than a whiff to inform him it had been tampered with.

It was still blood, though. Tainted animal blood but blood all the same. Get a bloke hungry enough and he'd lap it up regardless of the consequences.

Spike puffed out a breath, then tipped his head back and lifted the bag to his mouth, making sure the end he'd torn open was mostly pinched shut. A few ruby dribbles skated over the contours of his fingers, and those he smeared across his mouth and jaw before shifting to empty the rest into one of the inner pockets he'd fashioned into the duster—all the better to hide weapons, playing cards, or whatever he was nicking at the moment. Would be a bitch to clean out but he'd manage just fine.

The job done, he tossed the empty bag aside and staggered back a few steps, making a show of licking his already-clean fingers when he turned back to the cell's glass front. Those gits would see what they wanted to see.

As though she had an eye on him too and knew he had finished, Buffy made a sound of intense displeasure. "I hope you remember this moment when they're cutting you open. The whole me telling you that you were an idiot to drink it thing. But trust me, I've learned my lesson. No more trying to save your skin."

"Suggestin', of course, that you've done that in the past," Spike retorted, rolling his eyes at the wall they shared.

"Pretty sure I remember saving your ass last year when your old lackeys turned on you."

"Oi. Doled out a fair amount of thrashings, myself."

"You would've been dust without me and Angel there."

He snorted and rolled his eyes again. That had been a tight spot, he'd admit, but it wasn't like he hadn't faced steeper odds and come out ahead. Hell, getting out of tight spots had pretty much defined the life he'd led up until now—scraping by with all his parts in working order despite all the reasons he ought to be dust. But he decided now was not the time to rub her righteous little nose in anything. It wasn't

any fun when he couldn't see the way her irritation brought her eyes to life.

"Tell yourself whatever sweet lies you fancy, love," he replied. "Seems you've got a right talent where those are concerned. Goin' back to King Forehead himself."

She didn't answer in kind, which he took to mean she knew he was right. Or maybe she'd just decided to tune him out, which would be right thankless, considering he was her ticket to freedom. Even if she didn't know it.

Though he supposed he could just leave her in the cell to rot. Would serve her bloody right for all the misery she'd caused him over the years. He could just see it now—leering at her through her cell glass, soaking in her shock and regret. Maybe he'd even get her to beg him a little before he gave her a jaunty wave and helped himself to freedom.

It was a pretty picture. Tempting. But even so, he knew he wouldn't do it. Not to her. Place like this wasn't where a slayer—any slayer—should snuff it, especially if she'd already been denied one good death. To leave her here to dust on some operating table or sommat would be beyond monstrous. He owed her at least that much for having been the best enemy he'd ever had, including the sodding Immortal.

Still, it was difficult to bite his tongue when it came time to enact the next stage of his plan. In essence, mimic the swaying behavior he'd witnessed from the idiot crowd across the hall after a suitable amount of time had passed. Clutching his belly, staggering from one side of his cell to the next, and making enough ruckus that Buffy just couldn't help but voice her opinion.

"Is this the part where I get to say, 'I told you so?'" she asked in a falsely sweet voice that made him want to rip out her throat. More than usual, that was.

But he didn't give into the urge to snap back, for whatever his reputation might be, Spike knew when it was time to keep his yap shut. Instead, he fixed the image of how Buffy would marvel at him once she realized he'd managed to fool even her, fought back the urge to grin, then tumbled theatrically to the floor in a heap with such force, some

of the blood he'd dumped in his pocket sloshed out over the inner lining of his duster. Once he was out of here, he'd have to find some laundromat, threaten the owner until they fixed the coat back up properly. If whoever it was did a good job, Spike might even deign to let them live, though he wagered he'd need a nibble to get the taste of industrial antiseptic out of his mouth. The air here stank of it.

"Idiot," he heard Buffy mutter the next second. Then, and in a helpless tone that made something inside of him wrench, "Goddamn you, Spike."

He didn't answer, though a part of him that was clearly bloody barking screamed at him to do just that. It just wasn't natural for the Slayer, of all people, to sound that lost. Just as unnatural as it was for someone who aimed to claim her head later to give a fuck if she felt hopeless at the moment.

With any luck, this mad urge of his would clear up the second he was wiping her dust from his hands.

Though, and not for the first time, he wondered about that, too.



BUFFY SUPPOSED she shouldn't be surprised, but she was all the same. For some stupid reason, it hadn't occurred to her that Spike would crumble in the face of mild hunger, and definitely not as fast as he had. They had both sat here and watched as white lab-coated men had retrieved the dozing demons and Harmony, dragged them off to god-knows-where for god-knows-what. He had seen the proof of her earlier guess that the food they provided was drugged, and what had the dope done anyway?

Hung her out to dry, that's what.

If she weren't so certain that Spike was about to be subjected to something much worse than the death he had coming to him, she would try to Kool-Aid Man her way through his wall just so she could dust the idiot herself.

Not that she was giving up yet. Oh no. Buffy had a ways to go before she called it quits. She'd gotten out of worse jams before, in any case, including a literal trip to a hell dimension where she'd led the

others in a slave rebellion that had put an end to whatever hell dimensiony business ol' Kenny-boy had been up to. There had been actual magic and otherworldliness involved in that escape; certainly she could do that again against an opponent that was squishy and human, right? Even if they did have her tucked away in a cell where she couldn't touch the most breakable wall and seemed intent on starving her into consuming tainted blood.

Maybe she could convince them she'd drunk it without actually drinking it. Honestly, at this point, that seemed the only bet. Except she was also convinced the mysterious *they* were watching her every move, so just passing out didn't seem like the best option without at least trying to give the appearance of drinking the stuff.

Buffy furrowed her brow and glanced at the blood packet, something niggling in the back of her head.

Spike waited for months pretending to be paralyzed. That's how he got the jump on Angel. He let him think he wasn't a threat.

Could he be doing that again? It would certainly explain the one-eighty he'd done on the blood.

A sliver of hope dashed through her at the prospect—one she almost didn't want in case it turned out not to be true. But there it remained, blazing and impossible to put out of her mind once it sparked to life.

Keep thinking, though, she warned herself. He could just be that stupid.

That was certainly true as well. This *was* the same vampire who had kidnapped her friends and secreted them away in the most obvious place—first-guess place, even—and then acted all indignant when she'd called him on it. But he'd also been drunk then, so maybe she should take everything he'd done during that visit with a big grain of salt. The Spike who had initially crashed parent/teacher night hadn't been pathetic, after all. And, now that she thought about it, she wasn't sure the entire production of telling her what day he meant to kill her then not abiding his own schedule hadn't been his plan all along. What better way to throw the enemy off guard than to tell them when to anticipate an attack and then come at them when they thought they were safe?

Or maybe she was just an idiot to hope. Grasping at straws. It was

infinitely more comfortable to assume that Spike was being clever than face the reality that she was truly on her own.

Buffy tamped down on the urge to draw in a breath—she really wished her body would get with the not-breathing program—and forced her thoughts back to the problem at hand. Assuming he *had* just been an idiot, she was now in desperate need of the plan they hadn't made. It was that or accept she was back to square one, her least favorite of all squares.

But whoever had vamped them had to come down here eventually, right? Even if she didn't cave and drink the tainted blood? They'd be all like, hey, you with the willpower. You're all kinds of impressive. Let's open this cell door and see what else you can do.

And then she'd show them. She'd give them a full, unabridged demonstration of just how much ass she could kick when really pissed off.

Right now, that was the best she could do.

A few minutes after she heard Spike hit the floor, the same white-coated lab guys from before came wheeling a gurney down the aisle of cells. This was it—moment of truth time. Buffy scrambled to her feet and edged as close to the electrified glass as she dared.

The lab-coat guys weren't interested in her, and in fact ignored her completely as they came to a halt outside of Spike's cell. Either they were doing their part to keep distant from the demons in their collection or Buffy was just a part of the scenery until such time that she wasn't. She watched as the lab-coats wandered into Spike's cell—her heart doing a thoroughly metaphorical squeezey thing in anticipation—then let out a small groan when they hoisted his apparent dead weight onto the gurney.

Well, so much for hanging her hopes on Spike being secretly brilliant. Now she needed—

But then Spike was in motion, grabbing Lab-Coat One by the throat and tossing him against the shvelack demon's now-empty cell. Immediately the air split with the repeated wail of an awful alarm, red lights flashing through the corridor, and Lab-Coat One was coming forward again, disheveled but determined. Spike did a rolly thing across the gurney and caught him by the lapels of his coat before

throwing him harder against the vacated cell. This time, Lab-Coat One fell into a crumpled heap on the floor and didn't get up.

Lab-Coat Two, meanwhile, had quickly fumbled to produce a syringe, though he looked about as confident in using it as would Buffy's own mother in this situation. Lab-coats were lab *geeks* and not meant to fight monsters, after all. He seemed to be appraising Spike, trying to decide which angle was the best for attack, and Spike appraised him right back so when the lunge came, it was the sort that could be easily side-stepped. Her would-be mortal enemy grabbed the wrist attached to the hand holding the syringe and squeezed until Lab-Coat Two cried out and dropped it. Spike kicked it away without looking at it, now in full fang-face mode, bringing Lab-Coat forward with the clear intent of biting into his neck.

It was reflex more than desire that had Buffy pounding on the charged wall of her cell to get his attention. She registered, dimly, that she didn't really care if Lab-Coat Two became a snack, that the tattered remains of her human morality were becoming harder to grasp, but she was still Buffy Summers—she thought, she hoped—and Buffy Summers would not stand by idly as anyone killed a human being.

"Spike!" she snapped. "Leave him and get me out!"

Spike paused before his fangs could pierce skin, then rolled his eyes and grabbed something off Lab-Coat Two's person before chucking him aside like a ragdoll.

"Gotta say, find this a fetching look on you," he drawled, stepping up to her cell and holding up the thing he'd picked off the lab-coat. It was a keycard. "You at my mercy, that is."

"You're getting me out of here."

"Am I, now?"

"Spike, I swear to—"

"Not in a position to be swearin' to anything, from where you're standing." The smirk broadened but quickly faded as the sound of feet—a lot of them—hit the floor and started pounding in their direction. Reinforcements were on their way. If they were going to escape, if *he* was going to get her out of here, it was now or never. There would never be another chance like this again.

“If you leave me here, I’ll—”

But he was already moving forward, swiping the keycard down the panel next to the glass, and suddenly she was free. Stumbling into the hallway, damn near running him over, and Spike’s hand was in her hand, and they were running together. There were shouts and weapons—gun-like weapons started firing from behind—but Buffy didn’t slow down and neither did Spike.

Nor did she let go of his hand.



THEY CAME OUT ON CAMPUS, in the middle of the quad, through a door that disappeared almost the second she turned back to catch another glimpse. Melting into the scenery, becoming one with the grass, and thank god it was nighttime because they had both just burst out without hesitation, not even slowing down long enough to check that the coast was clear. Not that there had been enough time to check, as the coast behind them definitely hadn’t been clear. It had been full of army guys and stun guns and only by virtue of Buffy’s strength and Spike’s surprising show of cunning had they managed to shake the trail long enough to tear their way through the door that was no longer there.

The entire lab was under the campus.

Buffy would have to think on that later—right now, her one and only objective was to get as far from that place and those very human, biteable men as possible. It had become harder to distance herself from her growing homicidal thoughts the more those assholes shot at her. Keep the image of *Buffy Summers* in her head, the person she aspired to be—the one she wanted very much to still exist, even if she didn’t know why—front and center. But then one of their pursuers had managed to graze her arm with what she was pretty sure had been an actual bullet, and damn if that hadn’t pissed her off so much her fangs had burst into her mouth and there had been this clawing sensation beneath her skin like some animal was trapped there, just raring and ready to get out. There was also the fact that the thought of killing any of the aforementioned human, biteable men had graduated from

being *meb* to giving her a thrill she used to associate with the hunt, as there was all this rage that kept building on itself and she wanted to give into it. Let herself feel it, do some damage, rip flesh from bone and feast on the leftovers.

But she wouldn't. She would *not*. She wasn't an animal, goddammit, and she refused to act like one.

She would, however, keep on Spike's heels as he tore away from campus. That seemed like a Buffy thing to do regardless of circumstance. Stick close to him, try to figure out what the hell they had just escaped from and what there was to do about it.

Spike led her straight into Restfield Cemetery without so much as a backward glance, booking it hard toward one of the larger mausoleums that littered the place. He threw open the heavy door with ease and barreled inside, not stopping until he reached the sarcophagus in the middle of the place, gasping in a way that seriously screwed with her head as it sounded earnest, and she knew it wasn't.

Only it made her want to breathe, too. Even though the breaths she took now made her feel like she was drowning, or at the very least punishing her lungs by forcing them to perform unnecessarily. Here she was, trying so hard to be as human as possible and she couldn't even manage the breathing part, and Spike—unapologetically evil, unrepentant Spike—was gulping down oxygen like it was his job. Like he needed it.

Why did he get to be more alive than she was?

"Stop that," she said before she could think the better of it.

Spike threw a dismissive look over his shoulder. "Stop what?"

"Breathing."

His brow furrowed. "What? I don't breathe."

He literally said that while looking her in the eye, his chest heaving. "Yes, you do," Buffy snapped back, gesturing at him. "You are now."

Spike blinked and glanced down at himself, then barked a laugh and dragged a hand down his mouth, turning to face her in full. "Right. Suppose I am. What's it to you, Summers?"

"It's...it's wiggy! You're not supposed to breathe!"

"There's a lot I'm not supposed to do and do anyway. Don't see what business it is of yours."

“You breathing makes me want to breathe.”

He looked at her as though she had said something completely ridiculous, which she knew she had but was determined to not acknowledge because she was also right. “Then bloody breathe. Why the hell does it matter to me?”

“Because it hurts!”

“It hurts?”

“Yes, it hurts to breathe.” She dragged in a gulp of air as though to demonstrate and immediately regretted it. Again, her chest went tight, ready to burst with all this excess oxygen it had no use for. It didn’t make any sense—she knew, logically, that she needed to breathe *some* in order to speak and smell and stuff, but she didn’t feel the breathing for that the same way she did just the normal breaths her body had been taking dutifully for more than eighteen years until very recently. Maybe because those breaths were subconscious and the air had a purpose—information, communication, or some other kind of *ation* that she had yet to define. The breaths like the ones she had just taken, the ones Spike was dragging in now, were strictly there for show. Playacting being alive for exactly no one’s benefit.

“It hurts to breathe,” Spike repeated, still staring at her dully. “You’re off your gourd.”

“I was never on a gourd!”

“You’re a sodding *vampire*. Breathe or don’t bloody breathe, what does it matter?”

“I just told you—”

“Yeah, yeah, *it hurts*.” He snickered and rolled his eyes toward the crypt ceiling. “This is the thanks I get. You get the both of us snatched up by some wonky mad scientists—”

“Me?”

“There weren’t a bloody load of soldiers crawlin’ all over those tunnels when *I* left,” he snapped. “You let the lot of them follow you in. Probably too busy workin’ on *not breathing* to bother and make sure you’re not bein’ tailed. Bloody figures you’d be a miserable vampire.”

Buffy wasn’t sure if she should take that as an insult or not, but decided to just to be safe. “I am not a miserable vampire,” she retorted. “Just because I don’t do things the way *you*—”

"And what sort of *slayer* gets herself turned in the first place?" he shouted over her. "How the *bloody hell* did you let this happen?"

"I'm sorry, *let* it happen? I didn't ask for this!"

"You were supposed to be the best. Impossible to put down. And you let some trollopy tart get the better of you, and just what sort of name is *Sunday*, anyway?"

"So says the guy called *Spike*," she fired back. "And how did you know that was her name?"

But she knew the second the words were out of her mouth. Just one more of those beans Angel had spilled while Spike had been on his impromptu trip. What's more, Spike saw that she knew—she could read it on his face. That along with the anger that had started to spread, amplified no doubt by the adrenaline rush that was having escaped that horrible place and the uncertainty of *what* they had escaped. Whatever was going on in there was the sort of thing that Buffy the Vampire Slayer would rally the gang to solve and likely put a stop to, but Buffy the Vampire was still shaking over having been captured in the first place. Never mind that she'd gotten out because her archenemy had decided to honor a deal he could have just as easily discarded the second he got free.

She needed to reassert control of this conversation—if it could even be called a conversation—and she needed to do it now. "You know what? I think something is starting to make sense."

"And we both know it's not you."

"You ran off to Angel because you thought *he'd* sired me and for some reason, that was important enough to drop everything and flee town."

"I already told you—"

"And we just escaped some crazy science lab where we were the guinea pigs and you're still somehow bitching about the fact that I'm a vampire. You're taking this worse than *I* did, and that's saying a lot because this?" She gestured at herself. "Kind of my worst nightmare. But I *adjusted*. You threw such an epic tantrum it involved a spontaneous road trip to beat up my ex. But I think I get it now."

"Get what?"

"You're jealous!" Buffy pointed at him, grinning. She couldn't help

it. Now that she had started down this path, she was kinda enjoying herself. And what was even more, she was certain she was right. It had been there, itching at the edge of her subconscious ever since they'd run into each other at the frat party. Time to scratch that son of a bitch. "You were so sure it would be you, big, lean, slayer-killing machine. All those times you could've killed me and you didn't. All those times I kicked your ass back to last week. That's why you keep talking about taking me on like this. It's all about your ego, isn't it? It's not that I died, but that someone *else* got to me first."

Something dangerous—*exciting*—was happening behind Spike's eyes. "Shut your gob."

"Someone did what you couldn't. Someone was *better* at killing slayers than you, and you can't—"

But the air split with a roar before she could even figure out how she was going to end that insult, and the next thing she knew, Spike was there against her, shoving her hard enough that she almost stumbled over her feet but didn't because she *was* a fucking slayer and turned slayers didn't stumble. At least not while being manhandled by current or former—she wasn't sure which—mortal enemies. Her back did collide with the wall of the mausoleum, though, hard enough to wrench a gasp from her lungs—still hurt—and everything was going fast and slow at the same time. And even though she saw it in his eyes, even though she felt it in the press of his body against hers, she was still somehow surprised when his mouth came down on hers.

Almost as surprised as she was to find herself tangling a hand through his hair with a growl of her own and matching him with fang.

SHE CRIED MORE, MORE, MORE

IT HAPPENED FAST. ONE SECOND SHE AND SPIKE WERE KISSING—OR, more accurately, mauling each other with their mouths—and the next her pants were gone and Spike was on his knees, running his fangs along her inner thigh and teasing her pussy through the cotton of her panties with his tongue. And *god*, if that was a part of being a vampire no one had told her about, well, Buffy was first going to knock some heads together and then thank her lucky stars that she had been turned because it felt just this side of amazing. It also didn't last nearly as long as she would have liked—just a teasing lick or two before he was panting against her mouth again. Kissing her like she was the elixir of life, or unlife, and it had only been the one time before, but somehow Buffy knew the next step. She was tearing at his belt, her legs shaking and her hands shaking and everything shaking but a good shake, the sort that started from inside, and a wicked shake, as the concept of desire had been a source of curiosity and shame before she'd died. After all, thoughts and feelings like this were dangerous. Possibly world-endy. Only now not so much as there was no danger here. No soul to lose. Just a decadent surrender to sensation that left her grateful for the stone wall at her back because her knees seemed in imminent danger of crapping out on her.

And then Spike was running his fangs along the side of her neck, electrifying her, making her thoughts collide, and somehow she had his cock in her hand. She hadn't even registered pulling his zipper down, hadn't known her hand even knew what to do at this step. That hand had studiously *not* grasped anything of the sort for more than a year, and had only briefly played that night that everything had changed. True, she wasn't a virgin anymore but almost, *almost*, for that time with Angel seemed like it had happened to another person. Another Buffy. Not the one pinned between Spike and the crypt wall. Not the one about to be fucked sideways.

At least, god, she hoped that was what was about to happen. If he stopped now, she might scream.

Thankfully, for maybe the first time since he'd barreled into her life, Spike seemed to be on the same page. He had her ass cupped in one strong hand and the other was between them, batting hers away from his cock to take control. He was shaking too—or maybe that was just her, shaking so hard she felt the echo against him—and then he was using his cockhead to part the folds of her pussy—where the hell had her panties gone?—groaning a groan that was almost a growl. Maybe it *was* a growl. She didn't know. All she knew was that her weird, screwy, fucked up life, was on the brink of becoming even weirder, screwier, and more fucked up, and she could hardly wait.

There was a beat then, one in which Spike met her eyes, back in human face, and for that beat she waited for him to remember who she was or that he hated her, that he was pissed that someone had beaten him to killing her and wanted the chance to rectify that wrong.

Then the moment was over and he was pushing inside of her, filling her with a wonderful pressure she'd only experienced once before, but not like this. Not with the ground beneath her feet or her legs around anyone's waist, her weight supported by one, then two strong hands under her ass, hands with gripping fingers that dug into her skin as he pulled back, his cock slipping along her slick flesh until she felt almost empty and then plunging back inside.

"Oh fuck," Buffy gasped before she could help herself. "Oh my fuck."

Spike stiffened then chuckled, the sound a pleasant rumble against her chest. She hadn't known laughing was allowed during sex.

"Yeah, Slayer," he murmured before tugging on her earlobe with his teeth. "That's the idea. Hold on and try to keep up."

She would have snapped back at him, probably, if he hadn't started pumping into her pussy like he was mad at it, chasing all sense from her brain and leaving her with little else to do than exactly what he'd said. Hold on. Hold on tight. Dig her fingers into the soft leather of his duster as he knocked her into the wall at her back hard enough to hurt. Only it didn't hurt. Not like it had before. There was the thrill of the stone scraping between her shoulder blades, the abrasion against her spine, and the uncertainty of what he expected, but no pain. Just a blinding sense of ecstasy that felt dirty and desperate at the same time.

Yet she couldn't stop herself from wondering if she was doing this right. If she should follow the flow of his hips, thrust up when he pulled back, rock with him when he surged forward. If what she was doing was good at all or if he would forgive her because she was trying, *trying*, as this wasn't anything like it had been before and what had been before was all she knew. That time had been about feeling so much with only one way to express it, and a lot of what she'd been feeling had been pain. Pain that had resonated with the first penetration before settling into discomfort, all that she'd gritted her teeth and forced herself to bear on the promise that the bad part would be fleeting and the pleasure part transcendental.

Maybe *this* was what it meant for pain to become pleasure. Maybe it was Spike spearing inside of her, tearing at her skin with his lips and teeth. Maybe it was the sharp ache in her head where it connected with the wall, chased away by another swirl of hips, of cock slipping away and shoving wetly into her again. Maybe it was all of that combined into a rush that was something beyond good. Something *awesome*. A blinding, white-hot ball of pure awesome he kept striking, sending ricochets of holy-shit-this-is-what-sex-is blistering out her brain until it lost all its function. And the more he gave her, the more she craved. Buffy looped an arm around his neck and rolled her head back, pain there be damned, not knowing what she meant for him to do until his mouth fell upon her throat. Kissing.

Licking. Teasing with little nibbles that brought every nerve in her body to life. Tightening his hold on her ass, thrusting into her harder, growling, fighting her the way he always did but also not because she never wanted this fight to end. There was no urge to win, to lose. Just to keep going until they were both useless heaps on the cold ground.

“Fuck, I gotta feel it,” he rumbled into her ear, releasing the grip he had on her ass with one hand and dragging his fingers in a slow glide around her hip until he was touching her where they were joined. Burning out her senses with intense awareness of the sounds they were making together, wet and slick and raw. And the heady scent surrounding them, the scent that *was* them, that she could breathe in without feeling like she was drowning. And his fingers dancing over her soaked flesh and his flesh alike, stroking himself as he attempted to fuck her to dust, then nudging her in a way that took the awesome from before and made it go supernova. Buffy threw her head back again, the blast of pain from where her skull hit the wall drowned out with a roar, her fangs exploding into her mouth before she could stop them. And then she was lurching, seeking, not knowing what she wanted until she found it. Until she’d sliced open his throat and his blood was on her tongue, and Spike went nuts. Twisting her around, the air at her back, then falling and he was above her, holding her head to him with one arm, the other bracing his weight as he pounded into her pussy, some tangle of syllables that might have been her name tearing through him. Through them both. And she tightened where she had never tightened before and he whimper-snarled in response and that was it. He was pulsing, releasing into her, and she was convulsing and drinking and hoping that *god* they could just keep doing this. Just like this. Forget what had happened back in the weirdo-ville they had escaped and just...*this*. Again. Forever. She’d found her new calling.

The quiet that followed was almost unbearably loud, the air absent the groans and whimpers and the cadence of them coming together. Loud enough that the pain that had blossomed in her head began to register as actual pain, like the skin back there was tender. Buffy frowned and reached behind her, or tried. Her arms weren’t in the mood to cooperate, content to remain wrapped around Spike, who was

panting hard against her breast. Making her nipple go hard even through her bra. Making the parts of her that were still shaking shake harder still, for he was still inside of her. Spike was inside of her because they had just fucked like the animals they were.

Because she had just had sex for the second time.

How in the world had that happened? So wild and different from the last time. That had felt intentional and right. Like everything that had come before had been a slow build up. She had been scared that night, too, terrified. Why shouldn't she have been? It had been the first time and she'd let Angel lay her out on the bed knowing he'd had lots of sex before, that she would have to watch for signs of what to do. Hope that he would guide her, let her know what he liked and what he wanted, but also knowing that he wasn't the most verbose guy in the world and maybe she should just know? Maybe it was just something she was expected to get because she was the Slayer and—

And it hadn't been this. She hadn't felt untamed and wild, like something was clawing at her insides to get out. It hadn't been a hunger she was trying to answer, one that she could already tell was not completely satisfied. Yes, her muscles were hitting a plane of relaxation she hadn't known existed, all of her going limp noodly under the man who was supposed to be her archenemy, but there was more there. More of him. More of his blood in her mouth, his hands on her body. More to explore and experience, and just thinking about that more had those relaxed muscles unrelaxing in a big hurry. Had her clenching, and when her clenching made him groan, she clenched again. And again. And again.

"What the hell did you just do to me?" It came out more accusatory than she meant.

Spike lifted his head, his expression somewhere between exasperated and bemused. "You bit me. Dunno what you expected."

"No, Spike, what *was* that?"

"A hell of a shag, that's what it was." He nudged his hips forward, and she realized with a start he was still hard. Or maybe that was hard again. "Fuck, how wet you are."

"I'm serious." She slapped at his chest, but he didn't relent, just grinned down at her and thrust into her once more, driving thought

out of her head. And her stupid body was going with it, demanding it, acting entirely as though what had just happened *hadn't* just happened. "Spike—"

"Anyone ever tell you that you talk too much, Slayer?" Spike lifted a hand to his neck and pulled it away again, fingers shining with blood. "Can find ways to stuff that mouth of yours. Want more of this?" He coated it along her lips before she could respond, and *again*, Buffy's stupid traitor body reacted without consulting her. First licking up the blood he'd smeared there, then lifting her head so she could feast more from the source.

"Fuck," he hissed when her fangs pierced him again, his somewhat lazy strokes transforming on a dime. Then he was thrusting so hard she scooted back along the floor, making her moan and latch more firmly in his throat, which he rewarded by settling into a bruising rhythm that, like before, almost hurt but only almost. "I take it back."

"Mmm..." Buffy licked at the mark she'd made and felt him tremble in turn. "Take what back?"

"That rot I said about you not bein' a good vampire." He was back at her throat, nibbling his own path across her skin and making it burn in ways her skin just didn't burn anymore. She remembered, vaguely, wondering if vampires got hot—about the mechanics of vampire sex at all. If she could rely on her body doing the things it had done before, feeding her the same cues, and god, either being a vampire made sex better or she'd just had some not-great sex before.

The thought alone seemed disloyal, but then again, she didn't know if she cared. Maybe Angel was just a lousy lay, and she had been too new at this to know the difference.

"You're a bloody brilliant vampire," Spike continued, swirling his hips now, and she felt his lips curve into a grin against her neck. "Wanna taste of it? How it feels to come with fangs?"

He pulled back and regarded her through eyes that flashed gold, still smiling a smile that shouldn't have been sexy but was. It hit her all over again that she was really doing this. Having sex with Spike. He was really inside of her, pushing his cock in and out of her pussy at a bruising rhythm. He was the reason she was feeling all these things, why her skin was hot after it had been cold for a month. He was who

had sent her careening into that pleasure space she hadn't known existed. And he wasn't done with her.

The look he was giving her now... It was like he was just getting started.

"How about it, Slayer?" Spike purred, slipping a hand under her shirt. Under the cup of her bra, too, and then he was caressing the soft skin of her breast, and even with him thrusting into her at a rhythm, she found the intimacy rather startling. And something of what she was thinking must have been on her face, for the next second, he had rolled his eyes and bunched up the fabric, bra and all, so he could really touch her, and she could watch him do it.

"Of course you'd be gorgeous," he muttered as though irritated. "Can't bloody help yourself, can you?"

"Sorry?"

"Doubt it." Spike lowered his head then and held her gaze as he flicked that wicked tongue over one of her nipples. She gasped and he grinned, and she arched up and he thrust down, then *bit* down and she thought she might lose her mind.

"Oh shit!"

"Mhmm," he replied around a mouthful of breast, still looking at her as though demanding to know what she intended to do about it. The skin hadn't broken but she could feel his fangs, the pressure there against her, pressing into her, and what's more she also felt how much he wanted it, and suddenly everything was too much. Spike moving inside of her, the sounds he made, the sounds *they* made, the rough concrete at her back and the vampire over her. She'd realized earlier, when she'd seen him at the frat party, that this was where they could end up. That he'd been flirty in his antagonistic sort of way, and she'd been into it, and before he'd gotten all weird about her lack of a soul, the thought that he might want her too had been the wakeup call she'd needed to start living her life again.

Then everything else had happened.

Had they really escaped that place just to fuck? Did she care if the answer was yes?

No. She didn't think she did. And maybe that confirmed she *wasn't*, in fact, Buffy Summers. Or that Buffy Summers had truly been born

with a stake up her ass that losing her soul had knocked free. At the moment, it didn't matter. All that mattered was Spike fucking her with what she could only assume was the most impressive cock on the planet. On how it felt, having her mortal enemy plunging into her with increasingly frenetic strokes. Knowing she was the one who was making him whimper like that. Or moan. Or when she flexed around his cock, working some set of muscles she hadn't realized could squeeze that way, he nearly fell out of vampire face like it was hard to maintain, and how that was at complete odds with another—no, no, she didn't want to think about *him* anymore. Not right now. Not with Spike. She already had too much as it was. *He* didn't deserve her headspace.

"Ready for me?" Spike demanded, seizing a handful of her hair and yanking her head back. Again, there was a blast of pain—like he was pulling at a wound that had not completely healed—but it faded in favor of what he was doing to her, enough so she forced herself to forget it. It couldn't matter. Not right now.

Instead, she focused on his words. "Ready?" she echoed, her voice so soft she was surprised she could hear it above the wet, fleshy smacks reverberating between the stone walls. Spike grinned and lowered his mouth to her throat, laved the skin there with his tongue, and she knew what was coming and all of her seized.

"Fuck, do that again," Spike growled, hooking a hand under her leg and dragging it up until it was draped over his shoulder, and sounds that Buffy had never thought she'd ever hear herself making were now tumbling through her lips unchecked. All of her was tight and hungry for something she knew she knew but couldn't name, and there was more pain. Not in her head but along her back and the way her muscles were stretching, how she seemed to mold around him.

"Again, Slayer." His mouth was at her ear, his voice low and rumble. "Squeeze me like that again. Let me feel it."

She did, finding a rhythm, clamping her muscles around his cock every time he thrust home, and he groaned low and the sound was another hard slap of reality. The sort of detail dreams missed. Then he was dancing his fangs along her neck and his fingers were suddenly between them, slipping over her pussy once more to tease her clit.

Making her spark and burn, feel hot the way she hadn't thought she could anymore. And at last he was there at her throat for real, piercing into her and everything, *everything* changed.

"Oh my god!" Buffy clutched at Spike's head, felt him jolt in return but firmed her grip so he couldn't jerk away. So he was held there, lapping and drinking and sucking her into him. So that she felt the pulls of his mouth like she had once felt a heartbeat. Only a heartbeat had never had a corresponding tug on her clit. Had never made her scream like this.

It was fire and it was inside of her. Roaring through her veins and arteries and the parts of her that were supposed to be dead with such force her body jolted with life. That's what it felt like—an explosion of life. Something both outside of and within herself, pulling her in a thousand directions but piecing her back together at the same time. Even finding parts of her she hadn't known had fallen away, fitting them to her again so she felt whole as she hadn't in she couldn't remember how long. Buffy didn't scream so much as sob, didn't gasp so much as burst into tears, and those felt warm too. Hot and salty and burning her skin, and it just kept coming. Waves turning into floods, drowning her, consuming her, and then doing it all over again. And Spike still at her throat, and her leg still over his shoulder, and he was still thrusting in shallow strokes, then finally coming again, trembling too, as though to return to her what he'd taken.

A few minutes passed before it occurred to Buffy that she was panting, and the sensation didn't hurt at all. Not in the slightest.

Huh.

"Is it always like that?" she asked, startled to find her voice had a rasp to it.

He didn't reply for a long beat. And when he did, his voice was raspy too. "What's that, Slayer?"

"Sex. As a vampire."

Spike pulled his head back and met her eyes, and she immediately wished he hadn't for the way he regarded her. Not that she was an expert in the school of Spike looks, but she was pretty sure some of what she saw reflected back at her was pity. "What was it like?" he asked, not bothering to mask his amusement.

"Never mind," she murmured and placed her hands on his chest. "Let me up."

"Ah, ah. Answer the question."

"Why? So you can make more fun of me? You might get off on that, but I—"

"Think we both know what you get off on, pet." Spike grinned and nudged her with his hips, and oh god, he was starting to swell all over again. "Need another reminder?"

"You have to be kidding me."

"Why's that? 'Cause King Forehead couldn't go more than a single round or because he didn't even bother to make sure you had a good time?" He lowered his head to nip at her mouth, and as though to spite her, her body responded with a hard tremor. "That was the first time you'd come, wasn't it? That's what you were askin'."

"What?"

The grin on his face ought to be illegal. "Nothin' to be ashamed of," he said, and despite all evidence to the contrary, including the aforementioned grin and the spark in his eyes, she found she believed him. Or believed that he meant it. "He always was a selfish prat. Darla could get him to perform the way she wanted but—"

Buffy slapped at his shoulder. "I do not need to hear this!"

"But what if I need to tell it?"

"Tell it to someone else. And get off me!"

Spike arched an eyebrow, studied her, then shrugged and pulled back. Back until his cock was slipping out of her with an especially wet sound that did little to quell the flames he kept insisting on keeping stoked. In fact, something panged in her chest the second he was no longer inside of her, but it didn't get a chance to do more than that for the next thing she knew, Spike's head was between her legs and he was spreading her pussy open, his eyes dark with a sort of hunger she had never seen before. "Get off you?" he asked before lowering his face and dragging in a deep breath. "Or get you off?"

"What—"

"'Cause you haven't had much of the latter, and that's a right shame." And before she knew what he was doing, before she could

even register what he was saying, he'd taken a long lick of her cunt and the noise inside her head went shrill.

"Oh my god," she said, the words tumbling out in a rush. He chuckled and it vibrated against her and then his tongue was on her again and this, *this* had to be the vilest thing she'd done or let be done, for it felt too fucking good to actually be good. Pure and fire and he was licking her and groaning low in his throat, rolling his eyes back like she tasted decadent. And she barely had time to process the thought before it blinked out and she fell, lost to the motions of his tongue, the plunges, the eager laps, the searching and exploring and the sounds he made while doing it. And the parts of her that had been soft and sated were suddenly hot and tense, and there was nothing to do but follow the sensation and hope it didn't break her on the way to wherever they were going.

Buffy hadn't known tongues could do this. Maybe that was dumb, but it was true.

"To answer your question, pet," Spike continued, now teasing her clit with soft, velvety licks, "it's not bein' a vampire that makes this brilliant. It's bein' with someone who knows how to satisfy a lady. Who likes the way she feels when she comes all over his cock." He looked up at her, his wet mouth pulled into a grin. "Or his face. And that's the difference, innit? Had you at his fingertips all that time and never took the proper tour. Never got to know just how you taste when you fall apart on a bloke's tongue."

Spike fastened his lips around her clit before she could find the words she was looking for, and like before, those words and other words and in fact all words flitted out of her head, taking the last vestiges of her self-awareness with them. There was no room for self-awareness when consumed by pure physical ecstasy, even as phantoms of the word *wrong* ran scattered through her mind. Because evil things like this were wrong. The sort of wrong good girl Buffy Summers would never indulge in, never allow, and certainly not on the floor of some dank old crypt with Spike.

For the first time since she'd realized what she'd become, she'd felt glad for the distance separating her from the human her.

"Right crime that was," Spike murmured between long, decadent

laps of his tongue. Over her slit and then dipping inside, just a tease, before making his way back to her clit. Sucking her into his mouth and running his tongue over her with such focus she would have sworn her heart started beating again. There had to be some reason to account for the noise. "Fuck, you're bloody addicting," he added, and she wanted to laugh because she was the one who didn't think there was a forward from here. This was just where her story would end. Spike torturing her with his mouth until she shook herself to dust. Until all the pain and uncertainty and the worries about fitting in, being good, being herself, being Buffy had nowhere to go but up in smoke and they decided to take her along for the ride.

"We taste so good together." He lifted his head again and she caught him spooning up a pearly string of what she belatedly realized had to be his own spendings, and she was pretty sure her brain short-circuited. There was a chuckle against the mouth of her pussy, making her shake, and then his tongue was inside of her, and she was arching off the ground, threading her fingers through his hair, rubbing herself hard against his face, and he was there to catch her. Diving deeper, eating her, devouring her, and then when that wasn't enough licking his way back to her clit as he pushed one finger, two fingers, three fingers inside of her. Her head hit the concrete again, but the pain was incidental now, too small to be felt over what he was doing to her. Too minimal to care.

It wasn't fair that she'd had to die to experience this. It wasn't fair that it was now and with Spike. It wasn't fair that this was likely all she'd get, either. This random break from her everyday life. This celebration of not being dead or worse inside that cell and everything else.

Then Spike flattened his tongue against her clit, twisted his wrist and pressed at something inside of her, and everything coalesced. She felt herself arching once more, closing her legs around his face and pulling him harder against her, and she was convulsing and trembling and he was still fucking her with his mouth, still sipping at her opening, still growling his encouragement and whispering soft praises, and she wanted to say something but her words were still gone, so she said nothing at all. Just choked out nonsense sounds without shape, marveling again at how impossibly hot she was, how he'd made her so.

Buffy wasn't exactly sure when she realized the tremors had stopped, or that her body had fallen slack. She lay there for what felt like a very long time, relishing the breaths that didn't hurt and the way all of her seemed to tingle until Spike moved. For an instant, she was certain he was about to crawl back up, smelling of her and them, touch his mouth to hers while he pushed his cock back inside of her, but he didn't do that. He didn't and she *wasn't* disappointed. Really.

"Fuck," he muttered, and when she opened her eyes, she caught him dragging a hand down his face. "You're dangerous, Slayer, know that?"

"Pretty sure I'm supposed to be," she replied, her voice all hoarse. She waited, hoping he would elaborate, but he didn't do that, either.

Instead, he blinked and glanced down at himself, huffed, then looked at her too. "Made a bit of a mess of things," he said, skimming his fingers over what she now saw were bloodstains on his shirt and soaked into his jeans. Giving her another of those little jolts for the lack of concern she experienced, for she knew instinctively it didn't belong to either of them. "You too. Don't lick any of that up unless you aim to knock out for a few hours."

At first, she had no idea what he was talking about, and then she realized the wet sensation clinging to her skin wasn't centralized to her still-throbbing pussy. There was more of that blood, and it was everywhere, splattered across her legs and the floor surrounding her.

"Had to go somewhere," he said when she looked back at him, and drew his duster open to reveal an inner pocket covered in dark liquid. Spike hadn't even taken off the coat to fuck her. He'd stripped her down and made her feel...well, she didn't know what, and now he was showing her where he'd hidden the tainted blood that had provided the parlor trick that had secured their escape. What did it say that she hadn't even felt it, hadn't smelled it either, as it had slopped out and over them? That she had been so fixated on all things Spike her vampire senses had abandoned her. Her regular senses, too. Hell, it had been there on her thighs while he'd done that tongue magic and somehow, she hadn't seen it. All she'd seen was him.

Buffy met his eyes again, realized she was still lying there with her legs open and his ejaculate leaking out of her and hurried to her feet.

Feet attached to legs that thankfully didn't shake or do anything stupid like betray just how off her game she suddenly felt—not confused, not necessarily, and not hurt, but also not okay. How could she be okay after what had just happened?

Or that it wasn't *still* happening.

She turned her back to him as she busied herself fitting her bra back over her breasts and straightening out her shirt, her mind starting to race. Maybe it had been an anomaly, the sex thing. Or, she thought as she found her pants—her underwear seemed a lost cause—maybe her still-new vampire brain was trying to put a human spin on something that wasn't human at all. They had escaped something crazy together and then *done* something crazy together the first chance they'd gotten, and she was trying to analyze it like it could be analyzed when it was, in fact, just a part of the demon gig. Go through a wacky experience and enjoy a nice celebratory fuck at the end of it. Simple and straightforward.

Much more so than whatever the fuck the thing had been in the first place.

And that's what she needed to focus on. The lab. The crazy underground demon petting zoo. Not the vampire who was, or had been, her enemy. Easier that way.

"I need to get to Giles," Buffy said, smoothing her hands down her legs once all her clothes were back in place. The blood crusted on her legs would bother her until she got a chance to wash up, but at least she wouldn't look like she'd stumbled off a horror movie set. "Tell him about the lab."

"You're still reportin' to your watcher?" Spike retorted, somewhere between amused and exasperated. He'd withdrawn a cigarette from his non-blood-soaked pocket and lit up. She was glad. Gave her something to focus on other than the fact that he hadn't done up the button of his jeans. "Right. Dunno why I'm surprised. 'Course you are."

"I didn't ask for your opinion. In fact, I didn't ask for anything."

He arched both eyebrows and blew out a pillar of smoke. "Ooh, touchy, are we?"

"I was just kidnapped and possibly experimented on and it's happening in my town. Of course I'm touchy." Buffy frowned and ran a

hand along the still-tender back of her head. "Maybe you don't want to know what was going on there, but I do. So... I don't know, go do whatever. Back to your tunnel."

"And miss out on the fun of huntin' those wankers down?" He shook his head. "Don't think so, Slayer. Lead the bloody way."

There was no reason whatsoever for those words to settle the disquiet in her chest. Yet they did.

Being a vampire was just weird.

And she had a feeling it would only get weirder from here.

SO YA THOUGHT YA MIGHT LIKE TO GO TO THE SHOW

HE COULD MAKE A RUN FOR IT.

Spike sucked in his cheeks and quickened his pace in time with the Slayer's. It was true, and if he were a smart man, odds were that *running* was exactly what he would be doing. Forget the whole revenge thing and light out of Sunnyhell before the town could take anything else from him, for it was clear none of his plans—no matter how well-thought-out, no matter how much effort he put into them—would ever amount to rot while he was within a fifty-mile radius of the Buffy Summers.

But there was still the matter of the gem. He hadn't come all this way or done all this work, sussed out what that *valley of the sun* bollocks meant just to turn tail because some group of well-funded gits had decided to continue the sort of experimentation he'd managed to evade in the forties. He meant to have that gem—the only present aside from the Slayer's head that might make Dru go soft in the heart for him once more. Remember what it was about him she'd liked in the first place—his determination, his tenacity, his unwillingness to hear something was impossible without doing all he could to conquer it himself.

That look she'd given him after he'd tasted the blood of his first

slayer... The gem was key to getting that back. And if he couldn't have Buffy's head, well, maybe her dust would suffice.

Except that didn't sound convincing even in his head. Not now. Not after having been inside of her.

Spike slid his gaze to the right, to the firm set of her jaw and the way her hair bounced with every step she took. That profile that was unlike any other he'd seen in his many years, the same one he'd burned into his brain so well he saw it in his dreams. He'd wanted her so much—hadn't known just how much until her mouth had touched his, but it had always been there. A question dangling just outside of reach, comfortable enough he could keep an eye on it without having to give it too much space or consideration. There was an element of the bloodlust that was just *lust* when it came to hunting down slayers—a desire to tame all that raw strength, feel it around him, respond to him, experience all of her the way only one creature ever could. And as true as that had been before Sunnydale, it had become even more so the second Buffy Summers had entered his orbit.

The more he knew her, the more he hated her, the more he'd wanted her. It had transcended the simple urge to sample what a slayer was like between the sheets and taken on a life of its own. And he knew that had been part of the problem with Dru. What had been idle curiosity before, a question he was more than happy to let go unanswered for the sake of the woman he loved, had fed into an obsession he couldn't outrun. Not just thoughts about fucking Buffy—those, he wagered, Dru would have been happy to entertain—but other things no one should ever consider about their mortal enemy.

And he'd seen it there at the crypt. A reflection of it in her eyes, maybe the same question. Or the same curiosity. Only it was more than question and curiosity for him, even if he had fought it. Even if he hadn't admitted it to himself until he'd had her mouth on his.

That should have been the moment. Shag her, answer the question once and for all, then dust her. He could have, too. As limp as she'd been beneath him, Spike could have done anything he fancied.

And what had he chosen to do? Put his mouth on her, explore her where she was soft. Where she wasn't the Slayer at all. Where she was just Buffy.

He was a sick man.

And he should run. Cut his losses, even the gem, and see if he couldn't find Dru and beg her to take him back anyway. Not because he deserved it but because of what they were to each other. Or had been. Because he loved her with all he was—and forget that she didn't love him in the same fierce way; that wasn't her fault. He'd known from the start what she was capable of giving, and that had been enough. More than enough. For a century, it had been everything. He'd be an idiot to want more. To *have* anything other than idle thoughts he'd never act on about chits who meant nothing to him. To let someone like the Slayer, like *Buffy*, dominate so much of him that he forgot who he was.

Somehow, though, rather than wiping the Slayer's dust off his hands, Spike found himself standing outside a rather posh flat at the side of his mortal enemy. The woman whose taste was still in his mouth, whose cunt he could still feel wrapped around his fingers, his cock, and whose moans and whimpers made up the soundtrack of his mind. He wondered if her watcher would smell it on him the second he opened the door. If he'd take a look at the pair of them and just know. It had been a minute since Spike had been human, and god knows he hadn't been the most perceptive bloke then—at least not enough to readily identify the people in his circle who were shagging each other rotten behind closed doors—but he thought there might be enough age and cunning in Rupert to not be quite as naïve as ol' William had been.

Then again, Buffy was something like a daughter to the watcher—or had been before, at least, even if she wasn't now. Parents were keen to be blind in a lot of ways when it came to their children.

Either way, Spike gathered that his rumbling stomach was not about to be satiated and that any attempt to turn the watcher into a midnight snack would earn him a stake to the heart, so he tried to shove back his raging hunger when the door opened to reveal a very edible human on the other side. One whose tousled hair and blinking eyes betrayed he had just been roused from sleep and would likely be even slower to react than normal if one of the beasties that had come knocking decided he looked the right kind of delicious.

Spike wasn't much for old man meat, himself, but given how

famished he was, he couldn't quite keep from zeroing in on the watcher's jugular anyway.

"Buffy." Rupert pulled the lapels of his bathrobe tighter around himself like he'd been caught doing something indecent. After far too long a beat, the gent shifted his gaze to the Slayer's left and realized who she'd brought along as her plus-one. "And Spike. I, ah, gather things have changed since we last spoke?"

Buffy pressed forward, right across the invisible barrier that should have prevented her from entry. She was so domesticated these wankers weren't even taking proper precautions. It was embarrassing.

"Invite him in," she instructed, walking with intent toward what Spike saw was the kitchen. "We have things to tell you."

"Invite him in?" The watcher just stared in his confusion. At least someone here wasn't comfortable with the arrangement.

"He won't hurt you." Buffy sounded far too confident in the fact. Would serve her right if Spike took a big bite just to prove he wasn't going to be her lapdog just because he knew what her cunt tasted like.

As though hearing that thought, she added, "He knows I'll kill him if he does."

Rupert didn't look mollified in the slightest, which in turn made Spike feel a bit more at ease with the whole situation. "Excuse me," the watcher said, and stepped back into the flat, only to return a moment later with a crossbow at the ready. The sound of a microwave door slamming shut rang out from the kitchen nook as Rupert offered a wry grin and inclined his head. "Very well. Spike, do come inside."

Spike smirked in response just to show there were no hard feelings. "Thanks ever so," he said, moving over the threshold and kicking the door closed behind him. He let his gaze linger on the watcher's jugular a nice long beat—would be a poor showing on his part if he didn't even make the bloke feel threatened—before forcing himself to play nice. "Nice spot of trouble you let your slayer get in. Here I thought you'd trained her better than that."

"Excuse me?"

Buffy appeared at the watcher's side the next second, cradling two mugfuls of something that smelled warm and delicious. "Don't mind

Spike. He's just obsessed with the fact that I'm a vampire. Though I thought you'd gotten over that."

The last bit she said rather pointedly, and Spike couldn't help himself—he pulled his lips back into a grin. "I was over it. Inside of it, too. Could be I need a reminder."

She narrowed her eyes at him and thrust one of the mugs forward with enough force that its contents threatened to slosh over the rim. "Here," she said shortly. "How about you don't talk for a while? Let me catch Giles up to speed."

Spike studied the mug pressing against his chest for a beat before taking it. "This is how you're gettin' blood, then? You drink out of novelty cups?"

"You expected something else?"

"Given how repressed you are, I guess not." He tilted the mug this way and that, studying the blood now. As good as it smelled, something was still off. "Not human."

"It's pig," she said, raising the one she still held to her mouth.

"Of course it is." Bugger it. Pig's blood was still blood and he *was* starving, so bottoms up. He lifted the mug to his lips and downed its contents within two hearty swallows. It tasted about as he'd expected—flat and a mite greasy. Not bad in a pinch but he'd need to find himself someone to eat right quick. "Wouldn't want you havin' too much fun, would we?"

Rupert—or Giles, whatever she called him—frowned and turned to Buffy, who was ready with her patented eyeroll. "Spike thinks that because I'm not a mindless killing machine, something went wrong in the turning," she explained, setting her emptied mug on an end table.

"I thought Angelus might've had a hand in it," he said, and smacked his lips together. Subpar quality aside, the blood had curbed the hunger that had started to gnaw at his insides—not enough but he did feel a smidge more at ease. The watcher's jugular wasn't quite the siren it had been a moment ago. "Saw it before, what happened when a souled-up vampire decided to reproduce. Lost track of the kid before I learned about Angel's precious soul, granted, but it did put a few things into perspective."

Spike hadn't been in the same space with Buffy the last time he'd

brought up the wayward soldier, and as such had only had his imagination to fill in the way the news hit her. It wasn't the utter devastation he might have expected if her heart were still beating but enough of *something* that he couldn't help but swell with renewed annoyance at the way all the bloody women in his bloody life lost their bloody marbles over bloody Angel. Had been bad enough when it was just Dru but at least she'd had the whole actually insane thing to excuse it.

But Buffy? The girl the pillock had decided to abandon, all high and mighty like he was the leading authority on what was good for her? Watching her wince was enough to make Spike wish he'd staked the sod when he'd had the chance.

"Angel turned someone after he was ensouled?" Rupert asked, as any good academic would. "There is no record of that."

"Dunno why there would be. Happened in the forties. Never got the full story, 'cept Angelus was in the mix. Found us on a submarine after we got ourselves captured."

"You and Drusilla being the *we*, presumably?"

Spike shook his head. "Woulda been her if I hadn't been quick on my feet." And he didn't want to think about what might have happened then. No sure answer with Dru—she could have enchanted the lot of them or things could have gone so pear-shaped that Prague would have been an amusement park by comparison. "Got grabbed by some Nazi buggers while takin' her to a party." He wouldn't mention what kind of party as to not offend the Slayer's delicate sensibilities. "She got away, unlike yours truly. I ended up on this submarine with two others. Was right in the middle of settlin' the score when Angel showed up."

"On a submarine," Buffy deadpanned.

"Don't ask me for specifics. All I know is he was there and he turned the only bloke who had a chance of gettin' the bloody boat to surface again on account he was about to snuff it anyway. Then he made me and the new boy swim twenty miles to land because we were peckish and the pulsers who were still there had used up their usefulness." Spike had always meant to pummel his grandsire for that one but, like most things, it was the sort of impulse that only surfaced when he remembered to be indignant about it. "We didn't talk much,

but I could tell somethin' was off with the kid. Went our separate ways right quick. Wasn't until I learned about Angelus's shiny soul that any of it made sense."

Rupert nodded, his frown still in place. "And you believed, because of this, that Buffy had been turned by Angel."

"She's inherited his idea of a good time, so yeah. There's also the fact that you're standin' here with your throat nice and intact."

The crossbow in the watcher's arms, which had started to list downward, snapped back into prime killing position. "Buffy is proving to be many things," he said in what Spike assumed was his best protective-father voice. "Things, I might add, that you are not. Which begs the question, what in the blazes is he doing here?"

"That's a different story," Buffy said, sighing. Then wincing and pressing a hand to her chest like the movement hurt. Spike had to fight the urge to roll his eyes, if only because he didn't much fancy being tossed out on his arse, but Christ, she was a bit of a drama queen about this breathing thing. There wasn't much to it—breathe if you need, don't if you don't. He'd been doing whichever fit the situation for more than a century and not once had he ever made a production out of it. Never mind the fact that she'd been breathing plenty fine back at the crypt when he'd made her pant and squirm and beg. Only seemed to bother her when she was thinking about it.

And without a soul to blame or Angel's dubious influence, Spike couldn't see why it would occur to her at all. Though he supposed it didn't matter in the end. Just another thing about her that annoyed him. There were so many to choose from.

Headlining the list right now was the fact that he knew what her cunt tasted like and was aching for another sample. One she wasn't likely to give him.

"—to fool the scientist people or whoever they were into thinking he drank the blood," Buffy was saying when Spike decided to clue back into the conversation. "So they came to take him back for experiments, I'm guessing, and he got the drop on them. Then he got me out and we made with the getaway. And the crazy thing, Giles?"

The watcher's frown had turned more pronounced, and his grip on

the crossbow had again fallen slack. “You haven’t told me the crazy part yet?”

Buffy shook her head. “The last door we used came out somewhere in the middle of campus. Like smack dab in the middle, and then just”—she made some sort of spastic hand motion—“disappeared into the grass. This lab is *under* UC Sunnydale.”

There was a pause. “Forgive me, but what makes this particular detail any more noteworthy than the whole of what you told me?”

Her face fell a bit, which Spike had to admit was a little fun to watch. “You don’t think so? I thought it might mean that the school has something to do with it. Like the teachers or something. It’s a pretty big thing to hide and you’d need a good cover to keep from running into, oh say, *me* on patrol every night. Plus a handy supply of test subjects. You remember my demon roommate, don’t you?”

“I do...”

“Well.” She waved again. “Test subject.”

“But you killed her, didn’t you?”

“And?”

“Well, I don’t see how it’s related.”

The Slayer huffed—funny enough, this one didn’t seem to faze her—and waved her hand a third time. “There was a *demon* in my dorm, Giles. While fifty feet below us a bunch of sciencey types were doing experiments on demons.”

“Forgettin’ *you’re* a demon too now,” Spike added. He was ready with a grin when Buffy turned the full force of her glare on him. “What? Just tryin’ to be helpful.”

“Well, *unlike* me, Kathy was a demon from day one,” she spat before turning back to Giles. “And I’m betting she’s not the only not-human student in the graduating class of 2003.”

But the watcher was shaking his head. “I’m sorry, I just don’t see the connection. It’s not exactly surprising that demons who can pass for human would be enrolled in classes. Not all breeds are hellbent on destruction but rather wish to integrate peacefully into human society. For those, Sunnydale would be a safer school for them than many alternatives where the risk of discovery could be devastating. After all, we are on a hellmouth.”

"But that *is* the connection!" Buffy replied, so agitated now her eyes were flashing gold—something not lost on her watcher, who took a subtle step back. Subtle enough that the Slayer didn't seem to notice, even if Spike did. "So it makes more sense for these guys to set up shop here because there'd be more demons on our campus than, say, Boringville, Montana. Students go missing all the time—are we forgetting how I was turned?"

"Can't forget what you never knew," Spike interjected, and smirked when she again fixed him with another scowl. "Still owe me a story, Slayer."

"What, so you can pout some more about having been beaten to the punch?"

"Now, now. Remember where that kinda talk gets you."

Buffy snapped her mouth shut, still glaring stakes.

"Just so I'm sure I'm following," Giles said before anything interesting could happen, dragging Buffy's attention back to him once more. "You are suggesting that this operation is administered somehow by UC Sunnydale itself."

"Big science labs under the campus. I don't see what the reach is here."

Spike could tell she expected the watcher to argue some more, but at last the man fell quiet, furrowing his brow in apparent thought. While Spike didn't care either way—didn't much matter who was behind anything so long as he got to rip out some spines—he wagered it was a mite daft for anyone who had seen Buffy in action to doubt her intuition. If she thought the school was involved, odds were it was. Would be easy enough to drown the existence of a lab like the one they'd escaped in paperwork and other bureaucratic nonsense, and it certainly wouldn't be the first time it had happened. Hell, organizations had been dabbling in occult research for the whole of time.

And at last, the watcher seemed to arrive at the same conclusion. "It would be rather ingenious," he muttered. "New academic halls are developed every few years. Quite easy to avoid attention in constructing an elaborate underground facility."

"Thank you and *good job*, Buffy," Buffy said, crossing her arms.

"Yes. Quite." Giles straightened again, then glanced at the

crossbow he still held before shifting his attention to Spike. "I assume there is a reason beyond gratitude that you opted to include a vampire who has attempted to kill you on multiple occasions."

"They pissed us both off. If we're taking them down, he wants in."

"And we're just allowing that? No questions?"

Buffy shrugged, and for the first time, Spike thought he might have seen it—a bit of what made her different, a real vampire rather than a walking contradiction with fangs. What had been absent in the way she comported with him was suddenly there. Not that he'd seen her around her mates all that often, but he knew enough from having listened to Angelus's blathering on the subject that the Slayer had deferred to the wisdom of others without relying on her own expertise near as much as she was owed. She'd seemed the type to make apologies and try to keep the peace as often as she led.

Rupert nodded a nod of acknowledgment rather than agreement—Spike knew the difference all too well—and favored the crossbow with a longer, more meaningful look. The sort that betrayed something Spike wagered the Slayer hadn't noticed, for as at ease as she was around her watcher. Whatever story she was telling herself, whatever attempts she was making at passing as something other than a vampire, her old man wasn't convinced. At the very least, the option of trying to kill her was still on the table.

The watcher would have the element of surprise there, Spike supposed. And he'd need it if he meant to survive.

"I assume then," Rupert said slowly, shifting his attention back to Buffy, "that you gleaned what Spike is doing in Sunnydale in the first place?"

Buffy frowned before her expression hardened, and she turned to glower at Spike as though he'd betrayed her. "Funny enough, no. Except he's digging around for something. I dusted my way through his entire work crew before I was grabbed. Not even Harmony spilled the beans."

And if Harm had been a part of the great escape, Spike would have congratulated her on finally learning when to hold her tongue. That would at least spare him the necessity of ripping it out for another day. "Doesn't involve you, Slayer, so why don't you—"

"You know, I can let Giles and the others know where you were digging," she said brightly. "Some time when the sun is up and it'll be impossible for you to get back."

"Oh, darlin', you are a young thing if you think the sun can't be worked around."

"You can't work around anything if you're chained up."

"And here I thought we were through with foreplay."

Once again, she glared at him. She was so cute when she was brassed. If not for their audience, he might have dragged her close for a snog. See if what had happened back at that crypt had been lightning in a bottle, even though he knew full well it hadn't. They'd been flirting with each other since the beginning.

"You want to test me? I know Giles has chains around here somewhere."

"Never tell me *how* you know and I'll die happy."

They both took offense to that—the watcher going red and bluster and Buffy looking very much like she might fancy seeing if she could dust him by punching a hole through his chest. Spike wasn't all that eager to find out himself, though, and raised his hands before either of them could start in. "Right, fine," he said loudly. "I'll share. But Slayer, just know it's mine. I'm the one who did all the hard work and went to all the effort. I will *not* be leaving here empty-handed."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm talkin' about the Gem of Amara."

"The Gem of Amara?" Rupert blinked and forgot, for a second anyway, that he had at least one, probably two dangerous vampires in the room. The crossbow dipped almost entirely to the floor. "Surely, you jest."

"Yeah. Came back to a town I hate, recruited a load of muscle, and started diggin' in the Slayer's backyard all for some grand practical joke." Spike rolled his eyes. "Bloody skeptics."

"Can we slow down for a minute?" Buffy demanded, darting her eyes between the two of them. "What is the Gem of Amara?"

Spike smirked and tilted his head, narrowing his gaze at Giles, all daring. And why not? He had nothing to lose. If the pillock tried anything with the crossbow, he'd tear his throat out and deal with the

Slayer after. "You want to tell her?" he asked. "Just a fairytale, after all. Nothin' to worry about."

The watcher stiffened, lifting his chin as though in defiance. "It's a myth," he told Buffy, not bothering to look at her. "A sort of holy grail for vampires. The wearer essentially becomes unkillable. Impervious to sunlight. Invulnerable to stakes, fire, and decapitation. A truly unstoppable force."

Buffy frowned. "And this gem is in Sunnydale?"

"Of course not. It's a myth, as I said."

"Right. Then you lot won't mind if I keep searchin' for this myth."

Giles scoffed. "You can't seriously be considering returning to the tunnel when these...people, whoever they are, know that it was where you were last when they captured you."

"Just leave my hard work behind for some other git? Don't think so, mate."

"How do you know it's here?" Buffy asked, now focused on Spike. "This gem thing?"

"Don't know how it's any concern of yours."

"Well, the way I see it, my town, my gem."

It was predictable—truly, he'd seen it coming a mile away—but hearing her state it so baldly couldn't help but grate. "No," Spike snapped, at last tearing his gaze from the watcher and fixing it on her. Those eyes that were like gems themselves, set into a face that had haunted him across the bloody globe and paired with lips he'd now tasted. Make that *everything* he'd now tasted. She was remarkable—had been before the turning but even more so now that she came with fangs. The best slayer he'd ever had the privilege of dancing with. And yeah, she might have the moves where it counted—might have more than that, considering, but she had another think coming if she thought she could intimidate him into backing off. Strength was nothing against experience, or a willingness to enter each fight knowing it could be your last. Buffy might have sampled death but he doubted she was hot to try it where the stakes were for keeps. Where the person who walked away was the *only* one who walked away. No more surprise returns. No more nothing. Just dust.

And she saw it, felt it too, for a slow grin spread across that utterly

kissable mouth of hers. The sort he felt all the way down to his balls. “No?” she echoed. “You think you can take me?”

“Only one of us has ever been truly beaten in battle, love, and it’s not me.”

“I have a church organ that proves you wrong.”

He leaned forward, winking. “You let me get better, Slayer. Come back to fight another day.”

“And I’m still standing, so what’s your point?”

“You’re standing,” Spike said, letting his voice drop, “because some tart made a choice. You were dead either way. She beat you, killed you, stripped you of who you were. Then, to add insult to injury, she made you one of us. The fact that you’re *standing* has nothin’ at all to do with you. Tell me, you even look for my dust after droppin’ that organ? Or did you just think you were invincible?”

“Do you have any idea how much I am going to kick your ass?”

“Dunno. Did this one”—he nodded toward Giles—“ever teach you anythin’ meaningful about vampires before you became one?”

“That’s enough,” Rupert said, as though he had any authority on the matter.

Spike ignored him. Didn’t so much as glance in his direction. He only had eyes for Buffy. “You want to know if I think I can take you? Yeah, ducks, I do. You might have the muscle, but that’s *all* you have. I’ve been besting girls stronger than me for more than a century, whereas you were done in by some nobody not even worthy enough to have her name in one of your watcher’s books. Takes more than ego to win a fight.”

Oh, he was asking for it. Begging, actually. And from the look on Buffy’s face, he was going to get it.

“If you two are going to insist on fighting, I will ask you to do it somewhere other than my home,” Giles said, again like he was the one in charge here. Like he took for granted that Buffy would never snap out of whatever mindset these gits had tricked her into, finally realize she was a vampire and sod *politeness* and all that rot, snap the watcher’s neck and start living for herself now that she was dead. “Whatever is happening on or below campus is something that cannot be solved tonight.”

Buffy glared at Spike a moment longer before finally turning her attention to the watcher. "So what should we do?"

"You're seriously askin' him?" Spike demanded.

"For the time being, I would lie low," Giles said, speaking as though Spike wasn't there. "At least until we have more information on this underground laboratory and who might be involved. I will speak with Willow in the morning, see if she can find record of the development of a facility matching the size and scope of the one you described. Once we know more about whatever this is, we can plan accordingly."

God, that all sounded dreadfully dull. Naturally, the Slayer lapped it right up.

"Do you think it's safe to go home?"

Rupert frowned. "Unless they knew your identity somehow, though that seems unlikely. But do be careful."

Buffy nodded, proper little minion getting her marching orders, then turned and seized Spike around the elbow as she started toward the door. "We'll be back tomorrow," she called over her shoulder. "If I haven't just decided to kill him, that is."

Spike snorted but decided, hell, no point in fighting now. Better he wait until out of the range of that crossbow. Even if he doubted the watcher had sharp enough aim, ending up done in by some old bloke who had fired a lucky shot was too sorry an end to the William the Bloody story to risk it. So he let the Slayer drag him out of the flat she'd dragged him into and didn't bother wrenching free until they were on the sidewalk that lined the street, and well out of any surrogate father's line of sight.

Her reaction was immediate, and just what he'd expected, even if her speed was not. Spike had never seen a turned slayer in action before, not really. The sprint from the lab hardly counted as he had been far more focused on not getting caught than watching how she moved, and the crypt didn't count either because that hadn't been the Slayer. That had been pure Buffy, and all the more delicious because of it.

Now, though, he had the Slayer. A fiery, furious slayer looking at him with enough fury to have his cock twitching and his chest going tight, because she was glorious like this. Always had been, sure, but

seeing the monster flash behind her eyes was something else. Enough to give a man chills.

"That gem is mine," she spat, smashing her fist into his nose with enough force his feet left the ground and he went flying, flying, until his back met resistance in the form of a streetlight. The metal of the pole whined and warped, and he dropped to the sidewalk, panting. And she was marching for him, still glorious, still death, and Spike forced himself upright in time to knock her next blow with his forearm, which absorbed the impact but not the pain, and he roared and lashed out a kick that managed to land but didn't do much else.

Maybe he had been a bit quick to run his mouth after all.

Doesn't matter. Nothin' matters. Once I have the gem, she'll—

"It's *mine*." Her fist collided with the side of his head, sending him stumbling back, arms pinwheeling as he struggled to keep his balance. "And if I see you sniffing around those tunnels again, I swear I'll add you to the décor. Seemed pretty dusty down there. You'll blend right in."

Spike popped her in the teeth and watched, gleefully, as she stumbled backward, blinking her surprise. *That's right, baby. Underestimate me. They all bloody do.* "Gotta catch me first, Slayer."

Buffy wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "You think I can't?"

"You don't even know what you're lookin' for."

"Gem. Sounds kinda gemmy. I think I can narrow it down." She was on him in a flash, rearing back a fist that would likely send him on another gravity-defying tour of the watcher's neighborhood when the sound reached his ears and everything else faded.

Must have for her as well, for the next thing he knew, Buffy had shoved him off the sidewalk and into a grouping of bushes. He didn't have time to do much more than right himself before she was on him, pushing him deeper into a sea of green, not taking her time to be gentle. He felt the scratch of tiny thorns skidding along the leather of his duster, and he swore if there was even a single scratch, he'd kill the bitch on principle. The fact that she'd just saved his hide be damned.

For that was exactly what she'd done. A moment later, a crew of four men in army fatigues crept by, same as the ones that had nabbed

them in the tunnel. And despite himself, despite *everything*, Spike went rigid with what could only be called fear. It was one thing to ambush creatures where the creatures lurked, but walking around a residential neighborhood with heavy artillery took confidence usually backed by something more substantial than ego. Whatever was going on in this town, these blokes weren't afraid of being seen by the locals, which made them more than dangerous.

There was some chatter, too. Not much but enough that reached his ears. Words like *hostiles* and *escaped* and *implant* and *prototype*, and reporting back to someone called Walsh. How no one wanted to do that. How failure of this magnitude was likely to come down on them—*court martials if we're lucky*, one said—and how badly none of these blokes wanted to chance that they would be something other than lucky.

They didn't pause at the bushes, thank fuck, nor did they say anything that might indicate they had seen something of note in this *sector*. Still, Spike didn't let himself relax until he could no longer hear them—couldn't smell them at all, which was its own problem—then turned to Buffy, whose eyes were wide and skin paler than he'd ever seen it.

She was so lovely, and so lost.

Hard to keep angry with her under those circumstances.

"Any ideas, Slayer?" he asked. It being a foregone conclusion that wherever she went, he went too. He didn't know when that had been decided but it had. He wasn't about to question it now.

"We get to my house," Buffy replied, her voice shaking. "And we lie low."

"And then?"

"Then tomorrow, we decide if we want to kill each other, or help each other."

"Could always just shag again."

She rolled her eyes but didn't say no, and despite the bloody mess he'd managed to make in what was supposed to have been a simple, straightforward trip to his least-favorite place on earth, he found that rather promising.

MOST DISPUTES DIE AND NO ONE SHOOTS

BUFFY HAD NEVER TRULY APPRECIATED WHAT IT MUST BE LIKE TO BE hunted until this moment, and she had to say, she wasn't a fan. The entire walk-run to her mom's was spent throwing cautious looks over her shoulder, something she suspected would have earned a snide comment or twenty from Spike if he hadn't been busy doing the same.

"Jumpy?" she asked, the question coming out with more bite than was probably necessary.

"Somethin' ain't right with those blokes," Spike muttered, pausing again to make sure they weren't being followed. "Did you notice it?"

"Umm, yeah. Kinda why I shoved you into the bush. Four weirdos about ten years too old to be playing army are a bit hard to miss."

He turned and met her eyes before rolling his own. "Meant the scent, Slayer."

"What scent?"

"Exactly that. Couldn't get a whiff of any of them."

"And your olfactory senses thank you for sparing them whiffs of Old Spice and the BO it can't hide."

"No, you dizzy bint, I meant I *couldn't* smell them at all. Not a creature alive doesn't have some pong to it that a vampire can't pick out.

Those wankers, whoever they are, have worked some sort of mojo to keep from foulin' up the air."

Buffy was on the cusp of asking what the big deal was before her brain chimed in with the answer. And then she felt like a real idiot. Around Spike. Let that be something she took with her to the grave. "They're masking it so they can sneak up on vampires."

"Wager that's not all they're sneakin' up on, but yeah. Finally cottoned on, eh?"

She could have fired back at that insult but she didn't, instead turned and started once again in the direction of home. The larger connotations of everything she'd said at Giles's hadn't really occurred to her while she'd been saying them—if she was right and there was a massive conspiracy happening on campus. If the college itself was nothing more than a front for some kind of fucked up government-funded demon experimentation facility. It didn't really account for why she had been living in town for three years without once stumbling across a battalion in army fatigues while on patrol, but maybe the operation was new. Like, okay Buffy, you attended high school on the mouth of Hell and made it, so let's see what happens when Uncle Sam takes a crack at the Slayer. Only Uncle Sam had been a bit slow on the uptake and she'd gone and died ahead of schedule.

Or, considering that Sunday had been a campus parasite, maybe right on schedule. It was kind of the perfect plan. Lull Buffy into a false sense of security after throwing a Godzilla-sized snake demon at her with what she'd assume to be nothing more than a run-of-the-mill vampire skank and her cronies. After all, who would ever expect that Buffy, defeater of the Master, stopper of the Ascension, killer of her own boyfriend, would be done in by a gang of nobodies?

Not her, that's for sure. Even now.

"So let's hear it," Spike said a moment later.

"Hear what?"

"Still owe me the story on how you got those fangs, love."

Had he been reading her mind? "Why does it matter?"

"You think I don't want a blow-for-blow recount of the fight that stole the Slayer's heartbeat?"

"You're going to just be weird about it." Considering he certainly

hadn't been normal about it with the few scant details he did have. "Not a very exciting story, I'm afraid. There was this guy. I thought he could be a friend—"

Spike snorted, and she balled her hands into fists on instinct.

"I could just *not* tell you, you know," she said.

"Yeah, but you want to."

"Says who?"

"You have many chums who have gone through the change like I have?"

Buffy snapped her mouth shut before she could fire off some inane comment that would do little more than prove his point. She didn't like to think about it, how her friends were on edge with her more often than they were not. How even though Willow tried to smile and act like nothing had changed, she would still ask pointed questions that firmly spelled out how little Buffy was trusted these days. Just take the party the other night—Willow had eventually deigned to go off and leave Buffy to her own devices, but she'd asked. She might claim she'd asked to be respectful of her friend who didn't have a werewolf boyfriend to snuggle up to, but they would both know that was a load of bullshit. Her worry had been for the others at the party, and Buffy's inability to keep her fangs to herself.

Her friends were trying, and that didn't mean nothing, but she could hardly pretend things between them weren't different. Much as she would like.

Which meant they might not be her friends for much longer. Another part of Buffy Summers she'd scrambled to protect, all for nothing because Buffy Summers was room temperature now. In many ways, she figured Xander and Willow had been mourning her since before she'd woken up all fangy. They were just all slow to admit it to her, never mind themselves.

And Giles, too. He might have had his reasons for not staking her on sight, but she wasn't stupid. Regular human Buffy wouldn't have had any trouble getting him to believe her tonight. Probably. She was certain he'd have been way more concerned to learn she'd been abducted and caged. No, Giles would've hit the panic button. Her friends would've been combing the streets and cemeteries to find her.

Maybe even Angel would have been called in, because why not? Buffy the Human Vampire Slayer was their friend. Their leader.

Buffy the Vampire was beginning to feel more like a mascot. Or a *memento mori* with thoughts and feelings.

Maybe she had been fooling herself, thinking any of this could be normal. Maybe they had all been fooling themselves.

"I was feeling off about school," Buffy said grumpily, circling back to Spike's question. Recounting the past was less dicey than contemplating her present. "Just...not knowing my place here. And how everyone else seemed to be all with the gelling. Willow was in her element and Oz—that's her boyfriend—has been doing gigs with his band here for a while so he knew his way around. It just felt like I was the only one struggling. Then I met Eddie, and he was going through the same stuff. Just overwhelmed with the whole campus life and how disorienting it was. I liked him. It was nice not feeling like I was the only one struggling with everything. But then he didn't show up for class and I got worried, so I went to find him, and his stuff was gone except a note saying he couldn't handle it. And everyone just accepted that he'd bailed, and I knew something was wrong. So I went out to find him, and I did."

"And he had fangs."

It was dumb, but even now, the memory made her throat go tight. "He did. I killed him. Then I met the bitch who had turned him. Her and her clique."

"So there was more than one, then?"

"Yeah, there were... I don't remember how many. But they crowded me, and then the next thing I knew, I was waking up at Giles's and my best friends were treating me like a freak."

"Think the word is *monster*."

"You could sound a little less happy about this," Buffy grumbled, rubbing her arms and wishing she'd just kept her mouth shut. A joint escape and a romp in a mausoleum didn't exactly make them best friends. Especially since he was her number one competition for the gem thing.

And *god*, she wanted that bad. Not quite enough to stake Spike right now just to make sure she got it before he did, but definitely

enough that she knew she wouldn't hesitate if he stood between it and her. While there wasn't much she regretted about the way her life had gone these last few weeks, her tenuous relationship with her friends and watcher and everything she knew aside, she did miss the sun. It was way inconvenient scheduling everything around her inability to travel in the daytime.

"Happy?" Spike fired back at her. "Happy you let some deranged bint sink her fangs into you? Always thought you were better than that, Slayer. You were supposed to be the best. Never had a slayer give me the run around like you did. Realizin' you snuffed it and I wasn't the cause?"

"That's all this is to you, then. That you didn't kill me."

"Would've given you a worthy death, is all I'm saying."

"What does that even mean?" she demanded, digging her nails harder into her palms to keep from lashing out. "Worthy because what? Because it's you? Because you're god's gift or something? The Slayer of Slayers?"

"Because it would mean somethin'," he snapped back. "Forget for a second that I hunt out slayers because I want a decent brawl. No fun goin' into fights if you know you're gonna walk out just fine, is there? Huntin' out people because you think you're better than them—I couldn't stand the bastards who did that when I was alive, never mind after I died. It's about provin' something, innit? Provin' that you're the best. That you've earned bein' where you are and had sod all handed to you. I've saved the bloody world with you, known you better than I've known any other slayer, so bein' the one to watch the light go out in your eyes would *mean* something to me. I'd feel it, what it'd cost me to kill you. Knowin' I'd never fight you again after that... Believe me, love, I wanted you dead. But I wanted you dead because I'd finally done it. Earned the right to be the one to take your life. That's why it bothers me."

Well. Buffy didn't know how to respond to that. Except maybe she thought it possible that being a vampire had addled her brain after all, because put in those terms, Spike's view on death—on killing her, specifically—was almost romantic.

Moreover, she realized a second later, he wasn't talking about her

like she was all past tense girl. He was talking to her like she was Buffy. The exasperation in his voice was the same, as was the contempt. The *otherness* she kept getting from her friends was nowhere to be found. Like she hadn't died and been put on a new extremely restricted diet. Like she was the same girl he'd saved the world with; the same girl he'd blackmailed into helping him fend off the remains of his would-be crew after being cornered in a magic shop the year before.

And she liked the way he talked about her. How much it would have meant to be the one to kill her. Almost like he'd miss her after.

Yeah, likely vampire brain being weird.

"Well," she said at length, forcing her voice to work around the sudden lump in her throat, "if it makes you feel any better, I killed the shit out of Sunday. That was, like, the first thing I did. Besides tell my mom that I'm a vampire now."

Spike grunted, the sound noncommittal. Right, because he'd wanted to kill the one who had sired her.

"Actually, that was kind of funny," Buffy went on, thinking back on the way her maker's eyes had gone all wide the second Buffy had dusted the vampire at her right. It hadn't been long—among the other things that she hadn't inherited in the turning, Buffy hadn't been interested in drawing out her revenge. All she'd needed was that look, that grasp of *oh fuck* understanding. The recognition that a mistake had been made, and now Buffy was going to force her to pay up with her dust. "She had this look when she saw me and said... I dunno exactly, something about how I shouldn't expect any special treatment just because I'd been a slayer before. Her minions started all at the same level."

He didn't grunt this time—he snorted, caught her eye and tossed her an incredulous grin that made her insides feel all warm and fuzzy. "Tell me you made it painful."

"I made it quick."

"Pity. We need to work on makin' the most out of takin' down your enemies."

"What, like torture?" She pulled a face. "Not really my thing."

"Of course it's not," he replied, sounding both exasperated and amused. "Really a sorry excuse for a vampire, you know that?"

"And here I could've sworn earlier you said I was 'a bloody brilliant vampire.'"

Spike pulled a face like he had tasted something foul. "Do us a favor, pet, and don't try to do accents."

She rolled her eyes in turn, though she couldn't deny she was a bit hurt he didn't have anything else to add to that. The memory was still super fresh—his blood in her mouth, his cock in her pussy, the stone floor at her back, scratching at the skin as he fucked her across the mausoleum floor. He'd said it then, when she'd bitten him, and right before he'd offered to bite her in turn. It was the second time ever she'd had sex, and it had been explosive. Like *oh, so that's what the fuss is about* kind of explosive. She'd done her best to keep from thinking about it after, because it hadn't been anything to Spike. Just a roll in the sack minus the sack.

She sure knew how to pick them. But then, Spike at least had started and ended the encounter with the same degree of soul. He was even saying he'd stick around to fight these soldiers-slash-scientists, which was good. And confusing.

Granted, there was little in her life that wasn't confusing these days.

"So this gem is why you came back?" Buffy asked a moment later, her voice softer. "What was your plan? Get the gem and then try to kick my ass?"

"Somethin' like that, yeah."

"And you ended up with Harmony?"

He scoffed at that. "Not with the bird. Stumbled upon her one night while I was out lookin' for a pick-me-up. Saw she had a decent pair of tits, and I hadn't had a good shag in quite a while; she thought I was hot 'cause she's got good taste. Took her for a spin, and apart from teaming up with you, that might've been the barmiest idea I've ever had, 'cause I couldn't shake the bitch after."

Buffy wrinkled her nose. Flattering. Nice to know how he viewed his conquests. Of which she could now count herself. Ugh. "So she's not your girlfriend."

"Thought we settled this back at the lab," Spike drawled. "Might've told her a couple o' things to keep her happy, but only 'cause when

she's happy she's keen to suck my prick just the way I like it. That's all."

"And Drusilla? What happened there?"

He whipped to her in a blink, punched out a fist that clocked her in the chin before she even registered anything had changed, and that was all it took to get her fangs' attention. Buffy released a roar as they tore into her mouth, the sound louder than was advisable given the soldiers they'd just seen, and swung back, catching him in a blow that sent him staggering back a few feet across the pavement. No less than he deserved.

"What the hell, Spike?"

"You don't get to do that," he snarled, his eyes flashing yellow. "You don't get to talk to me about her. It's your fault, all of this."

"What is my fault?"

"*Everything*. The reason she left. The reason she *keeps* leaving. I can find her, torture her into that old feelin' for a night or two, and then she buggers off to find herself a new playmate, all because *I taste like ashes*." This last bit he said in what Buffy was certain was supposed to be a Drusilla impression. It certainly didn't sound like Spike's voice, at any rate. "And now here I am, goin' to shack up with the bleeding *Slayer*, of all people. It was supposed to be easy. Find the gem. Find you. Rip your head off and give it to her. Prove that I could. That I was demon enough for her after all. Does it matter to Dru that I've done in two other slayers and the best her precious daddy could do was sniff your knickers? No. Not good enough. *Spike's* never good enough, and it's all your fault." He glared at her for another second, then broke away with a harsh, unforgiving laugh. "Can't even kill you properly now 'cause you had to go get yourself all fanged up by some bloody child, and there's the rub. You let that bitch Sunday kill you instead of me."

God, this again? "Are you ever going to shut up about that?"

"I would've done it right, Slayer. You know I would have."

Buffy didn't know whether to laugh or scream. Screw romantic, this was just annoying. It wasn't her fault he didn't know how to let things go. "You're pathetic," she decided, shaking her head so that her fangs receded. "Your girlfriend breaks up with you and somehow *I'm* the problem. You come here to kill me and I'm already dead and

still, *I'm* the problem. You know what? I think you should give Harmony another shot. Sure, she's not insane the way you like, but you two do seem to have the same number of brain cells. That's a nice foundation for a lasting relationship."

This time when he came at her, she was ready, whirled around to catch his fist with her own, smirking all the while at the cold fury blanketing his face. This button-pushing thing with him was kinda fun. She'd always thought so, granted, but there was a freedom to doing it now. Like this. Knowing it could lead to another fight or another earth-shattering fuck and she didn't know which she preferred. That was definitely one of the highlights of being a vampire—the fact that she no longer felt obligated to maintain certain appearances. Should someone stumble upon her while she was riding Spike's dick, that was their problem. Violence and sex just happened to go hand in hand, and if others didn't get it, tough. It was a vampire thing. A slayer thing, too, come to think of it, but she'd been a little too uptight to admit it then.

There was also the fact that he was just not fast enough or strong enough to keep up with her. Buffy moved with fluidity and grace even she didn't understand. She would grant that Spike was the first of her opponents since being turned that seemed to appreciate that—accepted outright that he was outstripped in strength and speed, and rather than try to push himself beyond his limits, he compensated elsewhere. Dodging left when any other vampire would go right; swinging when others would duck, ducking when others would swing, playing to his strengths rather than trying to improve upon weaknesses he couldn't overcome due to sheer biology. It was the same way he'd fought her before, just modified. She hated that she liked it. And she liked it a lot.

"All right," Buffy said a moment later, rubbing the place where Spike's fist had managed to connect with her jaw. She didn't know if that had been luck or skill, and she liked that, too. "That's enough."

Spike froze, his fists raised. His eyebrows raised too. "It is?"

"Yeah. Do you want to kill me right now?"

He hesitated for a second before relaxing, lowering his arms to his sides. "What's your point, Slayer?"

That was a no. "My point is I'm tired, and I need a shower, and I'd

really like to not be out here longer than we have to be with those army guys wandering around. Yes, there are two of us, and yes, I kick even more ass than I did before, but you know I won't let you bite anyone and they have those shiny weapons that, quite frankly, we don't know anything about. Do you want to chance it?"

"Never backed down from a fight. Dunno why you think I'd aim to start now."

"It's not backing down, you idiot, it's being smart. The opposite of that thing you usually do before I hand your ass to you because you were too impatient or drunk or both to see anything through."

"That what you think, Slayer?"

Actually, she wasn't sure anymore, but there was no way in hell she was going to admit that. The point stood that whatever they were doing, she didn't want to do it here. "Does it matter?"

Spike seemed to consider this before ultimately shaking his head. "Suppose not."

"Then we're agreed that standing out in the open and fighting is probably the dumbest thing we can do under the circumstances."

He hesitated a moment longer, then nodded and motioned to the road ahead. The one they had been traveling down just fine until he'd decided to start swinging. Honestly, how this guy had made it to the dawn of the twenty-first century, she would never know.

"Right then," he said magnanimously as though her very reasonable suggestion had been his idea. "After you."



WHEN BUFFY HAD FIRST COME home from that summer spent in Los Angeles, her mom had made a point of trying to stay up late enough to welcome her home after every night's patrol. All a part of getting used to the idea that Buffy intentionally sought out danger when she left the house—that thing all daughters everywhere were told to avoid at all costs. And also, maybe, a teensy bit had been allocated to worrying that maybe Buffy would just take off again...at least at first. There had been that incident at her welcome home party, and Mom had been extra jumpy about her absences for a few days following.

The fact that her mom wasn't jumpy anymore was another thing on the big list of reality checks Buffy was happy to ignore. On most days, at least. She wasn't sure if Joyce's cessation of her late-night vigils had to do with the fact that she was a vampire and could take care of herself even more than she had before, because some part of her just believed her daughter was dead, or some combination of the two. That was where the ignoring came in. Just a facsimile of normal with no chance of mistaking it for the real thing.

Tonight, Joyce was in the living room folding laundry when Buffy cracked open the front door and slipped through. She felt rather than saw her mother tense, as she was wont to do these days. Not dramatically and not every time, but there was no ignoring the stiffness in Joyce's shoulders when Buffy stepped into the hall or the slight pickup of her heart. But Buffy didn't mention it and she figured she never would. It would just make things worse.

"Hi, sweetie," her mom said with that overly cheery bravado. "You haven't been home in a couple of nights. I was starting to get worried."

Had it been that long? Giles hadn't mentioned it. Hadn't betrayed any concern or relief that his slayer had shown up unharmed after a brief disappearance. Maybe he'd thought she'd gotten herself dusted. Or, even better, he'd wondered if she'd finally snapped and caved to those carnal cravings that appealed to her instincts but not her sensibilities. Maybe he hadn't cared.

Joy. Even more blows for the ego.

"I ran into some trouble, but it was nothing I couldn't handle," she explained, then looked over her shoulder, expecting to see Spike at her back, but the doofus was still at the front porch. She narrowed her eyes, traipsed back to the door, and threw it open wide. "What are you doing?"

Spike blinked at her. "What?"

"Do you plan to sleep out here? The porch isn't sunproof."

"Just wagered you'd need to get the lady of the house to invite me in, is all."

That caught her off guard. Buffy frowned and glanced back toward the living room. Her mother was now standing nearer the doorway, her

arms crossed and her expression troubled. "Did you have Willow do a disin-vite spell on Spike?" she asked bluntly.

Incredibly, Joyce relaxed. "Spike's here?"

"Yeah, and he's being weird about coming inside. We haven't disin-vited him, have we?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Oh." More blinking from Spike, though the confusion quickly melted into a smirk. "Even after last time? Thought you had better sense than that."

"Last time all you did was drink hot chocolate and whine about Drusilla," Buffy replied dryly. "Didn't exactly scream major threat."

"Right. That's why you rushed over here so fast."

"Kicked your ass, didn't I?"

He scoffed and, at last, deigned to enter the house proper, looking nothing as he had the first time she'd seen him cross that threshold. It had been such a gamble then, trusting that the bad guy wasn't trying to scam her into an easy kill. Leaving him alone with her mother while she made phone calls and updated the gang on her plans for world savage. Afterward, she'd looked back on the choices she'd made in complete bewilderment, knowing they had been the right calls but even still, hefty gambles for someone who hadn't lost everything but almost. Then, yes, hearing his voice over the phone last year, knowing he was alone with her mother, had resulted in a cross-town sprint, fueled by a mixture of anger and terror of what she might find when she got home.

All she'd found were dirty dishes and an empty bag of little marshmallows. And from her mom's account of the visit pre-Angel interruption, Spike hadn't so much as flashed any fang. They'd been talking like old friends. If he'd wanted to kill Joyce, he'd had all the opportunity in the world.

So, yeah, disin-viting Spike had pretty much slipped off Buffy's radar after that. Maybe not the smartest move, but something had told her she could trust Spike not to go after her mother.

"So," Joyce said now, sounding a bit cheerier than she had a moment ago, and wasn't that just typical. Vampire daughter gets tiptoed around even though she's been the model undead citizen ever

since turning while actual bona fide killer gets the red-carpet treatment. "What brings you to town, Spike?"

An easy smile stretched across Spike's oh-so-punchable face. Of course, he'd eat this up. "Little of this, little of that," he replied. "Like the Slayer said, we ran into a spot of trouble. But no worries. I was there to keep her head above water."

"Excuse me, what?" Buffy demanded.

"Don't recall you bein' the one who sussed out how to trick the guards. Would still be in there rotting if I hadn't used my noggin."

"Oh please, I so would have—"

"Whatever the case, it sounds like thanks are indeed in order," Joyce said before Buffy could start inventing ways she would have totally rescued herself from the lab. "Spike, you'll find some blood in the refrigerator. I go to the butcher twice a week to make sure our supply is fresh, but there might not be enough in there right now for both of you to have more than half a serving."

Spike beamed in response. "Thanks ever so, Joyce. Spot of blood is just what—"

"You already ate," Buffy ground out through her teeth.

"A little top off never hurt anyone."

"We won't have any for tomorrow."

"I'll run to the butcher before I open the gallery," her mother replied, already moving toward the kitchen as though Spike was too good to make his own helping of blood. "I was planning on it, anyway, if you came back tonight. I figured it wouldn't be enough for, ah, a growing vampire such as yourself."

Buffy waited until her mother had disappeared from view before stomping hard on Spike's foot. Not that it helped. He was still snickering when she made to follow a second later.

Honestly, if he didn't stop enjoying himself so much, she was going to have to stake him regardless.

"Do you have somewhere to stay while you're in town?" Joyce asked the second Spike stepped into the kitchen. "Do vampires get hotels, that sort of thing?"

"Been known to stay in a luxury suite or two," Spike replied evasively, strolling up to the island and grabbing one of the barstools

Joyce had situated there. The barstools themselves had a cyclical life-cycle in the kitchen—sometimes there, sometimes not. Buffy guessed this morning had been a bit more relaxed, absent one bloodsucking fiend in the house, and her mother had decided to not rush out into the sunlight but enjoy a leisurely breakfast while reading the morning paper.

“Spike needs to stay here tonight,” Buffy said in a rush, more to get herself to stop thinking about things she couldn’t change. “Just tonight until we get a couple of things sorted out. I’ll keep an eye on him—make sure he doesn’t get up to anything.”

Joyce had busied herself with a couple of mugs from the cupboard and didn’t respond until the microwave had dinged and the remaining blood had been poured. She also didn’t make eye contact as she slid the mugs across the island, rather jumped as though burned the second she released them then walked back until her butt met the sink.

“We never had this talk, did we?” Joyce said, rubbing her arms and forcing another smile that fooled no one.

“What talk?”

“The ‘is it okay for you to have your boyfriends stay the night’ talk.” The smile grew more strained. “I guess I always thought by the time that happened, it would be under a roof that wasn’t mine.”

Spike smirked and raised his mug to his lips. “Cheers, Joyce.”

“Spike is so *not* my boyfriend,” Buffy said, though even to her ears she sounded a little too defensive for someone who had been riding his tongue earlier. She decided not to hazard a look in his direction lest he do something to give away said tongue riding, but it wasn’t like she was wrong, either. Spike was *not* her boyfriend, and considering he planned on killing her to appease his ex, she didn’t see that changing anytime soon.

Which was almost a shame. Take away the wackiness of the past couple of days, and she’d actually had a decent time with him. Even with the penchant for random violence in the middle of otherwise normal conversations. Bantering with Spike, throwing punches, and then throwing each other against sturdy surfaces felt natural to her in ways she had to assume were not human normal. She couldn’t imagine

the Buffy she'd been before taking everything even halfway as well as she was.

But then it wasn't as though the Buffy she'd been before hadn't also found slaying to be a bit motor-revving. She just hadn't wanted to admit it.

"Well, whatever he is," her mother was saying when she clued back into the conversation, "I would appreciate some warning before you have overnight guests. Particularly other vampires."

"Believe me, I wouldn't let other vampires into this house." Also she didn't think she could. How would the invitation thing work now? Or did it not work at all since vampires didn't need permission from other vampires before entering a premises? Would her living at home put her mother at risk? That was a question for Giles—and tomorrow. Buffy didn't want Joyce to start thinking thoughts like, *I should kick my daughter out of the house* before she had the whole army guys/science lab thing figured out. One crisis at a time, please and thank you.

"Just for tonight," Joyce said, sounding for all the world like she was making a huge sacrifice. "And I expect blood-free dishes in the sink when I come downstairs tomorrow."

Buffy plastered on a smile and gave a salute that probably didn't earn her any points, but it did make Spike chuckle into his mug, and was therefore worth it.

"Guess we'll figure out somethin' else for tomorrow, then," Spike told her once her mother had wandered back to finish folding the laundry. "Unless you reckon your crack team can solve the case and have the baddies all bagged in twenty-four hours."

"The baddies in this case being the probably very human people running that facility." Buffy looked away quickly, knowing her poker face was crap and not wanting to broadcast doubts she wasn't sure she felt in earnest. Or hey, maybe she was sure she felt. It wasn't like any of the world she lived in right now was easy to navigate. "You know this isn't your problem, right? You can take off anytime you like."

"Still got me that gem to find."

"Yes, I will appreciate the help in looking for *my* gem."

"Just try it, Slayer."

She grinned but didn't meet his gaze. "Point is, this fight isn't one

you need to make if you don't want to. I can't imagine what's in it for you."

"Bout the same that's in it for you, I'd wager."

"What does that mean?" Now she did look at him, her brow furrowing.

"Not exactly tied to the place, are you?" Spike retorted with a one-shouldered shrug. "Got your mates and your watcher and all else, but are you tellin' me this is what you aim to do with bloody eternity on your hands? Stand guard over the sodding hellmouth? Sounds dull, love. Life's meant to be lived."

"I'm not alive."

"Then this is the perfect time to get to it, now isn't it?"

Well, there was a thought, and one she wasn't sure what to do with. For some reason, it hadn't occurred to her at all that she could just leave Sunnydale at any time she liked. That, as Spike had so astutely observed, there was nothing tying her here. Nothing that seemed to want her tied here, anyway. There was the dancing around her friends she'd been doing the last few weeks, the increasingly strained relationship she had with her mother. No more school for the time being, and what exactly would she be studying for? The job she would never have? Whatever money she managed to make wouldn't be at a place where she filled out a W-2 and got things like paid dental. She would just exist and continue to exist the way Spike and Angel and so many other vampires had. Hopping from place to place, not beholden to anything or anyone. No one to miss her if she didn't come home. Hell, at the rate she was going, people would be more disappointed if she did.

Maybe it was dumb, but for the first time since she'd been turned, Buffy realized just how alone she was. She'd been going through everything like it was a joke—enjoying her new strength on patrol, even if not much posed enough of a challenge to get her blood even metaphorically pumping. Telling Angel off for being a sanctimonious something-or-other. Tagging along with Willow whenever she could as though she were just another girl on campus, except she wasn't a girl on campus. She was a dead girl. A vampire. She wasn't even the Slayer anymore—not where it counted. She had become the thing the Slayer hunted.

"I need a shower," she announced abruptly.

Spike nodded and threw back the rest of his blood. "Mmm. Don't mind if I do. Where is it, upstairs?"

Buffy narrowed her eyes at him. "I said *I* need a shower."

"Yeah. And I'm here to help you scrub those hard-to-reach places."

"If you think I'm getting in the shower with you, you're crazy."

He snickered, shaking his head. "Choosin' now to get all dainty on me? Nothin' I haven't seen or licked or been inside before."

Buffy set her mug down so hard the base shattered against the counter. "Are you insane?" she hissed, then realized she was bleeding and cursed, rounded the island to run some water over her hand. "You heard what my mother said—no boyfriends in the house."

"Mhmm," Spike murmured. She didn't realize he had followed her until he snatched the hand she'd cut and pulled on it to tug her away from the sink. It was like something out of the movies—the old ones with the dance numbers. Effortless. Seamless. And then she was standing there, watching as he lifted her bleeding skin to his mouth. As his tongue curled out from between his lips and started lapping up the beads of red. Both soothing and...the opposite of soothing. Making her legs, which had no trouble standing up on their own, go a little wobbly in the knee area. Making her clench muscles that she'd only rediscovered that evening—muscles that liked to clench around something else.

"Good thing I'm not a boyfriend," he said, holding her gaze. "Wouldn't want to break the rules, now would we?"

Buffy forced herself to swallow. "You can't get in the shower with me."

"Pity."

"It's too obvious. She'll notice."

"And she'll ground you, I expect? You're a vampire."

"It's my *mother*. Plus, there's a door right from her room into the bathroom so, double no."

Spike sighed as though she were being unreasonable but didn't push the issue. And of course, now that he was cooperating, she wished he wouldn't. Something told her he could talk her into being bad—it wasn't like she had much other than habit and respect for Joyce to pin

her down. And as far as *bad* went, she figured if the worst she did was screw a vampire just because she wanted to, she was still pretty low on the evil scale.

Perhaps some of her thoughts were reflected on her face, for the next beat, Spike arched an eyebrow and edged closer. “Nothin’ wrong with enjoying each other,” he murmured into her ear. “Doesn’t have to mean anything.”

“You’re going to try to kill me,” she reminded him.

He grinned. “Well, yeah. And you’re gonna try to kill me. That’s the way it goes, right?”

“Spike, if I try to kill you, I’ll kill you. You don’t want to see me in action these days.”

“Believe me, baby,” he replied, and dragged his tongue across his teeth, his eyes doing that romance hero thing again and *sparking*, “there’s nothin’ I want to see more.”



THERE WAS one thing about sex that Buffy had definitely not learned from Angel, and that was it could be fun.

Like a lot of fun.

True to her word, she had entered the shower alone, though she’d halfway hoped, halfway expected Spike to join her the second the spray started to run. He hadn’t, however, and she’d tried to ignore her disappointment and focus instead on sudsing up and getting squeaky clean. God knows she’d needed it.

She hadn’t bothered with much modesty in returning to her room, though it hadn’t done any good. Spike hadn’t seemed all that interested in her near nakedness—his eyes hadn’t even twitched her way when she’d dropped the towel and paraded around her room modeling nothing but the bare skin of Buffy. Instead, he’d shucked his shirt like it was nothing, said it was his turn, then disappeared into the hall for his own go at the shower.

And Buffy had sunk onto her bed, feeling foolish and a little unsexy, but thought, maybe, it was a good thing Spike hadn’t jumped her bones. This was, as she’d said, her mother’s house, and her mom, while

iffy on the whole *vampire* thing would definitely have thoughts about her daughter having sex. Probably loud sex, too, if the time in the crypt was anything to judge by.

As luck would have it, Joyce had traipsed up the stairs just a moment or so after Spike started running the shower. Buffy had listened to her footsteps, could practically see her standing there in the hallway. Looking at the closed bathroom door and wondering. Then not wondering anymore, determined. Hard, momish strides toward Buffy's closed bedroom door that she'd thrown open with a flourish.

"Oh," she'd said. Buffy had been turning down the covers—dressed, thankfully, in a nightshirt she'd grabbed from her dresser. "I thought you might... Well."

"You really think I'm going to fuck my mortal enemy in the shower when my mom's downstairs?"

Joyce had colored but hadn't blanched. "Language."

"Mom, I have fangs. I think I can use the word *fuck* if I want."

"Not while you're under this roof," she'd replied, though her heart clearly hadn't been in it. She'd been scrambling for a thing to say—anything to unawkward the awkward she'd made by storming in here in the first place.

That really might have been it. Buffy could have rolled her eyes before closing them, tucked in under the blankets, even though it was way early in vampire hours, and feigned sleep when Spike came back into the room a few minutes later, wearing nothing but a low-slung towel around his hips.

But that hadn't been it, for Buffy hadn't feigned sleep. Instead, she'd met his eyes and made a decision.

And that was how she'd learned sex could be fun.

Not that it hadn't been fun earlier—it had. But it had also been spontaneous and shocking and she'd lunged just as much as he had, but she'd been in the moment too much to really call it a conscious decision. This decision was different. It was looking at Spike and deciding she wanted to experience that again, even if they did try to kill each other tomorrow or in the however-distant future. She hadn't lived much before she'd died, so now was a good time to start.

She was riding him when it happened, watching him watch her as

she learned how to listen to her body. Rock her hips like this, roll them like that, and her hands had been on his chest—his on her ass, helping her move along his cock in deep strokes—when she'd met his eyes and said, "I mean it, Spike. That gem is mine."

The change was instant. The hot, stormy look in his eyes flashed to rage, and he followed suit. Fangs descending, a guttural roar tearing through his throat, and then she was on her back and he was above her, pounding into her in hard, bruising strokes that had the headboard beating against the wall in rhythm, her bedsprings whining in complaint, and Spike snarling into her throat just how much he was going to enjoy killing her when the time came. How he would savor it. Make her beg for it. How it would be the best death she'd ever experienced because he was the one giving it to her, and that meant it would also be the one to last.

He hadn't needed to finger her clit or sink his fangs into her neck. She came screaming on his hate alone.

HIT ON THE HEAD WITH A FRYING PAN

SO THIS WAS WHAT IT WAS LIKE WHEN YOU HAD SEX WITH A GUY and he didn't run the first chance he got.

It was...nice.

Actually, really nice. And look at that, Spike was a cuddler.

Buffy was on her side, using his arm as a pillow, her own stretched out alongside it. Spike was at her back, pressed up all very snuggly, his other arm draped over her hip in a way that was almost possessive. Like he was worried she'd sneak off or try to insist on some space between them. Their legs were tangled together too, so they had become some amorphous blob that wasn't Buffy and wasn't Spike but some combination thereof. *Bike*—no, that sounded weird. *Spuffy* was much better.

The thought made Buffy do something she'd never once dreamed of doing the morning after sex.

She giggled.

As though in answer, Spike grunted. Smacked his lips together, slid his arm up a bit so it was around her middle and pulled her a bit closer, then stilled once more.

And it hit her what else this was. Weird.

It was day and she was waking up in her bed that she had shared

with *Spike*. Spike had been in her room, inside of her, doing things to her that she'd never done in this room. And god, maybe she was a little evil after all because the thought of how awkward the previous night had probably been for her mother had Buffy trying not to laugh harder rather than die of shame.

So yes with the weird, but it felt good, and that had to count for something too, didn't it? That for the first time since she'd become a vampire, she'd had something close to fun? Hell, strike the whole *before becoming a vampire* bit, because fun and Buffy were two principles that so rarely went together she could hardly remember the last bit of her life that she'd actually enjoyed. Maybe those few stolen hours with Faith last year before the whole thing with Allan Finch, and how much did it suck that it had taken dying for Buffy to truly understand the lesson she'd missed then?

Spike was a lot like Faith, in that regard, only somehow without the burning resentment that had consumed all the goodwill between them. With Faith, as with Kendra before her, there had always been a measure of competition, something Faith herself had taken to what Buffy now saw as the natural conclusion. God, if Faith ever woke up from that coma, she would probably just end up in another one from laughing so hard.

But even for as much as life had changed since then—as much as Buffy had changed—she couldn't imagine herself having nearly as much fun with Faith as she had with Spike the past day. That competition, that need to one-up each other, would still be there, but not in a way that she found exciting. Spike was all about keeping her on her toes, but as he'd made very clear in his super-weird Spike way, it was out of respect rather than competition. It was wanting her to be the best. The better she was, the more of a challenge it was for him. And yeah, he might have it in his mind that he was going to take her out with the gem, but as he'd said, it would still mean something to him—and that, strangely enough, meant something to her.

It was almost a shame that he would either force her to kill him or take off again. Spike was the only person in her life still treating her like Buffy, no caveats, and she liked that. A lot.

Too much.

Buffy sighed, winced, then slowly started to extricate herself from Spike's arms. Not an easy task, as he was very grabby in his sleep, but she managed to slide to her feet without much fuss. Though she would have liked to have lounged the day away in bed and experience even more awesome sex, it seemed safer to maintain distance. She might not have a soul but she did have a heart, and even though she knew she and Spike would never be more than they were right now, that didn't mean the rest of her would get the memo. Yeah, they were fighting, and he was driving her crazy with his weird fixation on how she'd been turned in the first place, but it was all *normal*. The closest thing to her normal that she'd been since that night on campus where her life—and death—had changed.

Better to get him gone before she started thinking things she couldn't think.

Buffy inched around her room, mindful of the places where the floor creaked, and went about collecting clothes as quietly as she could manage. Though from the way he didn't budge after she collided with her dresser, she needn't have worried about disturbing him. Spike didn't so much as grunt, rather remained where she'd left him, somewhat face-planted against the mattress in the absence of anyone to cuddle around. She watched for a second to see if he was faking, then snorted and dropped the stealth act.

And her mother thought *she* slept like the dead.

Buffy pulled on a sleek pair of black pants that were new enough that the fabric was a little stiff and recognized them as one of the pieces she'd bought during that last shopping excursion she'd taken before college started. Back when her most pressing concern had been preparing all the outfits she'd debut that semester while trying to figure out who post-Angel Buffy was and maybe tackle that moving-on thing that she'd heard so much about. Guess she'd never gotten around to wearing them before the whole dead thing. Oh well. They slid on just fine, and though her mirror was all kinds of useless these days, she was confident it paired well with that flowy red blouse, except by the time she had it all on, she realized she'd dressed in Spike's primary colors, which was not the statement she was going for—but hey, maybe that was a vampire thing, too. She had noticed a definite drop in her

appreciation for bright designs and flower patterns. More just a reminder of the sun she didn't get to see anymore.

Until she got her hands on the gem, at least, though that was a concern for later. Maybe later today if she was lucky. Now that she knew it existed—or that Spike believed it existed—she was kinda eager to get back to the tunnel to lay claim to it before anyone else. Leaving the space half-excavated made the findings seem a bit vulnerable, even if she was reasonably sure it'd take someone knowing the dig was there to stumble upon them.

Once dressed, Buffy threw the sleeping vampire in her bed a last look, allowing herself a moment to appreciate his beauty—'cause damn, he was beautiful—before slipping into the hallway. The house was already bustling with the sounds of life so she knew she'd find her mother busy downstairs, likely doing her best to try to feign nonchalance in the event her dead daughter walked into the kitchen sporting a fresh hickey. Which—Buffy delicately stroked the mark Spike had left on her neck the night before—was something of an understatement.

In a weird way, though, part of her was looking forward to the impending fight. To again seeing the version of her mother who had so boldly entered her room the night before, certain that she would find Buffy doing very grown-up things with a man she'd made clear was not her boyfriend. That had been almost vintage Joyce Summers, the way she'd acted when she'd had a daughter with a pulse.

Buffy pressed her lips together and swung around the staircase to head to the kitchen and the scent of freshly brewed coffee. Her mother was seated at the island again, her attention fixed on the morning paper, though she didn't seem to be reading it. Or if she had been, she stopped once Buffy entered the room.

And for a long stretch, Buffy thought that might be it. No confrontation after all. No follow-through on the mom-ish comments of the night before. It would certainly be the path of least resistance, but dammit, she wanted the fight. She wanted Joyce to care, to worry, to treat her like she was still her daughter and not just the thing that had hollowed her out. She wanted all the effort she was making to matter—to her friends and her family and the people she had vowed to

keep in her life despite everything that had changed. She *didn't* want Spike to be the only person who treated her like *her*.

She didn't know how much longer she could keep this up without losing her head and screaming. Especially now that she saw it—all the allowances she'd made for others that they hadn't made for her. The friends who were distant and the watcher who didn't trust her and the mom who acted like she was her daughter only when the mood struck. The charade of existence she'd been putting on thinking it mattered when it clearly didn't.

Then her mother cleared her throat. "I thought we had an agreement that you would not have sex while under my roof."

Buffy swung her head up from where she had been studying the flow of coffee from the pot to the mug she was fixing herself. "Did we?" she asked, trying to tamp down on her growing excitement, lest she get her hopes up. "I guess I changed my mind."

"I noticed." Joyce, on the other hand, did not sound excited or amused. She sounded terse, almost mom-like. Almost. "I found it hard to sleep last night with all the noise you two made."

"Sorry. I really meant to keep my hands to myself, but then he walked in wearing a towel and, well..."

At last, her mother lifted her head, revealing the deep circles under her eyes that not even the best concealer in the world had a chance of actually masking. "This isn't working for me," she said flatly, distinctly *not* mom-like. More businesslike. Joyce-like, and Buffy's excitement died at once. "I'm sorry, but it's not."

"What's not?"

"I thought I could do this. I thought I could..." Joyce trailed off, looked down at her paper, but up again almost immediately. "Ever since I found out about vampires and slayers, and learned really what it meant, I thought good. *Good*. Maybe if something happened to my daughter, I wouldn't really lose her. Even knowing it wouldn't be the same, it would still be better than never seeing her."

Buffy's throat tightened. "Why are you talking about me like I'm not here?"

"Because I can't pretend anymore."

"Pretend *what*?"

"That nothing has changed. That you *aren't* dead. That everything is the same and all that's different now is you can't go out while the sun is out. You know I slept better the night you were gone than I have any night since you moved back into the house?" Joyce sniffed and wiped at her cheeks. "I didn't know where you were or if you were even coming home and... I know I said I was worried, but I wasn't. I wanted to be, tried to be. But the truth is I was relieved. One night I might not have to listen for sounds in the hallway. Except even that was stupid, wasn't it? It wasn't like you couldn't come home later and *then* rip my throat out—"

"Mom, I would never—"

"No, *Buffy* would never. Buffy would never bring a vampire into my house and then keep me up half the night listening to them fuck."

The words were a stake to the heart. Combined with the look her mother was giving her, like she was someone else, and the sudden crush of all the horrible unsaid things punched her into the metaphoric ground. The thoughts and worries that haunted her, that she'd been trying to convince herself were out of proportion with reality, pretending, as she had been, that everything was all right or could be with enough time. Trying so hard to be Buffy Summers while knowing that fundamentally, she could never be that Buffy again. Hoping the new Buffy was at least a passable version of the one that had come before, for as twisted as it was, she wanted to be. She wanted to be the exception, the asterisk in the Watchers' Diaries; she wanted to be Buffy, just room temperature now. Someone who didn't have to give up anything in order to have everything, because what had her life been if not just an end parade of being forced to give up the parts of her she wanted desperately to keep?

But she couldn't deny that Joyce had a point. In no world would Buffy Summers, human, ever bring home a vampire and then proceed to fuck that vampire silly with her mother just feet away down the hall. She wouldn't have brought home a vampire period, not even Angel who had slept in her room once, because she'd known how Joyce would react. Adult or not. These were things simply not done and for damn good reason. Reason Buffy the Vampire had ignored in favor of what she'd wanted, giving little thought and even less care to what her

mother might think. How it would feel to listen to the show she knew she and Spike had put on the night before.

"You want me to move out?" Buffy asked once she found her voice. It was so unfair that her heart could break when it didn't even beat, but the pain in her chest was too familiar to pass off as anything else. "I'm trying, Mom. I haven't... I haven't been evil. I haven't hurt anyone. I stopped Spike from hurting people just yesterday because I know it's wrong."

"You might know it's wrong but you don't care that it's wrong."

Buffy blinked at her, trying desperately to see what the difference was and coming up empty. What did it matter what she cared about so long as she knew what not to do? As long as she stuck by the rules?

"It's better for both of us if you leave," Joyce said a moment later. "Find somewhere suitable for a vampire. And I'll keep buying you blood. I don't want to be the reason anyone loses their neck."

"Mom!"

"But I *can't* keep pretending that I didn't lose everything the night you died. That my daughter isn't dead. Holding onto you is going to end up killing me."

"Where will I go?"

"I don't know," Joyce said with a sigh, running her fingers along her brow. To her credit, she didn't look like this decision had been an easy one, but Buffy was all out of credit. Hard to be gracious when you're being kicked out of your home. "I'll pay for a hotel, too. Just until you find a place."

"You can afford that?"

"Not indefinitely but I can for a couple of weeks." She lowered her hand and drew in another breath. "Maybe Spike can help. You know, being a vampire, he might have an idea of what sort of place makes sense for you. I just can't have you here anymore."

The backs of Buffy's eyes stung, and she somehow found a way to nod, stagger back a couple of steps on legs that were suddenly not all that reliable. At once, she seemed torn in a thousand different directions. Wanting to lash out, smash things, scream and yell, wanting to fall to her knees and beg, promise to be better. Wanting to rage and roar and tear heads from necks, feed the burning that had taken resi-

dence in her chest with the bloodshed it demanded. And that was the problem, right? That the bloodshed was there at all. That she felt it, that she leaned into it, that the monster that lived under the skin of Buffy Summers felt some measure of peace at the thought.

Buffy didn't register that she'd left the kitchen until she was almost all the way back to the staircase. She paused and swallowed, glanced up toward the landing, hoping for...well, she didn't know what. Only a few minutes had passed since she'd come down here at all, yet that had been enough for her entire life to change again. It had happened so fast—fast enough that she almost thought it had been a mistake. Like maybe if she'd said something differently upon seeing her mother's face, been a bit more apologetic about having so brazenly defied house rules, the whole trajectory of the conversation would have been different.

It was easy to fall into anger, the inner monster purring as her mood shifted, filling her with energy and purpose. She took the stairs two at a time in her hurry back to her room, and by the time she burst back through the door, her temper had reached meltdown levels of destruction. It'd be a miracle if Spike ever saw anything outside these four walls again.

The fact that she caught him stretching in drowsy, catlike repose, his hair all pleasantly ruffled and a grin on his face, didn't help.

"There you are," he said, dropping his arms, his voice all lazy seduction, and god how she hated him. "Was wonderin' where you'd popped off to. Testin' out your legs? They still workin' after last night?"

"Shut up."

Spike raised his head with interest but the doozy, morning-after expression didn't go anywhere. "Someone woke up on the wrong side of the coffin."

"I said *shut up*." Buffy glanced around her room, unable to take more of Spike playing like this was anything other than what it was. She spied her travel bag in the corner—the same one she'd filled up a year and a half ago after killing Angel—and felt something awful twist her insides. Remembering how her mother had looked at her when she'd shown back up on the front porch. How her hand had shaken as she'd written the note that was supposed to have explained everything

but she knew had explained nothing. Then to the room with all her stuff—the stuff she'd have to move somewhere else.

When she'd left before, she'd known, deep down, that her stay away from Sunnydale would be temporary. There hadn't been a need to pack up everything, just what she had to have to get by. She would always come home.

"Slayer," Spike said, and when she looked back, he was sitting up, resting his forearms on his knees, bare-chested with the sheet pooled around his waist. She could see where she'd dug her nails into his flesh the night before, and the bite marks. The one above his right nipple, the long scratch trailing from his pec to his collarbone. She could also see the dent in the wall behind the bed frame that had made her laugh just a few hours ago, saw the way the bed frame itself bowed where it shouldn't bow.

She'd done that. Moreover, he'd let her do that.

"You got me kicked out of my house," she said, surprised when her voice came out measured.

Spike blinked and straightened one of his legs. "I did what now?"

"My mom. She heard us."

"Would've been a sodding miracle if she hadn't."

"No, you're not listening to me. She heard us and she's kicking me out." Buffy pinned him with a glare, upset and rage cresting toward the surface. "I don't have a *home* anymore, Spike."

He studied her for a moment, just pissing her off more with his confusion before the lightbulb seemed to go off behind his eyes, which he then proceeded to roll and piss her off even more. "And this is my fault, is it?" he retorted, kicking his legs over the side of the bed. The blanket fell away completely, revealing the rest of him. All that toned muscle and ridiculously impressive cock that looked too big even when not at attention. "You forgettin' who jumped on who last night?"

"Like that wasn't your plan. You kept talking about fucking in the shower or...or...that we could just screw and it'd be okay."

"And you're the one who decided to take me up on it. Didn't exactly have to twist your arm, did I?"

He was right and she knew it and she hated him even more for being right. For this being her fault. "Well, my mom's decided I'm not

Buffy after all because *Buffy* wouldn't have made her feel the way she did last night, listening to all the racket we made. And since I'm not Buffy, there's no need for me to stay in this house anymore. So thanks, Spike. I'm homeless now."

"Bit dramatic, too."

"Do you have any idea—"

"Oh, bloody spare me the hysterics," Spike spat, some fire flaring at last. And good. *Good*. She wanted him angry. *Needed* him angry because if he was angry, that meant she could focus her rage on him. Make him the problem instead of her, and he needed to be the problem because the other option was *not* an option.

Her mom didn't want her here anymore. Her mom didn't believe she was Buffy. All the trying she'd done, all the effort she'd put into being Buffy, and the person who was supposed to love Buffy unconditionally was throwing her out of the house because Buffy Summers was dead. God, had she been fooling herself this entire time? Was that the problem? Not Willow and her false cheer or Xander and the way he always found a reason to leave whenever she was around or Giles who had believed in her enough to let her wake up, to continue living, but not last night after she'd escaped a thing that should have had all the Scoobies at Defcon One. Buffy might be Buffy in name but she wasn't Buffy where it counted, and everyone had seen it except her.

But god, she felt like Buffy. Just without a reliable filter. Or the shame that used to push down on her with as much force as gravity itself, keeping her pinned to the ground or lower in how she felt about herself. The many failures of Buffy Summers, her heartbreak and her loneliness, and her near-mad desperation to follow Angel's parting advice to the letter. Find someone normal. Find someone who could help *her* be normal as much as possible. Someone who would make her feel like she belonged in the world she was killing herself to protect. Realizing the impossibility of regular-person normal after waking up as a vampire had been transformative. Understanding that she had the ability to say yes to things she wanted and no to things she didn't—that things like sex were only life-and-death if she made them life-and-death... All of these thoughts and revelations had felt like Buffy thoughts and revelations. Things she would

have eventually realized on her own had she not had the shorthand of dying yet again.

Except maybe that had been a lie, too. A comforting lie she'd told herself simply because she'd wanted to believe it.

After a moment, Buffy realized Spike was still talking. No, not talking. Ranting. At her. About her. How she was so intent on sucking the joy out of everything it was a *sodding marvel* that she hadn't just sprinted head-first into the sun the second she'd gotten a chance. No one had ever worked harder at being miserable than she had. What a bloody travesty of a life, dedicated to following the rules set by people who didn't understand her or him or their kind and punishing herself whenever she relaxed enough to have a little fun. How he pitied her and anyone who had to be around her, listen to her bemoan an existence that was supposed to set her free. But no, Buffy Summers just had to bollix up everything she touched in life and death alike.

"Shut up," Buffy said softly, and was surprised when Spike didn't barrel right over the words in his tirade but, in fact, stopped and aimed a glare.

"Or what?" he demanded, pressing forward on the balls of his feet. Something moved out of her peripheral, and when she glanced down, she saw his cock was no longer at ease. It was hard and thick and veiny, straining toward her like a dare. And despite herself, a thrill ran down her spine and her chest tightened with the breath she wanted to take but didn't. Couldn't. Not without it hurting.

Spike got all hot and bothered just by yelling at her. That shouldn't turn her on but hey, her life was just one *shouldn't* after another. What difference did one more make?

"Or I'll save myself the trouble of killing you later and get it over with now."

He smirked, ran his tongue over his teeth. "Like hell."

"What?"

"Seems to me I'm the only one you've got left. Your only friend in the world. You really that keen to be on your own? It's a big bad world out there. Even for brassy slayers with fangs."

Buffy opened her mouth, fury resurging through her body like a pounding pulse. She wanted to rage at him, scream and claw most of

all, wipe that fucking smirk off his face. She wanted to make him hurt, make him bleed, make him feel the tangled mess that was her insides on his outsides. She wanted to scream at him for having come to her town, for unmasking the lie she'd been living, for making her realize things she hadn't been ready to realize. She wanted him to be the one who was to blame so it didn't have to be her.

But it was her. It was all her. And knowing that he knew that made her hate him more than she'd known it was possible to hate. Until it was nothing but a big, messy ball of black living inside her chest, pumping through dead veins and arteries with more life than blood ever had. The tips of her fangs pierced against her gums without falling completely. She couldn't let the monster out now. Not with her mother in the house. Not now. Not ever.

Maybe she could never be Buffy, but that didn't mean she ever had to stop trying.

And that thought stirred her back to the present—to the reality she didn't want. The place where everything that had just happened, everything that was *still* happening, was thumping through her like the heartbeat that no longer existed. She could rage. She could scream. She could tear into Spike and render him dust, and nothing would change except she'd lose everything she had left.

The *only* thing she had left.

What was worse was he watched her understand it. And instead of responding with a sneer, he dropped the sneer from his face and replaced it with something far worse. Something like pity.

Fuck. Well, there went what was left of her pride.

"Buffy," he began, but she beat him to the punch.

"I don't have anywhere to go." If she was going to be pathetic, then *she* would be pathetic. She wouldn't wait for him to point it out. "I don't... I don't know how to do this. Any of it."

Spike regarded her for a long beat, his expression unreadable, still, all except the eyes. His eyes burned with motion. Then he sighed the sort of sigh that spoke of weary resignation and nodded, stepping forward. Closer to her. Into her space and senses.

And god, for someone she hated as much as she hated Spike, she liked his closeness a whole hell of a lot.

"The gem is mine," he said softly. "That's my price."

"Your price for what?"

"Helpin' you learn how to be what you are."

"A killer, you mean."

Spike rolled his eyes but didn't move away. "No," he replied, drawing the word out. "You wanna keep your mitts clean, Slayer, I'm not gonna stop you, even if you are bein' a mite precious about it."

"I—"

"What I'm talkin' about is teaching you how to live." He let his gaze roam down her body. "You wanna play pretend with your watcher and your mates, but you're beyond them now. Beyond your mum, too. 'Bout time you started acting like it."

"And we're back to the killer thing," she said, shaking her head but not backing away. "I don't want to do that."

"That's just it, love. Bein' a vampire isn't about doin' things you don't want. It's about doin' exactly what you want, and bugger what anyone says." Spike was studying her mouth now. His eyes seemed to have gotten stuck there on their way back up, and that should not have done anything for her but it did. Being on the receiving end of his intense consideration was... Well, it was unlike anything she'd thought she'd experienced before. "We get the gem, and I'll show you how to not care about what any of those pillocks think about what's become of you."

"Why?"

At last, Spike dragged his gaze back up. "Why not? Sounds like fun."

"I thought you were going to kill me for Dru."

"Can still do that, can't I? I'll just do this first."

"Why the hell do you care at all?"

He hesitated but didn't look away. Just let her watch him as his eyes did more of that fast movement. "Bein' killed was what brought me to life," he said after a beat. "What made me *feel* alive, sod all else. I'd played by the rules up till then. Been a right good little boy."

"You. Good."

"Laugh all you like, but it's the truth. Then I died and it woke me up. Made me realize what I'd been pissing away all that time." Spike

took a tendril of her hair between his fingers, studied it. "You've been doin' the same. Playin' the game the way you're told. Even managed to convince yourself you're not followin' orders when asked to jump. Least I can do before killing you is let you get a taste of how to live."

Buffy licked her lips, watched him immediately drop his eyes so he could watch. There was that—the open way he reacted to her and what it stirred in her in turn. How she'd ever felt, because it wasn't like her life up until this point had been a major snooze, but there was freedom there that she hadn't let herself contemplate before. A whole lot of freedom. Remove the shackles of Sunnydale, of her friends and her watcher and the mother who had kicked her out of the house for the second time, and what was left?

A vampire who actually wanted to be around her. Yeah, maybe to kill her, but not just for that. Probably not even mostly for that, judging by the hunger on his face. For the first time since that first night, Buffy felt like something other than a reality others had to accept. She felt like a choice.

"What do we do about the lab?" she asked.

"Sod the lab. Not your problem, is it?"

"You don't want revenge?"

"That's the thing, sweets. Revenge is somethin' you can get any ol' time. Let your mates handle the mess for now, yeah? Not like they don't have the experience."

It was rash and insane, probably a huge mistake, but god if Buffy wasn't starting to feel alive just a little. Enough so that when she next took a breath, the pain in her chest that she had become so used to failed to register. "Where will we go?"

"Wherever you fancy."

"How will we get around?"

Spike smirked, and the smirk was sex and promise. "You really think I come to this pissant town without wheels?"

"You have a car?" For some reason, it was hard to picture him doing anything as routine as sitting behind a wheel, navigating in and out of traffic. "But the sun—"

"Slayer, relax. Been doin' this for a minute, haven't I? I can get us outta here."

Buffy let out another breath, one that only hurt a little, before nodding. “Okay,” she said, and before she could talk herself out of anything, she surged forward and pressed her lips to his. Not really sure why, except that it seemed like the thing to do, and Spike must have agreed for he groaned and seized her by the upper arms, kissing her back with all the passion and fury he used in fighting her.

It would be fun until it was over—this...whatever this was. And it would be honest. The only honest thing in her life.

“I need to get a few things,” she murmured against his lips after they broke apart, trying and failing not to grin at the heat in his eyes or how she read, plainly, that he was debating tossing her onto the mattress and giving her mother something more to complain about. But the part of her that was more slayer and less monster found the wherewithal to place a hand on Spike’s chest and push him away.

“First stop’s the tunnel,” Spike informed her as she started throwing things into her travel bag. Not that she had much she cared to take. Just a few changes of clothes, some underwear she imagined wouldn’t survive long, a few stakes, knives, vials of holy water—just in case—and Mr. Gordo. “We get in, nab the gem, then we’re on our merry way.”

Buffy nodded without really thinking, shoving a pair of heels that she hadn’t worn in ages into her bag. Also makeup. She might not have mirror access anymore but she wanted to look good. Or as good as possible. And a hairbrush plus accessories. Deodorant. None of her perfumes or body sprays, as they were an assault on the senses, but some of the more understated luxury soaps were pleasant to the nose. She kept waiting for Spike—who had started pulling on clothes of his own—to mock her packing selection, say something about the stuffed pig she was bringing along, or that she was taking too much, wasting too much time, being such a girl about it, but if he was thinking any of that, he didn’t say it. Which, honestly, probably meant he wasn’t thinking it. Spike wasn’t the sort of guy to not say a mean thing just because it was mean. If anything, he did the opposite.

“Okay,” she said when she was reasonably certain she’d packed everything she would miss. “I think that’s it.”

“Need to grab a blanket, love,” Spike said from where he was lounging against the door.

“Blanket?”

“Or sommat. You fancy goin’ up in flames the second you step outside?”

“Where’s this car of yours?”

“Parked downtown. We’ll need to find sewer access near here. Can take that most of the way, but you’ll need to stay under that if you aim to—”

The chime of the doorbell interrupted whatever he’d been about to say. He paused, arched an eyebrow at her, and she shook her head in answer to his unasked question. It wasn’t usual for anyone to stop by at this time of the day—not when her mom was typically at work and Buffy was...well, asleep because *dead*.

It was probably nothing, but still, her hackles got all hackly.

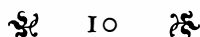
Buffy fitted the strap of her bag over her shoulder and stepped into the hallway, Spike close behind. She was at the top of the stairs just in time to catch her mother opening the front door, far enough away that the spill of sunshine didn’t make her do more than flinch.

Not as much as the sight of the men on the other side, one of whom she recognized.

“Hello, Mrs. Summers.” It was Riley Finn, the guy she’d once bonked on the head. The doofus from the bookstore. The one she’d flirted with that one time. Only he didn’t look remotely doofus-y now. He looked severe. And he smelled...

God, he smelled like the lab.

“We have a few questions to ask about your daughter,” he said.



WHEN THERE AIN'T NOWHERE YOU CAN GO

IT HAD BEEN A TEST, THOUGH BUFFY HADN'T KNOWN IT AT THE time. A test for her *and* for Willow as they independently sought to answer what had become the only question that mattered. Was it possible for Buffy Summers, former vampire slayer and current vampire, to be among humans without succumbing to her innate desire to kill? She'd done pretty well so far. Learned how to control the shift of her fangs, how to force the bones of her face to smooth out so she could fool those around her into forgetting that she was a monster now. Not that they ever did.

For everyone else, Buffy had steadily increased her exposure to those humans who weren't friends or family, first with trips to the butcher shop to collect blood, then to a study group with Willow under the pretense of catching up on classes she'd already known, deep down, she was going to drop. And eventually to a few of those soon-to-be-dropped classes, seated as far away from the other students as possible and under layers of clothes, which had earned her a number of sideways glances she'd forced herself to ignore. But classes and study groups and the like hadn't exactly been hotbeds of temptation. The little fleshbags with their throbbing hearts and racing pulses had been seated, not moving around in ways that sent fresh wafts of *bite-me* scent

to her nostrils. Not like a frat party, where people were constantly moving, mingling, and sweating until it seemed like Buffy was stranded in the middle of an all-you-can-eat buffet as her stomach tore itself apart with hunger.

Buffy hadn't known how she would handle it. Neither had Willow, which was why Willow had been sure to pack a load of stakes, crosses, and holy water in her purse—something Buffy hadn't discovered until later that night. Not the nicest thing to find when searching for a piece of gum, but she hadn't made a fuss. That would've made everything worse.

It didn't help that the reason she'd wanted gum in the first place was to fool her mouth into thinking it was full, therein making the juicy jugular on the guy who had scoffed when she'd refused to dance less appealing.

No one had trusted Buffy to do well. And that had been the first of several fundamental revelations—the sort she'd just kept on having until this moment. Right now.

"Never mind," Riley said calmly, shifting his gaze from Joyce to Buffy. "I see she's here. And she has Hostile Nineteen with her."

"Would you look at that," drawled another man she recognized, though only vaguely. A friend Riley had introduced her to that night at the party. Forrest. She remembered because she'd made a *Forrest Gump* joke he hadn't laughed at. "Not the waste of time I thought this would be."

"These clowns friends of yours?" Spike asked in a low undertone she doubted reached the ears of anyone below.

No, they really weren't. And they were more than clowns. But she didn't say that—she was too busy glaring down into a pair of gray eyes that had, not that long ago, been warm and friendly, even concerned. Eyes that were now harsh and regarding her like she was something less than vermin. He'd looked right from her mother to her almost as though he'd known she was there, and maybe he had. He betrayed no surprise, just a grim sort of acceptance that would have made Buffy's blood run cold if her blood was still running at all.

"Mrs. Summers," Riley said, stepping forward with an air of authority, "I need you to come with us."

The men at his side flanked into the foyer like a well-choreographed dance routine. The sort of precision that took training to execute flawlessly, and that was all it took to confirm her suspicion.

Riley Finn was one of the military guys. He knew who she was. He also knew what. Nothing else would have brought him to Revello Drive.

He hadn't come expecting her to be there. He wasn't wearing the camo from the night before, and neither of the men with him sported one of those scary-looking guns. This had been a house call. Maybe to sit Joyce down calmly and try to explain that her daughter was dead but less dead than normal dead and also probably caution her against letting her in.

"What's going on?" Joyce demanded, turning and meeting Buffy's eyes. And maybe Buffy was kidding herself, but she thought she might have seen something like fear flash there. "Who are you people?"

"We're with the United States government," Riley explained, taking Joyce by the arm. "I'm sorry, but your daughter has been exposed to a highly dangerous contaminant that requires immediate quarantine. You will need to be evaluated to ensure she hasn't passed it on to you."

"Could always just throw her in the sunlight," Forrest muttered. "She goes up, that's one less hostile to deal with."

"Negative," Riley replied. "She's warm. Just focus on Hostiles Eighteen and Nineteen."

The guy on Riley's other side, the not-Forrest guy, nodded and grinned up at them. "Had quite the little run around town, didn't you? Don't get any funny ideas. There's too much sunshine for either of you to get very far."

"What do you wager, Slayer?" Spike asked at her back, and she felt his tension as thoroughly as though it were her own. That animal need pressing up against the skin, ready to burst through—perhaps a little desperate to.

Or a lot desperate to.

"No killing," Buffy murmured. "Whatever you do."

"You're no fun."

"Spike—"

He surprised her by craning his head over her shoulder and pressing a quick kiss against her temple. "No killing."

Buffy nodded, heartened, then looked at Joyce. Joyce, who seemed confused and resigned, and also, despite everything, scared for a daughter she didn't think existed anymore. There was a flash of pain that took Buffy by surprise even though she'd mostly expected it. Any hope of salvaging their relationship was about to die. The second Joyce saw her monster face was the second this life she'd been clinging to ended for good.

But the moment passed and she had to act. And so, bidding Buffy Anne Summers farewell, Buffy shook her head and let her fangs descend, launching herself at Forrest with a hard snarl. There was a moment of absolute freefall, nothing under her feet or at her back, the wide eyes of the man below her and the sudden explosion of fear that filled the air—intoxicating in ways she would rather not consider—before she crashed into him. And down they went, Forrest to his knees and Buffy clawing on top of him, inhuman sounds ripping at her throat. Then *his* throat was all she could see. That stretch of perfect brown skin, sweetened with the scent of adrenaline and fear—delicious fear pumping through his veins in a rush that was almost musical. Buffy didn't mean to, didn't even really register what she was doing, but her fangs were in control now. Driving her forward, and she could already feel the gentle rip of his skin beneath them. How easy it would be, and how all that rich, fear-enhanced blood would taste flowing from his arteries and into her mouth. The urge had never been this strong and that should have scared her—*would* scare her when she regained control of herself—but that was a problem for the Buffy she would be once Forrest was dead.

The Buffy who would do the killing was in control now.

And then all thoughts blinked out. All instincts too. The roaring in her head gave a tremendous yelp before receding into a whine, and Buffy was on her back, screaming and tearing at her own skull as though she could dig the pain out. For it was there, inside her. Brightening her insides and twisting through her limbs and she thought she was dying, but she knew she wasn't because this wasn't how vampires died.

It lasted forever. It lasted for seconds. She lay still for what felt like hours after the initial sensation had faded, twitching with echoes and aftershocks, and it felt like she would never move again. That the will to move, to exist had been zapped out of her.

Then she heard him—*Spike*. His throaty screams from what had to be a thousand miles away, but they reached her ears anyway. Vampire hearing at work.

Vampire, vampire...

Buffy opened her eyes and saw Forrest leering over her, the fear from before—how long before?—gone, a leering smirk in its place. His lips moved but the words didn't reach her—odd when Spike's screams had no problem—and she realized, impossibly, only a few seconds had passed since she'd been on the stairs and if she wanted to live to figure out just what the fuck had happened in her head, the time to act was now.

So she sat up and punched him. *Really* punched him. Punched him so hard he went sailing over the staircase banister and crashed with a crack that could only mean he'd broken something. And Buffy might have relished that a bit had her head not been consumed again with the sort of pain that would make the most hardened demon beg for death. Still, the second blast wasn't as bad as the first, though only barely, and she suspected only because she'd braced herself for impact. For she understood that at once—understood what the pain was and why it was there. There had been awful clarity in those echoes, and her brain, fried or not, had put the dots together.

Science lab. Experiments. Demons lined up like caged zoo animals. Collected but not killed. And why not killed? *Why not?*

This was the answer to that question.

"Hold him. *Hold him!*" Riley was screaming, his back to her. Joyce was deep in the living room, watching with a mixture of horror and fascination. She wasn't screaming, though, as most people would in this situation. "We need—"

But whatever they needed would forever have to remain a mystery, for Buffy gave another roar and leaped onto Riley's back. Again, pain exploded behind her eyes, but she shoved it back. *Had* to shove it back. That was the only way out of here. Out of this mess. She had to

ignore what was happening in her skull long enough to grab Spike and run.

Run. Run where?

That she didn't know. It wasn't like Spike had said how they were going to get to his car—only that there was no need to wait around until the sun fell. And that meant she needed him now. Needed him alive, or undead, or whatever, and Riley was struggling to toss her off his back as Spike, bleary-eyed, saw what she was doing and understood.

And that was good, but not nearly as good as what he did next. Buffy honestly hadn't expected much—the pain in her head was something beyond unbearable. She was fighting through it with grit alone, not necessarily to survive but out of determination not to find herself in a cell again. Death was better than that—better than whatever they had planned. She was sure of it. But even still, Buffy hadn't expected Spike to find the will to fight. It was taking everything she had to remain upright, to not surrender and forfeit the battle for her body. The only reason she was still moving at all was, she'd thought, the extra strength she possessed courtesy of having been the Slayer.

But Spike wasn't the Slayer. Spike was nothing but a vampire who had somehow managed not to find himself on the wrong end of a stake over the past century. Yet he was fighting too—gritting his fangs and screaming a roar that made the walls shake as he threw off Riley's other lackey with enough force he went sailing into the entry hall wall.

Then it was just Riley himself—Riley trying to buck Buffy off. Riley scratching at her arms and throwing himself against walls and doors and every surface he could find, shouting orders to the lump that was Forrest on the stairs. Not realizing he was alone, or not accepting what he was seeing. And then Spike staggering to his feet, his yellow eyes blazing, and pulling back with a roar that made the house's very foundation shake. He drew back a fist before letting it fly, and Riley's head snapped back with enough force it would have smacked hard into Buffy's face if she'd been anything other than a vampire. If she hadn't been prepared. If she hadn't known.

The hulking mass went to his knees, and Buffy rolled off him with a gasp. Spike's hand was in front of her face and she didn't have time to think. Just let him pull her to her feet, which he did with enough

enthusiasm her travel bag thumped hard against her back. Still there. She hadn't lost it in the fight.

Spike studied her for a moment, panting hard in that human way of his, then turned to her mother, who was huddled against the far wall of the living room, looking a mixture of distressed and enthralled, like someone driving by the scene of a particularly gruesome car accident.

"Your keys," Spike spat out between his fangs. "Where are they?"

Her mother just blinked at him.

"I can ask the nice way or the less nice way, Joyce. Which do you prefer?"

Buffy opened her mouth to snap at him—tell him that her mother was off limits, but then Joyce was talking at a clip. Keys were in the kitchen on the island. The car was by the garage she never parked inside, accessible from the back door. And Spike nodded, then looked to Buffy and snatched her hand, and her feet were moving before her brain could catch up. Pulling her down the hall, through the kitchen, and the keys were there and the back door beyond it.

Spike paused long enough to bark at her mother about something—why would he need a blanket?—and then the quilt that Aunt Darlene had made as a junior in Home Ec and then gifted to her mother for Christmas that one year was in Buffy's arms. She just blinked at it, but she didn't get a chance to ask. Spike tugged it free and draped it over her before tugging off his leather duster and throwing it over his head. And then, yes, she understood that, for the back door was open and the sun spilled in, and while she could feel her skin starting to smoke, Buffy did not go up in flames. Instead, she followed the zigzag line he took over the otherwise familiar terrain of her backyard.

She still didn't know how he intended to get them out with the sun beating down through the windshield, but she also didn't think asking him about it would do much for morale. At this point, Buffy was just hoping—hoping hard and with everything she had in her—that Spike had been in situations like this before and had some truly spectacular tricks up his duster sleeves that would allow them to live long enough to figure out just what the hell had happened back there.

"In the back," he barked as he threw open the SUV door and launched himself behind the wheel. "Stay under that bloody blanket."

And then Buffy couldn't help herself. "What are you gonna do?" she asked, clambering over an easel and a stack of prints wedged between the two seats in the middle. She turned and managed to slam the door shut and then fell back and under the quilt as instructed. Her hands hot. Too hot. Wafts of smoke still rising off her skin. Worse than any sunburn she'd ever had. Worse than any *anything* she'd ever had, except for the pounding in her skull and the faint aftershocks of *whatever the fuck that had been*.

"Try not to sizzle," Spike snapped, and that was all he offered before the SUV was bounding in reverse down the drive, the air rapidly thickening with the stench of overcooked meat. Then the vehicle made a wide arc, and Buffy felt the sun shifting from her left to her right, so it was bearing down on the passenger side, and then they were off. Tires squealing, horn bleating, Spike cursing up a storm as he weaved them in and out of traffic—that was what it had to be—taking the occasional sharp turn, snarling when the sun swung back in his direction, and but overall managing to keep the deadly rays on the optimal side.

It wasn't long. Probably not even five minutes, but long enough that Buffy started to wonder just how the hell Spike planned on actually getting anywhere. Playing an extended game of chicken with the sun didn't seem like the sort of strategy that led to a long and happy unlife, and even if she had just lost everything, Buffy was nowhere near ready to call it quits. But then he broke hard—hard enough she went skidding into the seat back—and killed the engine.

"One more time, ducks," he said, panting as though he'd just run a marathon and had the sort of lungs that would feel the pain. "Need to run again."

Buffy didn't bother lowering the quilt. "Run?"

"At my car. Need to switch."

"Why?"

"Because I really don't fancy goin' up like Guy bloody Fawkes. Stay here if you like, but—"

But nothing. He was not leaving her behind—not when they had a

deal. Buffy lunged for the door once more, not giving herself time to think before throwing it open and dashing out. Again, her insides were on fire, and again, her skin started to smoke, but Spike was there at her back. She felt him and he was real, and he'd lived this long so she'd be stupid not to trust that he knew what he was doing.

The car he sprinted toward might have been the most obviously vampire vehicle she had ever seen, but Buffy didn't have time to judge. The driver's side door was open and Spike stood aside, ushering her in, and in she went. Head-first across the bench seat, sending packs of cigarettes and more than one empty bottle of booze to the car floor. The sun was relentless, blinding against the windshield, but Buffy's skin had stopped sizzling and that sensation of imminent dustage—for that was what it was, a reckoning with her own mortality—faded. She blinked against the incoming brightness, dazed and more than a little confused at what she was seeing until she realized she wasn't seeing much of anything, for the windshield was smeared with black gunk that managed to stave off the worst of the sun.

"Seriously?" she heard herself asking, waving away the remnants of smoke that had followed her inside. "This is how you get around in the middle of the day?"

The car rocked with the force of the slamming door as Spike settled in beside her. "Don't think you're in a position to complain, pet," he said, revving up the engine. "Just saved your hide."

"Once my hide stops smoldering, I'll say thank you." Buffy wrapped a hand around a grab handle as Spike tore into the street. She had no idea how he could see through the muck but as he didn't seem in imminent danger of ramming them into a light pole, she decided not to ask. The important thing was he could, and they were in a safer vehicle. One with a dramatically reduced chance of making her go up like a Buffy-shaped firework.

There was one problem solved in time for a bajillion new ones to announce themselves. Like the pounding in her skull that had yet to let up, the way her entire body had seized the second she'd tried to put her fangs into use. Or the fact that she'd tried to put her fangs to use in the first place, but she didn't want to think about that and it didn't seem nearly as important as the other thing.

“Who the bleeding hell was that, anyway?” Spike barked, cutting into her thoughts.

“Who was who?”

“Who the fuck do you think, Slayer? Were you even awake for what just happened?” He gritted his teeth and made a sharp left that had Buffy slamming into him hard enough to leave a mark. “He knew your name. And he was—”

“One of the lab guys. Yeah, I put that together all on my own, actually,” she shot back. “I don’t know him.”

“No?”

“Well, I thunked a book on his head one time and gave him my number at a party that Wills dragged me to.” She sensed rather than saw his glare. “I didn’t know who he was! I was trying to be normal.”

“This before or after you got yourself killed?”

“Would you shut up?” Buffy dropped her head into her hands. She couldn’t help but think that Spike had overlooked the more imminent problem—that was the fact that neither of them had been much use in that skirmish. That pain, the intensity, how it had rattled her bones and her teeth and made her brain feel like it was bubbling, like it might just leak out of her ears. The echoes of it were still there too. A buzzing between her ears, behind her brow, electrifying each strand of hair through her scalp. More intense now without the burn from the sun to distract her from it.

“Balls,” Spike muttered.

She jerked her head up, wincing against the light that tried to get in through the smears of black. “What?”

He didn’t answer immediately, rather jerked on the steering wheel to pull the vehicle over to the curb. “Those thieving wankers,” he growled through his teeth, straining to see something through the impossible windshield. Then a snarl erupted off his lips and he threw himself back into the seat hard enough that the car rocked with the movement. “Bloody thieving *wankers*. I’ll rip their sodding throats out!”

“What? What is happening?”

Spike scrubbed a hand down his face before turning his glare onto her. “What’s happening,” he said through clenched teeth, “is

your soldier playmate is tearin' up the tunnels where we'd find my gem."

"*What?*" That made the kind of sense that didn't. Buffy scrambled forward—or as *forward* as a girl could get in this car—and looked harder through the black muck, but to no avail. The most she could see were blurry shapes doing blurry things against a blurry backdrop. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm fucking sure." Spike snarled again and curled his hands around the steering wheel as though trying to steel himself, but no good. His anger exploded and he threw a punch against the dash. "All that planning. All that sodding effort, and that bloody tosser is going to make away with my gem."

"Maybe." Assuming Spike was interpreting those blurry shapes correctly, and she'd just have to take it on faith that he was. "But—"

"Wager we can find a way back in. Turn the place upside down."

"Wait? What place?"

Spike fixed her with another glare. "Where do you think?"

An unvampirely amount of panic was beginning to bubble in her stomach. "I thought we were blowing off the lab! You know, you teaching me how to be a vampire? Find the fun?"

"Nice thought, Slayer, but that was before they put their grubby mitts on *my*—"

"Spike, no. Think about this. Think about what happened back at the house." She had her hand on his arm now, fingers digging into the leather of his duster. "I went after one of them and my head... Something went off in my head. And I know it wasn't just me—I heard you screaming. They did something to us in that lab."

The fury on Spike's face fell, but only for a blink. "You felt that too?"

"Like my brain was being electrocuted? Yeah, I felt it. And they did it. I know they did." Buffy tightened her grip on him. "That's what they were doing in that place. We can't fight them. *Literally* can't fight them. So the gem... The gem is gone. If they have it, it's gone."

There was a beat, a long one this time, as the reality of what she'd said hit home. She watched it happen. The rage in his eyes shifting, transforming, until it was something else altogether. Then he breathed

in, flexed his fingers around the steering wheel, and worked his throat, and somehow she knew he'd come to a decision.

"It's not gone," he muttered. "Just a mite further away than I would have liked."

"What?"

"Quite simple, really." He did some fancy manipulation of the gears and other car-gut parts that still eluded her, and then they were rolling back and away from those blurry shapes and whatever they were doing at the dig site, Spike looking over his shoulder to navigate until he was satisfied. Then a hard brake and more intense maneuvering of the steering wheel, and they were pointed in another direction. "Suss out what those plonkers did to us, get it reversed, and then go find my gem."

He made it sound so easy. Like it was obvious. Like he was wasting his time explaining it in the first place. "Uhh..."

"Until then, Slayer, I reckon we might want to scarper out of town." He tossed her a grin, and that astounded her too. That he could go from rage to bargaining to smiling at her as though everything that had just happened *hadn't* happened. Buffy had always thought herself adaptable, but clearly, she did have a lot to learn. "Nothin' for us here until we get this figured, is there?"

She thought of her friends and of Giles. And of the mother who had just kicked her out of her own home for the second time in two years. No, there was nothing left for her in Sunnydale right now. Maybe ever. No more pretending to be what she wasn't—it was time to discover what she was.

Hopefully, Spike was still up for that.

"Where are we going to go?"

Spike shrugged, speeding through the city with carelessness she envied. "Think we'll start with Angelus."

"Angel? Why?"

"Cause he might be a bloody berk, but he's a bloody berk who's family."

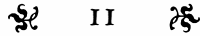
"And you have no better ideas."

"Not a one. You think of somethin', be sure to share it with the class."

Buffy opened her mouth, hoping that her slightly fried brain would run to the rescue and spout off something brilliant, but it didn't. She didn't have anything. All her nets were suddenly gone, and she hadn't the first idea how to begin rebuilding them.

Hopefully, Angel's sense of decency would keep him from staking a vampire who couldn't fight back, though something told her not to hold her breath.

Figuratively speaking.



BUT YOU GAVE AWAY THE THINGS YOU LOVED

GOD, SHE WAS GOOD AT THIS. ALMOST TOO GOOD TO BE CONVINCED it was her first time, but he'd asked and she'd told and he believed her. Would have even if she hadn't sworn it—pure and virginal was the way Angelus liked them. All the better to corrupt.

But it wasn't Angelus's prick the Slayer had in her mouth. No, because the tosser had used her and thrown her aside like the git he was and now, thanks to his shortsightedness, Spike was reaping the benefits.

And *god*, she *was* good at this.

"Fuck," Spike managed between his teeth, curling his fingers through her hair with his right hand while the left did what it could to keep the DeSoto from swerving too wildly. There weren't many coppers out here but there would be the closer they got to Los Angeles, and the last thing he needed was to get a lecture on how it was unethical to kill the officer who had just pulled him over for getting a blowie on the road. "You are somethin', Slayer."

She turned her head ever so slightly to catch his eye and grinned, her lips brushing the head of his saliva-soaked cock as she did. "Am I?"

"Fuck yes." He fisted the hair at the back of her head to direct her back where he wanted her, and bless her, she obeyed without fuss.

Swallowing him into that mouth, taking him in as deep as she could before sliding back again, her cheeks hollowed and her tongue making artful swirls, like she was using it to memorize the location of every vein in his dick. Even better was the way she smelled—that he knew she was wet for him, that doing this made her wet. Would make it almost impossible to part ways with her when the time came—a woman who truly got her jollies by sucking cock was a marvel.

Could always keep her, some little voice whispered as he fought to keep his eyes from rolling back. She was playing with his foreskin now, rolling it down with her lips to lave the head with long, decadent licks then rolling it back with a nice hard suck. Already a quick study. He'd told her what he liked and here she was, doing it. Making him think downright blasphemous things, because he was almost certain the owner of that little voice was his dick. A part of him that had no inherent loyalties to Dru but was fast developing them for someone else.

And that wasn't right. None of it was right. He still had no bugging idea how he'd ended up here. How he'd gone from *kill the Slayer* to *fuck the Slayer* to *teach the Slayer how to enjoy the unlife* as quickly as he had. In his defense, he hadn't had a lot of time to think. Everything thus far had been instinctive, his mouth running before his brain could get in a word edgewise. Now he was on the road to bloody Los Angeles for the second time in as many days, and yeah, this drive was already going a lot better than the last on account of the company he kept. Still, the fact that that thought existed in his head at all was cause for alarm in itself.

But what was a man to think when the Slayer was making those sounds, slurping at him like he was a delicacy? Catching his eyes whenever she could to make sure he was enjoying himself. Always with that earnest little flicker, like she really thought she could do anything wrong here.

His heart twisted and his balls tightened and every part of him wanted every part of her, and it didn't matter that it was wrong or nonsensical, that his heart was Dru's, because Dru had tossed him out, yeah, so Buffy *could* have his cock. Have as much of it as she could fit into her mouth or her cunt or her arse or between her tits or whatever

she wanted because when she did that he forgot that he was going to kill her. Forgot that all of this was only temporary.

"Buffy," he managed between his teeth. "You want me to fill your mouth? Keep doin' exactly what you're doin'."

She grinned at him from between the golden strands of hair that had fallen into her face, and if he were the swooning sort—which of course he was not, that was bloody ridiculous—this was where he would have swooned. Buffy Summers, the best slayer he'd ever had the privilege of fighting, and would eventually have even the greater privilege of killing, grinning up at him with her mouth stuffed with his cock. His chest gave a heave that defied logic and probably science, bugged what he knew, and before he could help himself, let alone do more to warn her than he had already, Spike bucked and groaned and started jetting into her. His balls tingling and the car swerving and Buffy still there, squeezing and pulling with her mouth and making a low sound of her own when his cum hit her tongue.

Good bloody thing his heart was already spoken for, else he might have just fallen in love.

Buffy took her time pulling herself off his prick, increasing the pressure of her lips just enough that by the time the tip plopped free, he was hard and aching again. And Spike had the thought of just cupping the back of her head and shoving her down once more—saw that she almost expected that for the way her eyes twinkled—but somehow found the strength to ignore the pull. Bitch didn't need to know how good she was. Like everything else, it would just add onto that mammoth ego of hers and he'd never hear the end of it.

Though why that mattered, Spike couldn't say.

What he *did* say was, "Not bad," as he wiped a strand of semen off her lips. Trying not to think about how much he wanted to pull over just so he could pull her onto his cock properly and reeducate her on who was in charge between the two of them. "Could use a bit more practice, though."

"Yeah. That's why you almost crashed the car twice," Buffy said, her voice trembling with very earned amusement that he was determined to ignore. She flopped back against her seat, and before he could stop himself, he stole a glance to capture the picture she presented. Smiling

and relaxed, superior as ever with a bit of mischief thrown in for good measure. A vast improvement over the moody, bitchy bird she'd been not fifteen minutes ago when he'd shouted that if she was going to run her mouth, he'd give her something to occupy it with. Which had led to the discussion about dick sucking—roadhead in particular—and how if Buffy was serious about this *learning how to live* business, she might as well start there. There was nothing else to do, and neither one of them could touch the radio dial without a skirmish that would do little more than get them killed. And their reputations were far too good for either of them to die in a bloody car accident.

Still, Spike hadn't expected her to agree. She'd been fixated on what had happened back in Sunnyhell with her mum and those army bastards, not to mention tense about the prospect of coming face-to-face with Angel. Not that Spike was particularly looking forward to that, either, but he didn't have any better idea at the moment, and neither did she. They needed a place to stay while they figured out what had been done to them in that lab and, like it or not, Angel was their best bet.

"He'll just try to kill us," Buffy had argued.

"No, he won't. Man talks big but he's a bit precious about those he considers family."

"Is he? I seem to have this perfect memory of him staking his sire to save my life."

Spike had snorted, rolled his eyes. "Yeah. First impulsive thing I'd guess the git has ever done, and the last. You'd know it, too, if you'd had to sit through all his sodding bellyaching."

"When did he—"

"When do you think?" he'd shot back, and that had been the end of that for one blessed moment while Buffy put the pieces together. She was so bloody innocent about it, he almost felt sorry for her. That was until she'd drawn herself up and made like she was going to continue arguing about a decision he wasn't going to walk back. There had been a few more insults and insinuations and then... Well. He couldn't say he regretted that.

"So," Buffy said now, "how is this going to work?"

"Reckon we do a lot more of that, for starters," Spike replied,

gesturing at his dick. He had yet to tuck himself back into his jeans, and hoped she'd just decide to start in again without him having to force the issue. Would make the drive a whole lot more bloody bearable.

Tragically, Buffy did not seize the invitation to put her mouth back to good use. Instead, she sniffed and settled back against the seat, and pick up right where they had left off. "Angel made it clear he would kill me if he saw me like this. And normally, I wouldn't be worried about him actually doing it, but if I can't fight back then I might be on the road to my own funeral."

"He really said he'd kill you?" Spike hadn't thought there was much of anything Angelus could do that would surprise him. It was nice to be proven wrong. "Didn't know he had it in him."

"Thanks. I feel a lot better."

"Slayer, even if he tries anything, you're still faster than he is. Can make a break for it."

"And that would be oh so very comforting if I didn't have to deal with the sun being up."

"So we wait until tonight. Find somewhere to sit it out. Could do with a nip of blood, too." He ran a hand over his stomach, realizing for the first time just how hungry he was. He hadn't had much in the way of food the previous day—a mug at the watcher's flat and half a helping at the Slayer's. Neither serving had hit the spot, either. Neither had been human. "Just downright tragic about you and Angel, though. Story gets more entertaining the more you tell me."

"Well, not all of us can have the epic, undying love that is Spike and Drusilla. Now there's a romance for the stars."

The urge to backhand her struck him like a thunderclap. Intense and powerful, almost impossible to ignore. Yet he could still feel the echoes of the pain he'd experienced back at her house. That bloody explosion in his head, how it had torn through his bones, making them rattle until he'd been sure they would just start to crumble to nothing. And he supposed that was the point. The soldiers wanted their pet monsters nice and neutered, so they'd fitted those they'd captured with some sort of shock collar.

As such, with difficulty, Spike managed to grit out, "Got time now. Care to tell the full story?"

"I thought I did tell you the full story."

"You told me the wanker ditched you around prom."

"Yeah, because he thought I should have a normal life."

"Oh, well, that was considerate. Didn't know there was a way to unchoose a chit after she'd gotten herself all chosen."

"What?"

"Well, that'd have to be part of the package," he said, his anger beginning to ebb as he sensed her own irritation climbing. "In order for you to have a normal life. Not bein' the Chosen One anymore. Otherwise, it sounds like a load of bunk that no bird with two stones to rub together would believe for an instant."

The girl crossed her arms, going all deliciously huffy, and the rest of his annoyance faded without a fight. He couldn't help himself—he loved her like this. It was one of his favorite iterations of Buffy Summers. Hard to stay brassed when she was being all adorable.

"Course, no bird with two stones to rub together would've wasted more than ten minutes on that prat to begin with, so I suppose you were already hopeless."

"What is it with you and birds and stones?" she snapped. "What does that even mean?"

"That your way of tellin' me you took the bait? Don't fret, Slayer. I already had that much figured." Spike smirked and flexed his shoulders, pleased with himself. It was nice getting his own back, especially where she was concerned. "Got bits and pieces of the rest. Enough to know he didn't come runnin' to the rescue when you got yourself in a spot of trouble, but why is it you think he's gonna try to take a piece outta you when we turn up?"

"Because he said he would." If the words had been fire, he would have gone up in a blaze.

"He didn't just decide that for no reason—"

"It's not *no reason*, Spike. It's because *I'm not Buffy*. I'm the thing that killed Buffy. And that's the way the cookie crumbles. For Angel. For my mom. For Giles, probably, and my friends."

Her voice had cracked. Suddenly, this wasn't much fun anymore.

"That's a load of rot."

"Really? Well, tell him that, because he's pretty damn clear on the point." She hesitated, then sighed and rolled her head back. "The thing is... I think I knew. I think I knew he'd be like that. I wasn't going to call him at all, at first. Just make the trip to LA, tell him in person. It didn't seem like the sort of thing you just say over the phone, you know? 'Hey, remember me? I'm a bit deader than I was the last time you saw me, so do we maybe wanna rethink the whole breakup?'"

Spike scoffed. Well, most of him scoffed. Something inside him, something he didn't much care to acknowledge, gave a little growl. Had nothing to do with the Slayer, of course, just the general principle of the thing. The old sting that all the women in Angelus's life tripped over themselves to win his approval. That he could hurt them the way he did and still maintain this loyalty, this power.

"That really what you thought, kitten?" he asked before he could help himself. "You wake up with fangs and decide to tether yourself to Captain Forehead for the rest of eternity?"

"Well, of course it crossed my mind," she said. "He broke up with me because we were from two different worlds."

"No, you're from the same sodding world. Just opposite sides of it."

"The difference being?"

Spike rolled his eyes hard enough he was surprised when they didn't fall out of his skull. "So, how was it gonna work, then?" he asked. "This grand normal life of yours. Between fightin' vamps and stoppin' the world from ending every other week. You find yourself a nice bloke with a pulse and a tan and he joins up with that crack team of yours. You settle down, get hitched, pop out a kid or two. Yet the demons keep comin', and oh look, now you have readymade hostages for the big ugly of the month to snatch up. You say you'll always protect 'em but you're the Slayer, aren't you? Can't be in two places at once. Might get your mates to lend a hand and might be that'll work most of the time, but it only has to fail once. Then the fate of the world depends on whether you'll let dear ol' hubby kick it or give in. It's the sodding trolley problem, and it's become your life."

"The trolley problem?"

He nodded. "Back in the sixties, this philosopher bird asked what

would you do about this rogue trolley.”

“And that trolley’s my life.”

“Trolley’s headin’ down this track, see, and if it stays on course, five people are gonna kick it.”

“Why?”

“They just are.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“They’re tied to the bloody track, all right?” There had never been a woman more annoying than the one next to him, he was convinced of it. Probably wasn’t worth the effort to go on, but there wasn’t anything else to do and plenty of road still ahead. “So this trolley can’t be stopped—brakes are out or the like. Those sods are doomed unless someone can divert it. Only if you pull the lever to make it change course, you’ll kill someone on the other track.”

“There are two tracks now? And they both have people tied to them?” Buffy snorted. “What is this, *Rocky and Bullwinkle*?”

“Two tracks, one person on one, five on the other. You do nothin’ and the five snuff it. You decide to change the trolley’s course, and only one person gets chewed up.”

“This is the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Spike clenched his jaw, thinking it was very fortunate for the Slayer that the DeSoto had been fashioned in an era of crank windows. Maddening as she was, the electric kind would have been too much temptation for someone with his level of impulse control. He’d have to settle for popping her in the mouth once they had this mess with their heads figured out. “Yeah, it’s all a barrel of bloody laughs. You’re supposed to choose.”

“Choose to let the runaway train hit five people or one person? What kind of choice is that?”

“All about action, yeah? Do you intentionally kill one person to save five, or let five die by doin’ nothing?”

At last, she fell silent, having evidently run out of quips. Though he wasn’t sure the quiet was too much better. Mite jarring, actually, having nothing but the hum of the car filling the air. After what felt like bloody eons, she finally gave a cute little growl and crashed back against the seat. “So if I do nothing, my hands are clean but five people

croak. I can save those five people if I make the decision to kill someone. One is better than five, so that's obviously the right choice."

"Even if it's you doin' the killin', love? You with your precious little vampire morals?"

Buffy scowled. "That doesn't matter. Either way, people are dying and either way, I have to make a decision. I choose to let more people live."

"Yeah, sounds nice and simple like now. Reckon you'd feel the same if you still had that pesky heartbeat?"

She opened her mouth but that was as far as she got. Not that it wasn't a pretty picture—it certainly was, and his cock thanked her for it. The rest of him enjoyed knowing that he'd said something that left the high and mighty Slayer stumped.

"You ever tried to date a normal bloke, I bloody guarantee you'd end up facin' the trolley problem down the line," he said. "Comes down to savin' the world or savin' your beau. Even bein' the one to flip the lever yourself. You think you could stomach that, knowin' you'd dragged some poor, hapless sod into this life of yours?"

"Willow and Xander manage fine," she said.

"Do they, now? Never had to play the hero? Get them out of a jam they got into because they fancied dabblin' in your world?"

She shifted. "One of those times was your fault."

"Well, yeah. But that's the point. Sometimes you get someone like me who'll use 'em as collateral. Sometimes you get bloody Angelus, who'd think it poetic if the Slayer had to save lives by endin' one. Even more because he'd get to watch you break after." Spike shrugged and turned his attention back to the road. "Anyone who comes into your life's gonna be in danger, love. There is no normal when you're *the* girl. Gotta guess your prince knew that too."

"Then why in the world would he tell me to go for normal?"

He snorted before he could help himself. Daft little twig still had so much to learn. "Why not? It keeps you chasin' after something that doesn't exist. Somethin' that can't work in the long-term. Makes sure you'll never find anyone who hangs the stars for you like he did. That's what he wanted, love. Not for you to find your merry ever after with some bloke, but to make sure you never did."

“That’s not true.”

“No? So you’re tellin’ me you didn’t waste a load of time comparin’ every git who made eyes at you to Angel? That you didn’t have to give yourself little *it’s what Angel wants* pep talks every time you had a mind to say no?” Spike snickered and shook his head. “That bloke who came knockin’ at your mum’s door—you said you gave him your number. You do that because you really liked the pillock or because you thought it was what you were supposed to do because Angel said so?”

There was no quippy retort to that—no clever Slayer comeback designed to put him in his place. Rather, the girl frowned and studied her hands, and even more annoyingly, something in Spike’s chest twisted that felt an awful lot like regret at the sight.

Not that he had anything to regret. He didn’t. Not his fault that she hadn’t seen the bloody obvious, was it? Even if he knew intimately just how much it hurt to realize you’d been nothing but a plaything—a distraction that certain people wanted to keep within reach in case they ever got bored again.

“I knew I couldn’t have normal after I was a vampire,” she said at last. “I don’t know why I tried.”

Probably the same reason she’d tried it when she’d been alive, but he decided not to say that. Let her figure it out on her own. Instead, he said, “Got another question for you while you’re up to sharin’.”

“What?”

“Why Angel? I know why Dru moons over the sod. Never could understand what he had on you. You never seemed all that happy.”

“Oh, what, like you and Dru were?”

He shrugged, pushing down on the instinct to bite back. “We were happy enough. It was just the two of us for a nice long stretch, though not so long that she forgot how much she fancies her daddy.” Or the demented things he did to her. Where she’d gotten that yen for pain, how she loved it when it hurt so much she thought she might dust. And that Spike, though he was a quick study and could easily bend himself into whatever shape she wanted him to be, didn’t relish it the way she needed her men to relish it. Not when it came to her. There was a difference between making the wankers who had given him his nickname beg for their lives and making the woman he loved bleed just

to get her off. For a long while, he'd thought there was something wrong with him there. He'd do whatever she wanted and enjoy most of it—most, but not all. Not that part.

"So how 'bout it, Slayer," he said, shaking those thoughts away. "You ever anythin' other than painfully bored with the big brooding forehead? What fun did the two of you ever have?"

Buffy didn't respond. Not at first, at least, just kept studying her hands as though they held the answers to all of life's most evasive secrets. He couldn't tell if she was seriously mulling over what he'd asked or winding up to explode on him, and either possibility was tantalizing for what it would reveal. But she wasn't ignoring him—that he was certain. He might not know all the Slayer's moods and whims, but he could read her well enough, even at a glance, to know when she was contemplating her next move. Trying to decide how much she wanted to gamble and if she thought she could win. They were so alike in that respect.

In many respects, he was coming to learn.

"It's probably bad that I can't think of anything, right?" Buffy finally asked. "Like, we were together for a not insubstantial amount of time and all that comes to mind is the bad stuff. I guess I had a nice morning with him once after crashing at his place, but then he dumped me later that day, which was definitely not happy fun times."

Spike snorted. "What a sodding prince. Don't feel bad, pet. Only woman I imagine he ever made happy was Darla, and that was because the bint was as bloody addicted to misery as he is."

"And that's not a vampire thing?"

"You tell me. You take a new shine to misery ever since you were turned?"

"Well, I have been fucking you."

"And that's made you miserable? Reckon it's the only time you've uncorked at all."

Buffy didn't reply. Or did, just not verbally. The fresh arousal tickling his nose told him all he needed to know.

"*Fun* isn't a thing that has been exactly rampant in the life of Buffy since I became the Slayer," she said a moment later, shifting a bit, which only intensified the mouthwatering scent she was flooding the

air with. "Angel was supposed to take me ice skating one time, and that would've been fun if one of your assassins hadn't shown up."

"Now there's a thought that'll haunt me. Angel in a sodding leotard."

The burst of laughter that erupted from her was loud and sudden enough he knew he'd surprised her. And damn if that wasn't a mighty fine feeling, even if it had no right to be. He shouldn't swell with pride at making the Slayer laugh, but at this rate he wagered he could add it to the list of his other sins. Wasn't anything worse than what he'd done already.

"I guess you're right," Buffy said a moment later after she had regained control. "I never had fun with Angel. It was all doom and gloom and forbidden and...heavy. Even the things that weren't supposed to be heavy were heavy. Like they could crush me. That was being the Slayer. Just never getting a break." A pause. "Actually, I think the most fun I've had since I was called has been fighting you."

Spike straightened, tightening his grip on the steering wheel. "Yeah?"

"Don't read too much into that. I don't even know why I said it."

"Cause I keep you on your toes, Slayer," he replied, his mouth curling into a smirk before he could help it. But then he didn't want to. "Always have."

"Get over yourself."

"No fun in that, now is there?"

She didn't take the bait—pity—just crossed her arms again and made a show of staring out the passenger side window, even if she couldn't see for shit. And after a moment, Spike resigned himself to the sad fact that he wasn't about to get another suckjob on the road and tucked himself back into his jeans at last. He remained keenly aware of her as he zipped up his fly, tracked the way she tensed and seemed to follow the sound the way she would follow anything she was out hunting. The thrill of being the target of that hunt was something he doubted would ever fade, no matter how long this thing between them lasted. Not just because she was the Slayer—because she was Buffy. And like everything else where she was concerned, he didn't know how to feel about that.

Didn't know how to feel about *her*.

At last, after the quiet had stretched just a hair past tolerable, Buffy shifted again and turned to regard him. "You really think Angel will help?"

It was an earnest question, and because of that he decided to give it the consideration he would otherwise avoid. In truth, Spike hadn't thought too hard about what he expected when they got to Los Angeles. Like everything else, the decision had been rash. An idea he'd had and acted on without bothering to analyze it. But it still seemed like the right bloody move. It wasn't like he could count on the watcher being much better than Joyce, and the Slayer's friends were little more than cannon fodder without her. If the situation between his ears was as dire as Buffy seemed to think—and hell, he had no reason to doubt her—then it wasn't like he was awash in options. Angel was the closest solution and the one least likely to try to shove something pointy through his chest.

"Dunno," he said finally. "There's a chance he will, though, and that's more than we have waitin' for us back in Sunnyhell."

Buffy furrowed her brow but didn't reply, and for a moment he wondered if he ought to have just fed her some placating lie. Only it seemed Angel had already done enough of that—both before and after her death, and though he might have plenty of other faults, Spike didn't like spinning yarns. Everything he did was straightforward, if not honest, and she deserved nothing less. Not after having spent so much time being treated as a plaything.

Of course, he knew what Drusilla would say if she knew. Good thing the bitch wasn't here.

She'd laugh herself sane.



THE LAST TIME Buffy had seen Angel had been after graduation. Or after the battle of graduation, really. She'd lost him in the fray and had just convinced herself that he'd done what he'd said he do and taken off. Except he hadn't. He'd stuck around long enough to make sure she saw him, given her a good hard stare full of the goodbye he'd been

determined to deny her, then turned and walked off all dramatically into the mist.

So much had happened since that night that Buffy had trouble remembering exactly what had followed. The entire summer had been spent trying to put him behind her—or gear up for putting him behind her, a task in itself that had seemed impossible because, well, how exactly did you get over a relationship that had cost people their lives and nearly destroyed the world? She'd lost so much trying to save Angel, save their relationship while believing she was fighting for something they both wanted, that the reality of losing it had nearly crushed her. Not because he was gone or in some hell dimension or some other reason that would have been difficult but understandable, but rather because he didn't want her to spend her life with him. She'd lost so much and he'd just walked away like it was nothing.

Then college. Then Sunday. Then the fangs. That fervent hope she'd nursed that Angel would help her understand what it meant to be a vampire—that maybe eternity wouldn't suck so hard because at least it meant they could be together. That hadn't lasted long but it had been another blow all the same. One she had done her best to put behind her. He'd believed some incredibly shitty things about her just because of her change in diet, which had been a rude awakening. Made her consider him as she never had before. Or as *Buffy* never had before, since it was apparently up for debate as to whether or not she could still call herself that.

By the time she and Spike finally rolled into Los Angeles proper, having weaved through the traffic that Buffy had most definitely not missed since she'd moved away, the day had matured into afternoon. Spike wasn't hot on waiting for nightfall, despite what he'd said earlier, but conceded that they'd need to be able to book it out of Angel's building should he decide to greet them with a stake. They found a garage in which to stash the car, then capitalized on Spike's knowledge of the LA underground to get to a demon bar that thankfully kept full kegs—yes, *kegs*—of blood on tap. And given they were both starving, neither had complained about the price.

“Not like I'm going to need this for school, anyway,” she'd said, forking over a fifty squirreled away from the money she'd initially set

aside to pay for books and the first semester of student housing. By a random stroke of luck, she'd never made her way to the bank after officially dropping out of college, so the cash had been in her room, ready to be packed with everything else. Repayment plans and the like were for people who weren't dead. "Keep it coming, bartender man."

The demon behind the bar had wrinkled what she'd thought might be a nose at the words, and she and Spike had fallen into a debate as to whether she'd just insulted the creature or not that lasted until said creature returned with tall glasses brimming with red liquid. Buffy hadn't hesitated, rather snatched her glass up with such hunger some sloshed out and spilled over her fingers and started guzzling.

For around five seconds, until she realized why the blood in her mouth tasted so much better than the blood she'd been drinking the last month.

"It's human," she'd said, pulling back to glare at Spike. "Did you know it was going to be human?"

"Well, yeah," he'd replied before taking a long, deliberate drink. "Kinda the point, love. Get some real nourishment in you."

"How many times are we going to go over this?"

"You're a sodding vampire. Gonna spit this back into an open vein to call it good? Why the bloody hell do you even care?"

Buffy hadn't answered that, mostly because she hadn't wanted to examine the question too closely. The most she knew was that Buffy Summers, the real Buffy Summers, definitely would have cared. It would have bothered the real Buffy Summers to know that places like this existed, where human blood was kept in kegs and could be purchased for seven-fifty a glass. And that she was traveling with someone who had done this sort of thing enough to make a comment about that being *bloody highway robbery* even if they hadn't been in a place to be the choosiest of beggars at the time.

She also hadn't wanted to share as much with Spike. It wasn't as though he would understand, or care even if he did.

Plus, he'd had a point. The blood was there, and it wasn't like she could go find whoever had lost it to give it back. Assuming that the donor was even still alive. Add to the fact that the blood had, in fact, been delicious and it hadn't taken much persuasion to bring the glass

back to her lips so she could down the rest. Or ordering a refill. And then another after that.

At the end of it, the guilt that she felt wasn't even for the heartbeat responsible for the blood now warming her stomach. It was that she hadn't felt guilty at all.

By the time she and Spike left the bar, the sun was on the last legs of its trek across the sky, and thankfully positioned in such a way that the building's shadows provided more than enough cover to navigate the streets without catching on fire. Made for a much more comfortable walk back to Angel's place. Especially when you factored in the lack of stinky sewer smell and the pleasantly full bellies. Buffy's concern over the coming confrontation had receded considerably. Yes, they were weakened by whatever had been done to their heads and yes, that put them at a large disadvantage with Angel, but Spike was right. In the event he decided to make good on his threat, Buffy was confident she could outstrip him in speed.

All that was left was putting that to the test.

"You ready, Slayer?" Spike asked when they were outside of Angel's place, and nudged her shoulder with his.

"I don't think I'm ever going to be readier than I am right now, so let's get this over with."

"That's the spirit." He chuckled and placed a hand on the small of her back. For a second, she thought he meant to shove her ahead of him, but he waited until she stepped forward. Then he was striding alongside her rather than trying to manhandle her, and she wasn't sure why that surprised her but it did. It was the sort of thing that an ally might do, not an enemy with whom she had a reluctant and very temporary ceasefire.

Once they were inside the complex, Spike took the lead, but not overtly. Rather casually positioned himself so he was just a bit ahead of her. This also confused her, but she didn't have time to worry about it—a voice she knew very well filled the air, muffled but close, and Buffy found herself hurrying her steps without meaning to. For some stupid reason, she'd forgotten that seeing Angel meant also seeing Cordelia, and even if they hadn't been friends in the strictest sense, it would be

nice to see a familiar face. Even nicer if that face remained friendly once she remembered the whole vampire thing.

Buffy stopped just outside the door to Angel Investigations. Cordelia was complaining loudly about the quality of the takeout someone called Doyle had procured, and Angel was muttering in the back about how he didn't care because since he didn't eat so she needed to leave him out of it. Another voice, unfamiliar and very Irish, chimed in with the point that maybe Princess Cordelia needed to adjust her expectations a bit, be grateful they had anything to eat at all given how business was going. An amateur mistake for anyone dealing with Cordelia Chase, Buffy knew, and she thought it might be best to go ahead and announce herself now before her kinda friend really got started.

"If I say I can see all sides of this argument, can you guys keep the stakes in your hands and not hurled anywhere toward the chest area?" Buffy asked loudly as she helped herself through the door. Spike pressed tightly in behind her, close but not so close she felt claustrophobic. Just that he was there, supporting. It was kinda nice, in a freaky way. "Because believe me when I say we wouldn't be here if we really didn't need help."

Cordelia—looking especially fabulous in a red halter and black pencil skirt, the bitch—stared at them open-mouthed for what felt like an obscenely long time. Eventually, she blinked and turned to Angel, regarding him as one might regard something explosive. The other person in the room, presumably the owner of the Irish accent, also glanced from Buffy to Angel and back with open, unapologetic confusion until comprehension settled behind his eyes.

"I take it this is the infamous Buffy Summers," he said, standing back. "And she brought a date."

"That would be Spike," Cordelia said, having regained control of her motor skills. "The bastard who tried to kill us *how* many times?"

"Don't remember tryin' to kill you at all, ducks," Spike replied without skipping a beat, "but always nice to hear I've made an impression."

"What are you doing here?" Angel demanded, pushing his way between Cordelia and the other one. "Either of you. I thought I was

pretty clear in what I said would happen if you showed your faces around here again.”

“Look, if you think I’d book a trip to the very special hell that is any of this because I had a choice, you’ve gotten significantly stupider since we broke up,” Buffy replied, probably a little too quickly as she hadn’t given herself time to do the *filter* thing, but also, she wanted to get past this part. “We need your help.”

“That’s funny,” Angel said in a flat I’ve-never-heard-a-joke-in-my-life tone. “You came here thinking I would help you?”

She narrowed her eyes. “I think that you’re standing here because of me. I already scratched your back. Time for you to scratch mine.”

“What are you talking about?”

Oh, that was nice. Buffy swelled up, anger and irritation joining forces in that quick way they did these days. It would really serve him right if she punched him through a fucking wall. “You’re right, it wasn’t a big deal,” she said, trying and failing to keep her rising temper out of her voice. “Not memorable. You just nearly drained me to death to save your own ass.”

That did it. Some of the righteousness in Angel’s expression softened. Not all the way but some. Enough that she knew she’d hit him in the pride. “You told me to do that. *Buffy* told me to do that.”

There it was again. The accusation, the thing she couldn’t outrun. Except no, she was not backing down here. Her mom could doubt it, her friends, and her watcher, but Angel had lost that right. She wasn’t about to cower or back down from the person who had demonstrated in Technicolor the sort of difference a soul made. “News flash, I’m Buffy.”

“News flash,” he shot back, stepped forward, “*Buffy* wouldn’t have let that thing”—he pointed at Spike without taking his gaze off her—“anywhere near her. You don’t think I can smell you two all over each other?”

“I think if you think I didn’t know what a Grade A hottie Spike was from the first time I saw him, you’re deluded.” Buffy took a deliberate step forward. No backing down. No crying uncle. Angel didn’t get to win this time. “And he’s always known me, Angel. Better than you.”

Angel scoffed and tried to turn, but she seized his arm and

squeezed.

"I'm pretty sure I told you that last year, too," she went on. "When I was explaining that we couldn't be friends and I needed my distance. Distance that you, by the way, weren't all that generous with the giving. It wasn't until it was your idea that you were all gung-ho about Buffy and Angel not seeing each other anymore. And even if all of that weren't true, it still doesn't change that you're here courtesy of my blood. You needed my help to live, and now I, *we*, need yours."

"You are so bloody hot," Spike purred at her back, not even pretending to bother to keep his voice low. "Fuck, Slayer..."

"Umm, boundaries, people," Cordelia snapped. "My desk is for *work*, not vampire mating rituals."

"And barely for work, but definitely not the other thing," the Irish guy added.

"Don't worry, Cordy." Buffy kept her eyes on Angel, unblinking. "We get what we came for and we'll be out of your hair and off your desk."

It was an easy thing to say—felt good saying it, too. All the bravado she used to just exude suddenly within reach again, doing more than anything else had in recent days to make her feel like her old self. Mostly because she meant every word she'd said. They felt like Buffy words, born from Buffy thoughts and feelings, flavored with the same kind of Buffy resentment that she typically tried to swallow, except not this time. She was here for a reason, and goddammit, Angel was going to help.

He had to help. This was it—her last shot. Unless Spike had heretofore unexplored levels of brilliance he'd been saving for a rainy day, her resources were exhausted. Much as she might have doubted that going to Angel was a good move, it had still been their *only* move. And their fate was in his hands.

After what felt like an eternity, Angel broke his gaze from hers and stepped back. "Why do you need help?"

It took all her willpower not to grin. Or sag with relief. He hadn't said he'd actually do anything yet. Especially since it could all go to crap at a moment's notice. "Something happened to me and Spike back in Sunnydale. We were abducted by some scientists."

Whatever else he'd been expecting, it clearly hadn't been that. Angel frowned and crossed his arms. "You were kidnapped by scientists."

"Military types," Spike threw in. "Shoved us in a pair of cages. Mucked around with our heads."

"Your heads?" Cordelia was frowning too, glancing between the two of them. "They look like heads. Attached and everything."

"Yeah, well, they did something that made it impossible for us to fight," Buffy said, and immediately braced herself. Now was the moment—she'd just handed Angel a buttload of power. If he was going to use it, they would have just one chance to run.

"Impossible to fight?" Cordelia echoed. "What does that mean?"

"Means the Slayer and I get a splittin' headache if we so much as throw a punch," Spike said. If he was having similar misgivings, he didn't give it away, and Buffy was thankful for that. Coming here had, after all, been his idea. "We can't chase the other puppies anymore."

"And, what, that's a problem?" Angel asked. While he hadn't reached for the nearest stake, he didn't exactly look concerned, or even all that interested. "Did you really come here thinking I'd help you start hurting people again?"

"I'll have you know, I haven't hurt anyone," Buffy snapped. "No thanks to you, either."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I *died*, Angel. I was killed and vamped and maybe you forgot, but that was literally one of my worst nightmares. I asked you for help, told you I didn't want to hurt anyone, and you told me tough, Buffy's dead. You didn't even try."

There was a beat. Then another. Then Cordelia asked, soft, "Is that true?"

Angel didn't so much as glance at her. "Is what true?"

"Did she really call you and ask for help?"

He swallowed but didn't reply, which was a reply in itself. And apparently, Cordelia knew that too. The confusion in her eyes hardened into the defiance that had made her a force of nature throughout high school. "Can I get a demo?" she asked.

Buffy could have played dumb but she didn't see the point, so she

aimed a weak kick at Cordelia's shin, hoping that maybe not using a ton of force would translate to less of a headache. No such luck. Her brain exploded with fire and the rest of her seized, her muscles tensing and everything going white behind her eyes. Her legs buckled and she thought she might just go down, but then Spike had her by the upper arms, his fingers digging into her skin as he hauled her back to his chest.

"Umm, ow," Cordelia said, and for a wild moment Buffy thought she was commenting on what she'd witnessed, but Cordelia was rubbing at her shin as though she had gotten the short end of that stick. "You could have hit Angel, you know. At least he's done something to deserve it."

"Thanks," Angel said dully.

"I was hoping that if I didn't really mean for it to hurt, it wouldn't hurt *me* as much," Buffy gritted through her teeth. "So much for that."

"*That* was you not meaning for it to hurt?" Cordelia scowled and shook her head. "Damn. You're welcome, Angel."

Angel sighed his *I know what's best for everyone* sigh. The one that had gotten under Buffy's skin well before she'd had a good reason to want to punch him in the face. Now that she had a reason, it was only by virtue of her still-ringing head that she managed to keep her fists where they were.

"Okay, so, we need to figure out what's going on." Cordelia turned to the Irish guy. "Doyle, you know how you're a low life who knows a lot of low lives? It's about to come in handy. Put some feelers out there and see if you can get any info on what's going on in Sunnydale."

"Since you asked so nicely," Doyle replied dryly. "I suppose I could poke around."

"Cordelia—" Angel started, but for all the attention she paid him, he might as well have been invisible.

"Buffy," Cordelia said, whirling back around. "You and I? We're not friends. But what's going on with you isn't cool. And here at Angel Investigations, we help the helpless. Looks like you and your reject new boyfriend qualify."

"Oi!" Spike snapped, squeezing Buffy's arms from where he still held her. "I'm not bloody helpless."

"Or my boyfriend," Buffy added as though that mattered. Only it seemed to, considering how much she liked the holding thing.

Cordelia rolled her eyes and waved a hand through the air. "Undead fuck buddy, whatever. You guys can stay at my place until we figure this out. But you're *paying* customers, understand? We don't do pro-bono work."

"Cordelia, you can't—" Angel began again.

"It's fine," Cordelia said with another hand wave. "After that display, I'm not worried about them doing anything to me, and even if they tried, it's not like I don't have backup." She pinned her gaze on Buffy. "My roommate will kick your ass into the sun if you or your not-boyfriend so much as lay a hand on me. Do we understand each other?"

Buffy was beginning to think she might have made the wrong call her first day at Sunnydale High. This was way easier than talking to Willow. "You have a roommate?"

"And he will kick your ass," she said again.

"Sounds awesome. Can't wait to meet him." Buffy turned to look over her shoulder, catching Spike's gaze. "You'll play nice?"

He snorted and rolled his eyes, just as she'd known he would. "Not like I have a choice, is it?"

"Not even a little one. Glad we agree."

There was another scoff, but she would have sworn she caught a twinkle in his baby blues. A twinkle that made her stomach do an unplanned somersault. Standing here, between the vampire she was fucking and the vampire who had fucked her, Buffy was hit with the realization that she understood one a lot more than the other. And not the one she would have thought.

That realization was chased by another. Even on a day like this, a day where she'd lost what little she'd had left to lose, she'd also managed to have fun with him. The sort of fun she'd never had with Angel.

Spike had become the best thing in her life, and if that wasn't fucked up, she didn't know what was.

AH, AH, AH, YEAH

HE WANTED TO TAKE CREDIT FOR IT. WHATEVER HAD HAPPENED with the Slayer between bolting from her mum's and getting into Angelus's face, her uncertainty had gone and the magnificent, brassy bitch she'd always been was calling the shots. Spike wasn't crazy—something had changed. Could be she'd seen a bit of what he'd told her in the car, could be the sheer desperation of having nowhere else to turn. In the end, the why didn't matter so much as the results. And those Buffy had delivered, all without flashing a bit of fang.

That was what had driven him crackers in the first place. From the start, she hadn't been conventional. He'd fought slayers with families waiting at home, that wasn't unusual. Everyone came from somewhere, even the Chosen girl. But Buffy had been the first whose family and friends hadn't been content to sit around and wait for her to give the all-clear. She'd defied everything he'd known about slayers from the word go. And in that regard, it had been bloody barmy for him to think she'd be any different as a vampire. The very thing that defined who she was with a pulse would be amplified without one. He'd just never met another like her.

Another like him.

And fuck, if that thought wasn't heady.

“Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing,” Angel said, drawing Spike out of his pleasant Buffy-fueled thoughts and forcing him back to the more annoying present. It had taken some persuading, but the ponce had finally consented to give them access to his bloody bat cave and all its useful amenities, like the fridge stocked full of blood. Human blood at that, and wouldn’t that figure.

Buffy had looked more annoyed than scandalized when she’d gotten a whiff but hadn’t said a thing before helping herself to a bag. Not that she’d needed it at that point. They’d both been full by the time they’d left the bar. Just seemed like she was staking her claim on whatever she could while she was here. It wouldn’t make up for what she’d lost or the lies the wanker had told her, but if it made her feel better then Spike wasn’t about to stop her. Annoying Angel was just a bonus.

Angel, who had taken a seat at the table in his kitchen, making a big show about reclining back as though he hadn’t a care in the world what Spike saw or touched.

Too bad Spike knew him better than that.

“What I’m doin’ is waiting for your mate to get back with news about what happened to my noggin,” Spike replied, not tearing his gaze from the pair of swords Angel had decided to turn into wall art. They looked nice, sturdy; the sort that would cut through his grand-sire’s gut like butter. Mighty tempting if not for the fact that he’d earn himself a headache and likely also get them evicted without ceremony. So instead, he turned toward the splatter of water from the shower Buffy had insisted on taking and tried to think of more pleasant diversions, although he didn’t much like the thought of her standing naked in the bastard’s space. He understood why she needed a wash, even if she’d had one just that morning. And it wasn’t like she was anything to him but a pleasant pastime so he was better off not fixating.

Get whatever had been done to his head reversed, get the Gem, get Buffy dead, get Dru. That was the plan. Nothing had changed there. No matter how much he was enjoying her company at the moment. He was just taking the scenic route to the same destination.

“You think you can use Buffy to get back at me,” Angel continued in that same calm, holier-than-thou voice. Too bad Spike couldn’t rip his tongue out just now. “You think that’ll make us even for Dru.”

Spike's jaw went tight. "It'd take more than that to make us even from where I'm standing."

"So you admit it."

"Only thing I'm admittin' is I'm havin' a great time with your ex. She's the only part of the last couple of days that made any of this bearable." Never mind the times where they had been at each other's throats, though he couldn't say he minded that, either. Fighting with Buffy was just as brilliant as fucking her. It was the same rush, the same excitement, the same passion, and it was intoxicating. Addictive.

Just like the rest of her.

Spike swallowed and did his best to shove that thought back. It was a dangerous thing to exist, especially since he still had every intention of wiping her dust off his hands after they got this rot with their heads sorted out. Would be a sight harder to convince Dru that the Slayer meant nothing to him if he let her live. She already had the wrong idea as it was.

Or maybe she saw what you didn't. Wouldn't be the first time.

Yeah, that thought needed to be shoved back, too.

"It's not the same, you know," Angel said.

"What's that?"

"Buffy. Whatever you're doing with her. It's not the same as me taking Dru away from you. For starters, Dru was never yours."

There it was again. More of that old tension, spreading from his jaw down his neck and across his shoulders, making his spine go rigid and his fists ball with fury. Spike turned his head away, fixed his gaze on the door through which Buffy had disappeared a few minutes earlier. The shower was still running and she was under it, scrubbing her hands into all that supple flesh that had been Angel's to explore once, though not anymore. Would serve the bastard right if Spike decided to just stroll in there now, shedding clothes as he went so he could listen to the sounds she made when she had someone worthy between her legs.

"For another thing, that's not Buffy," his wanker of a grandsire went on. "No matter what she says or thinks. You can't get back at me with her because Buffy is dead."

Spike snorted and rolled his eyes at that, relaxing somewhat. "That really what you tell yourself? Thought it was just a line."

"I'd know better than anyone, wouldn't I?"

"What? 'Cause you're not the same when your muzzle's off? What exactly is it that you think a soul is, Angelus?" Spike turned back to him, wanting to catch his face. "You're a self-involved wanker with one and without. Sniffin' around pretty young virgins that you can't wait to sully. Callin' the shots even when they're not yours to call, viewin' your word as law and your word alone. Sounds the same to me."

"Sounds a lot more like you running your mouth about things you don't understand."

"Really? Tell me where I'm wrong. Tell me she was spinning yarns about you not acceptin' it when she demanded space because it wasn't *your* idea. We both know you can't. You didn't pack up and leave town then, you stuck around long enough that the girl came crawlin' back. That doesn't sound familiar to you?"

Angel blinked, which might not be much of a victory to anyone who didn't know him, but Spike did. Getting the wanker to betray anything at all meant something. "It wasn't like that," he said.

"No, of course not. How was that, again?"

"I did what I had to do even though it killed me. Something you couldn't possibly understand."

"Just that thick, I suppose."

"Among other failings, yes."

"You wanna talk to me about failings?" Spike replied, now facing him in full. "You abandoned the girl."

"I left town."

"Not *then*, Angelus. She got herself in a pickle and reached out to you for help. You told her you'd kill her if you ever saw her again. That she was a monster."

"That's what happens when a vampire is made, Spike. But again, I wouldn't expect you to understand. You can't."

Right. This muck again. "And if you *understood* the Slayer even half as well as you claim to, you'd see that she hasn't changed a lick where it counts."

"Because you would know."

"Better than you. I know slayers. Know Buffy, too." There was a metallic groan as the water in the other room shut off, and in spite of

himself, Spike experienced a thrill of excitement. If he could do anything for Buffy in the time they had together, it would be this—freeing her of a world where she was jumping through hoops for Angel’s approval. She’d come close in the time they’d spent together but he wasn’t daft; once the plonker had his claws in a girl, she couldn’t be wrestled free with words alone. She had to fight for it, realize just how much she stood to gain by stepping out from under his shadow. It was what Dru had never managed to do—had never *wanted* to do, happy as she was to continue performing for him. But Buffy didn’t want that—he could see she didn’t. She wanted out, and Christ, he’d do that for her. “Girl’s been forcin’ herself to live the way you never could. Remember China? You crawlin’ back to us, tail between your legs, pretendin’ you could be your bad self so Darla would rub your belly and save you from bein’ a stray for the rest of your miserable days? Buffy’s been doin’ the same only because she actually wants it. She’s not playin’ a part. This is who she is.”

“She might think that, but that’s not the way it works.”

“No, it’s not the way it worked *for you*. And that’s the rub, innit? You see enough that the Slayer hasn’t changed and this pretty little lie you’ve told yourself falls apart.” Spike closed the distance between them and slammed his hands down on the table hard enough that the metal creaked and the legs threatened to topple. “Didn’t have much to live for back then, did you? Darla tossed you out on your arse and you spent the next few decades feelin’ sorry for yourself and puttin’ distance between the monster you’d been and the sad sack you became. Then suddenly, you spot a girl and decide you have somethin’ to live for after all, and lucky you, your evil days are a distant bloody memory. So far back they might as well not count for rot. That is until you got let out of your cage, and now all those distant victims aren’t quite so distant anymore. Makes a bit of difference, doesn’t it, when you have to look them in the eye day after day. So you convince yourself that there’s some grand sodding divide between who you are with a soul and who you are without and if it’s true for *you*, by George, it’s got to be true for her too. Otherwise there goes the lie and you gotta find a different way to live with yourself.”

Angel just blinked up at him, his arms crossed and a supremely bored look on his face. "Are you done?"

"Yeah, think so." Bloody good timing, too. He felt the moment she entered the room, escorted on a wave of steam he would forgive for smelling like Angel's shampoo. "And you are, too. Think she's gotten a good look at exactly the sort of bloke you've always been. No longer livin' by the Gospel According to Angelus. Just her hard luck it took dyin' to do it."

Buffy sidled up behind him, placed a hand on the small of his back, making him relax in spite of himself. Then tense all over again as he realized it. That had been a trick of Dru's—only Dru, point of fact. She'd had this calming quality about her that few people had seen and even fewer appreciated. All she'd have to do was touch him and he'd teeter back from whatever temper he found himself in and grab hold of his senses. There was no reason for the Slayer to have the same ability. If anything, she should provoke more outrage just by virtue of being her. She was why he was in this mess, after all. If Dru hadn't gotten it in her head that he was fixated on the girl, he never would have come back to Sunnyhell. Would right now be enjoying the sweet life in Rio de Janeiro and picking up some scrappy tourist for dinner.

He *wouldn't* be in sodding Los Angeles lecturing Angel on what exactly he'd cost himself by walking out of Buffy's life.

What the fuck was she doing to him?

"Whatever you're fighting about, it's not worth it," Buffy said, and before he could so much as tell her he agreed, and to sod off, stop touching him, she pressed her lips against his nape in a soft caress that siphoned out all his budding resentment.

That was it. All it took. Her presence and her touch and her mouth, so sweet against his skin, and all the tension melted anew. No matter that thinking about her, about whatever this was between them, was what had put it there. Buffy had kissed him and that burned away everything else, made him feel whole in ways he hadn't for a long bloody time. Since before her. Before Prague.

And on the cusp of that realization came a truly terrible thought. One that had been there on the periphery, dancing along the edges of his awareness for days.

It was impossible. It couldn't be true.
Because if it was, he was fully bugged.



DOYLE RETURNED to Angel Investigations with empty hands and a hapless shrug, claiming that as far as he could tell, not a single one of his contacts had heard about anything screwy going on in Sunnydale, and certainly nothing involving the military. Though that could be due to a number of things—while the government wasn't great at keeping secrets, they could *sometimes* get their act together enough when it mattered, and anything involving hell beasts was sure to qualify.

"So you have nothing," Buffy had replied, leaning back against Cordelia's desk. "Thank you, that's very helpful."

"Now, hold on, darlin', I didn't say I have nothing," Doyle had replied. "I did happen to hear a little somethin'-somethin' about a place in town that might be worth a visit."

"Worth a visit for who?"

"You two." He'd thrown Spike a careful look before returning his attention to her. "I don't know the full story, so don't eat the messenger, but word is you go there and the bloke who's in charge can read your aura, or tell your future, see your destiny—get you on the right path for wherever it is you need to go." A shrug. "Might be there's somethin' there that'll help."

"Sounds like a load of bunk," Spike had observed, and Buffy had been inclined to agree with him. But considering this was literally the only option they had, she'd figured they couldn't afford to be choosy beggars and agreed to accompany Doyle to the one of the most promising up and coming hotspots in LA.

Which happened to be a demon bar.

"Actually, this makes sense," Buffy said, scouring the crowd of patrons—from the human-looking to the mildly horrific—that were hunched over tables, seated at the bar, and even one on what was undoubtedly a stage, crooning lyrics she didn't recognize to the tune of a song she did. "Everyone knows Willy's is where you go if you want to get information back home. Or double-crossed. Often both."

"Did it have to be bloody karaoke, though?" Spike drawled, eyeing the stage. The crooner definitely was not human, unless humans came with tentacles and three extra eyes. Its skin had a moistish quality that, when paired with the full package, made Buffy think of calamari. "Got sensitive ears, y'know. Don't fancy sacrificin' them to a sodding gylmock demon butcherin' the Beatles."

"That's the Beatles?" Buffy echoed. "I don't think they put out any albums in that language."

"What I've heard is that's how it works," Doyle said, sidling between them. Cordelia was right behind him, having apparently ditched Angel, who had been grumping loudly as he searched for a parking spot. The current source of his displeasure—the fact that everyone had crowded into his vehicle. There had been plenty of room and Spike had reasoned it didn't make sense to drag out the DeSoto since they were all heading to the same place. Secretly, Buffy figured Spike was just doing whatever he could to get on Angel's nerves for the hell of it, which she should probably discourage but didn't because, well, it was funny.

"What's how this works?" Spike asked, an edge to his voice.

"The chap who owns the joint—that's him there." He pointed to a tall green demon in a white suit who had very red eyes and two little red baby horns to match. "Dunno what kind of demon he is, but whatever it is, he can see things about you when you sing."

Buffy frowned and pulled her gaze off the green guy. "Uh, what?"

"Look, I can't make it make sense. Like I said, It's what I've heard," Doyle said. "You belt out a tune, and he can read you, put you on your path."

"You've never tried it?"

Doyle huffed a sound that might have been a laugh. "Just found out about the place, didn't I? But on that note, there ain't enough liquor in Los Angeles County to get me up on that stage. Also, figure if there are any urgent memos, I gotta direct line to the Powers that they can use to ring me up."

"Huh?"

"He gets visions," Cordelia said, butting her way between Doyle

and Buffy. "You'll know it's happening because he's way dramatic about it."

"They bloody hurt!" Doyle protested.

"You're such a pansy."

"Like to see you have a go." Doyle huffed again and looked around her at Buffy. "Skull-splittin' migraine's what happens, and if you're lucky, you get flashes of somethin' the Powers want your ex-honey to hunt down or stop or what have you."

The skull-splitting migraine part sounded familiar at least, and despite herself, Buffy felt a twinge of what might have been sympathy for the man who had just announced that his grand solution to their problem was to get her on stage. She shifted her focus to Spike, expecting to find him in a similar state of exasperation, but to her surprise, he didn't look annoyed. Weird on multiple fronts because Spike was *always* annoyed. Usually at her.

"So we go up, do a dance, and that bloke'll tell us what's goin' on with our heads?" he asked.

"I didn't say that," Doyle retorted rather emphatically. "In fact, I'm *not* saying that. I can't tell you what he'll say or what he'll see or if he'll even see anything, just that I know a guy who knows a guy and based on what that guy said, this here might be the best shot you have."

As far as ringing endorsements went, this one left a lot to be desired. But apparently, Spike was just desperate enough to give it a try—or he had no shame when it came to his singing voice. Now that she thought about it, he probably had a very nice singing voice, his regular speaking voice already being all low and sexy. Whereas she sounded like a screech owl whenever she decided to show off her vocal range—something she typically reserved only for the shower and the car. And that one time she'd been kinda drugged and had had "Macho Man" stuck in her head.

Though she had to admit, the thought of getting up on stage in front of all these demons didn't wig her out as much as she would have thought. Like, she wasn't necessarily wild about the idea but was also not about to run screaming for the exit. Turned out Vampire Buffy didn't care all that much. Which might be further

evidence that she wasn't Buffy but now was not the time to ruminate.

"All right," Buffy said, squaring her shoulders. "How do we get our names on the list for karaoke?"

As though summoned by the question—and for all she knew, maybe he was—the green demon in the white suit seemed to just materialize before them. "Well, if you two aren't the most scumdiddlyumptious things I've laid my poor eyes on in a long time?" he said by way of greeting, throwing an arm over Buffy's shoulder. "Little vampire Barbie dolls, the both of you." He turned and favored Spike—Doyle having chosen that moment to amscray—with an appraising look before closing his other arm around him. "Though he might be a tad Punk Barbie. Complete with your very own entourage."

Buffy glanced over her shoulder in time to see a very scowly Angel come through the door, where Cordelia and Doyle stood, watching the exchange, before her attention was snapped back to the green demon now steering her toward the stage. "I'm just assuming the two of you are a set," the green guy continued. "Everything here just goes together. Love the leather, by the way. Is that vintage?"

Spike looked vaguely railroaded, which Buffy couldn't help but find endearing and hilarious. He'd been all gung-ho a moment ago. Maybe being called a Barbie had caused his brain to malfunction.

"We're here together, yes," Buffy said when the green guy's enthusiasm started to melt into confusion. "Something happened to us back in Sunnydale. We want answers and someone said this is where we find them."

"Well, someone was right," the green guy replied without a trace of ego. Just straight forward *those are the facts, ma'am*. And though she knew it was premature, Buffy's confidence began to tick upward. "So since you're here together, you two good going *up* together? Or is Billy Idol a solo act?"

That snapped Spike out of whatever fugue he'd landed in. At once, he reeled back, his eyes bright and furious. "Oi! I'll have you know that git stole *my* bloody look. Then he went off and made himself famous, never once mentioning where the inspiration came from. Fucking ungrateful sod."

“Billy Idol stole your look?” Buffy blurted. Here she’d always thought it was the other way around. “Is that true?”

Somehow, Spike managed to become even more indignant at the question. “Bloody yes, it’s true. Right before the berk hit it big, too. We were at this club where he was testin’ out some material with the other members of Chelsea, and he started makin’ eyes at Dru. She was in one of her snits so she decided to string him along. Was one of her favorite games, see. Push me as far as she could until I snapped or—”

“Darlings,” the green guy interjected with what sounded like extremely forced patience, “fascinating as this is, truly, people do not come here for back story. They come to be entertained, and maybe to learn a little something-something about themselves. Can’t do that until you sing your fool hearts out. Pick a song, any song, and let’s get this show on the road.”

As quickly as he had appeared, the green demon vanished into the throng. Buffy swore she blinked and he was across the room, schmoozing with what looked like a slime-covered demon with large, dripping antlers. The sight of which made Spike scowl for some reason, though she supposed he could be frustrated with their host, who had yet to be as helpful as Doyle had indicated.

“What do you want to sing?” Buffy asked, tugging on his coat. “Help me pick.”

“Don’t care,” he replied without looking at her. “This whole thing’s a bloody waste of time.”

“But we’re gonna do it, right? It’s not like we’re overflowing with options here.”

“Bloody hell, woman, just pick somethin’.”

Buffy bristled at that, some of her own nerves starting to wear thin. He’d been so weird since they’d arrived. Well, granted, Spike had always been weird in ways she was relating to more and more these days, but she could do without the crabbiness or the attitude, especially if it was pointed at her. A thought she carried with her over to the place where she could flip through the song options—by herself since he didn’t seem to care—and didn’t release as she started to search the catalog. And maybe it was because the green guy had called them Barbies or because she knew Spike would have kittens when he real-

ized what she'd signed him up for, but when her eyes scanned over the title of a certain song that had been on every radio station two years ago, the part of her that was definitely evil decided it needed to be fed.

Besides, she was sure he deserved it for reasons beyond being in a snit.

"Song selected," Buffy informed him after turning over the information to the chick of unknown demon origin who was running the stage. "Probably not one you know, but they promised that the words would be there so you can chime in at your part."

Spike huffed to show he'd heard but didn't otherwise respond. He was still glaring at the slime-covered antler creature. And after around fifteen seconds of the silent treatment, something inside of Buffy snapped.

"What is up with you?" she demanded, seizing hold of his arm. "Did the Billy Idol comment really upset you *that* much?"

He whipped his head toward her with a growl. A *growl*. At *her*. Honestly, he was cruising for such a bruising.

"That's a chaos demon," he snapped, pointing in the direction of Mr. Antlers.

"Okay? And?"

"The sodding demon Dru left me for last year."

Well, Buffy could say she definitely hadn't been expecting that. She chanced a not-so-conspicuous look in Antlers's direction, this time less as a slayer or a vampire and more as a single, unattached woman whose ex-boyfriend was in the crowd and could stand to have his face rubbed in how thoroughly she'd moved on. Though she almost immediately wished she hadn't as Antlers was seriously gross. It looked like it was dripping snot. "The same one?" she asked. "Literally that thing?"

"No," Spike practically snarled, glaring at her. "Don't be thick."

"You just said it was the demon Dru—"

"The same *kind* of demon, you silly bint."

"Okay, fine. So it's the same kind of demon. What the hell does that matter?"

Though the longer she looked at it, the more Buffy could see why it mattered. Spike was a good-looking guy. Like, amazingly good-looking. He was also a great kisser and...well, everything he did with his mouth

was on her plus list. Antlers... He looked gross. Also looked like he *smelled* gross, which made Buffy grateful for the fact that not breathing was an option. She didn't want to inhale around him if she could help it. The fact that Drusilla had left Spike at all when he was so devoted to her, let alone for something that was so...*that*...really reinforced the whole *insane* thing. And she could see where Spike's incredulity had come from.

"I'm sorry," she said, surprising him and herself, for she hadn't meant to say anything, and she certainly hadn't been prepared to mean it. But at least she had his attention back—he was staring at her like he'd never heard an apology before and didn't know what the words meant. "I mean... Come on, that guy's all gross and stuff. You might be an enormous pain in the ass, but you're not gross."

For a long moment, there was nothing. Nothing except Spike looking at her like he had no idea what to do with her. Then finally, his eyes went dark. He'd apparently decided on anger.

"It's your fault," he said in a low, dangerous tone that couldn't help but turn her on a little—god help her, she liked Spike rumbly and pissed off. "She left because I was *covered* in you. And look at where I ended up. You're bloody poison, is what you are."

That was less fun, more hurtful. "I didn't do anything!"

"Because of you, I'm in sodding Los Angeles in a karaoke bar and she's off god knows where lettin' god knows who do god knows what to her. And you're makin' me—"

"Making you *what*? I didn't ask for any of this!"

"Not havin' a bad time, though, are you?"

Great, now his temper was starting to rub off on her. She seized him by the lapels of his duster and started dragging him bodily toward the stage where—yes—the green guy had gone up to announce them. This was not the time for one of his woe-is-me-Drusilla mood swings. "I get it. You hate me, I hate you, we're dusting each other once this is all over," Buffy hissed as he righted himself, his eyes positively blazing now. "You haven't been exactly subtle on that point." Though she'd thought they might have been getting along better, what with the talk in the car and the sharing blood at that bar and how he'd reacted to her yelling at

Angel, but all that proved was she was an idiot who didn't know the first thing about vampires. Not even becoming one had helped her in that regard. "Right now, though? We have a stupid fucking song to sing so we can figure out how to get back to killing each other."

"This is all a load of bollocks."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Won't know until we try, will we?"

Spike glared at her a beat longer, his nostrils all flared and his cheeks sucked in, and she hated how good he looked. How much his anger appealed to her, and that she had no chance of hiding it from him. Thankfully, the moment didn't last, and her reluctant travel companion had turned to stomp up the stage just as the green demon finished his introduction and the first notes of the song she'd selected blasted through the speakers.

"The fuck is this?" Spike snapped, looking around. "Slayer—"

"Hi, Ken!" Buffy replied, bouncing up to join him, where she grabbed his arm again and pointed at the screen bearing the lyrics.

"What did you call me?"

"Sure, Ken!"

"They bloody rhymed *Ken* with *Ken*?"

Buffy rolled her eyes and snatched the mic off the stand. Fine. She'd do this on her own. She sure as hell was *not* missing her cue. "*I'm a Barbie girl, in a Barbie world. Life in plastic, it's fantastic.*" She turned to Spike in time to fall into his glare, but he would not ruin this for her. "*You can brush my hair,*" she sang into his face, "*undress me everywhere. Imagination. Life is your creation.*"

She pointed again to the screen, fully expecting him to go on ignoring her. Instead, to her shock, he seized the microphone, brought it to his mouth, and recited, "*Come on, Barbie. Let's go party.*"

The monotone was too much. Like he had completely checked out of the absurdity of the situation. *Spike*, who was the king of absurd. Who had told her that he was going to show her how to embrace her inner vampire, which she knew included having fun. And everything else aside—the situation with their heads, getting kicked out of her house, showing up on her ex's doorstep begging for help he hadn't wanted to give—being in a demon karaoke bar singing pop songs in the

hope that someone would tell her her fortune was *fun*. It had to be, or it'd just be weird.

Besides, while Spike had clearly heard the song before, he'd never really listened to it. Buffy was going to change that.

"I'm a Barbie girl in a Barbie world. Life in plastic, it's fantastic. You can brush my hair, undress me everywhere." It was the second time the line had left her lips, but she took care to enunciate in the right place—including a hip roll probably didn't hurt either—and thank god, it worked. Spike's eyebrows perked, dropping his gaze to admire the way she was throwing her body into the song. And bye-bye scowl, hello horny look. *"Imagination, life is your creation."*

Spike brought his eyes back to hers and that was it—the switch had flipped.

"I'm a blonde, bimbo girl, in a fantasy world. Dress me up, make me talk, I'm your dolly," she sang boldly, not looking away from him.

He leaned in to sing his line—really sing it this time—watching her with an intensity that would have made a human Buffy blush.

"You're my doll, rock'n'roll, feel the glamour and pain. Kiss me here"—he pointed to his lips—*"touch me there"*—he pointed at his crotch, then threw in an eyebrow waggle—*"banky panky."*

"You can touch," Buffy sang back, and oh god, this time he did. Wrapped an arm around her waist and hauled her to him, his blue eyes blazing with challenge and lust, and she had no idea how he did that. How he could go from one extreme to the next on a dime, but he had, and this was better. Spike looking at her like he wanted to eat her, like maybe he would, crowd of people or not. *"You can play. You can say I'm always yours. Ooohoo."*

Spike curled his lip and leaned as though to kiss her, but she turned away before he could, throwing herself into the rhythm of the performance. *"I'm a Barbie girl in a Barbie world. Life in plastic, it's fantastic."* She whirled around and found Spike grinning at her as though he knew exactly what she was doing. *"You can brush my hair, undress me everywhere. Imagination, life is your creation."*

"Come on, Barbie, let's go party," Spike sang back to her.

"Ah, ah, ah, yeah."

"Oooh abh ooh. Oooh abh ooh." Buffy used the musical break, brief as it

was, to glance into the crowd—probably not advisable but call her curious. And as though her eyes knew exactly where to go, she found Angel immediately.

And boy, was he ever *not* happy. She suddenly knew what Spike meant when he said things like *if looks could stake*, what with the Cro-Magnon scowl he was rocking. Though what, exactly, he was so mad about, she couldn't say. That she was singing a stupid pop song, that she was flirting with Spike, that Spike had forgotten he was in a snit of his own and was flirting back. Groping her in increasingly bold places while he was at it, practically devouring her with his eyes. Making it way clear what he intended to do with her when they were alone again.

Which in turn just made Angel glower even harder. Had his forehead always been that big?

"Make me walk, make me talk, do whatever you please," Buffy sang, circling Spike, dragging her fingers along his back and shoulders. *"I can act like a star. I can beg on my knees."*

She dropped to her knees on impulse, licking her lips as she eyed the bulge in his jeans.

And Spike didn't miss a beat. He seized her by the back of the head and drew her close. *"Come jump in, bimbo friend, let us do it again. Hit the town, fool around, let's go party."*

Buffy held his gaze as she pushed herself to her feet again. *"You can touch."* He grabbed her ass. *"You can play."* He gave it a squeeze. *"You can say I'm always yours."* He nipped at her mouth, grinning. *"You can touch. You can play. You can say I'm always yours."*

The rest of the song was several repeats of the chorus along with another, *"Come on Barbie, let's go party,"* exchange, all of which Buffy performed with similar abandon. Prancing around Spike on the stage, rubbing up against him, pressing her breasts and ass against his chest and into his hands, occasionally stealing glances at Angel and his increasingly stony expression. She knew Spike had noticed as well, as he likewise threw himself into his role, feeding off the energy she gave him until she was certain the green guy was going to storm the stage and start spraying them with a hose.

Not that it would stop her. Odds were Spike would look just as hot soaking wet as he did dry. Better, even. His T-shirt would be all clingy.

Finally, the song reached its end, and probably not a moment too soon. Buffy put every bit of her cheerleader pep into the final lines, bouncing on her toes and declaring, “Oh, I’m having so much fun!” in an exaggerated squeak that almost hurt her voice.

“Well, Buffy,” Spike replied, drawing her close once more. And no, she so didn’t miss that he’d said her name. Nor did she think it was an accident. “We’re just getting started.”

Something told her that was very, very true. Even if what she said next was not. “Oh, I love you, Ken!”

And just like that, it was over. The music was replaced by the sound of applause—not wild, standing ovation applause or anything, but definitely more enthusiastic than the demon that had been on stage before them. She even got a couple of wolf whistles, which persuaded her to take the sort of deep bow that would ensure everyone in the front row got a good look down her shirt.

Why not? If she was embracing the whole *evil* thing.

“All right, you crazy kids,” came the voice of the green demon, who once again materialized as though out of nowhere, wearing a smile that straddled the line between sincere and strained. He threw an arm around each of them and, very purposefully, steered them away from each other. Then, to the patrons filling the bar, he said, “I’m gonna pop off for a quick chat with Mr. and Mrs. Mattel, but I leave you in excellent paws with Miss Ulrica, here to howl her way into our hearts with her rendition of ‘Bad Moon Rising.’”

Then Buffy was being ushered rather forcibly off the stage as a scrappy woman who smelled enough like Oz to identify as *werewolf* came out to a round of polite applause. The green guy kept his grip firm, steering her and Spike together toward a corner booth close-ish to the stage but also far enough away from it and others to create the illusion of privacy. To her surprise, Spike didn’t look at her before immediately assuming the spot nearest the wall—she was so used to the men she was with insisting on a spot they didn’t have to wriggle into that it took her a moment and a nudge from their chaperone to fall into the vacant space beside him.

“Well,” the green demon said, sliding onto the bench across from

them, “the most I can say is boy am I glad I voted against Family Friendly Fridays.”

“Right, because that’s not a terrible idea by itself,” Buffy replied without thinking. Then, at the look she received, went on, “Because, you know, Friday night. Date night. No self-respecting demon wants to bring their honey to a bar where there are a bunch of rambunctious kids running around.”

“I see your point, but come on, the alliteration does half the marketing for me. And Fridays aren’t as meaningful to demons as they are to humans.”

Spike snorted and shook his head. “They are if you’re hungry, mate.”

“Sorry, I’m not that kind of demon.”

“What kind of demon are you, anyway?” Buffy asked, again without thinking.

“The not-answering-rude-questions kind. But you can call me the Host. Or”—he winced—“Lorne, but I don’t want to hear a single word about—”

“Lorne as in Lorne Greene?” She couldn’t keep the giggle out of her voice. “Someone got their ass kicked a lot in grade school.”

The green demon, or *Lorne*, favored her with a scowl that bordered on a pout, an expression that shouldn’t look so at-home on the face of any demon yet he wore without issue. “Ouch. Here I thought you were the nice one.”

Out of her periphery, she saw Spike lift his shoulders. “Takin’ baby steps to be a proper vampire, this one is.”

The Host, Lorne, whatever he wanted to be called rolled his head back with a much put-upon sigh. “I knew this about you two and yet I sat down anyway. That much is on me, I can admit.”

Well, consider her interest piqued. Buffy sat up straighter. “You knew what? And how? Are you saying you really can see something when people sing?”

Lorne leveled his focus again upon her. “In order. Honeys, your auras are so similar it’s hard to tell them apart. When they were cutting this one from the cloth”—he hung a thumb at Spike—“they sure made sure to save the fabric. And yes, I saw a whole wallop in’ lot

when you two decided to do that mating dance up on my stage. I wouldn't complain but let's just say there are patrons who might wanna follow your footsteps who are nowhere near as easy on the eyes."

Buffy turned her head to catch more of Spike's face. He was leaning against the wall, sort of tucked into the corner, and ready with a suggestive flick of his eyebrow when their gazes met. And maybe she should have been embarrassed or apologetic or any number of more appropriate things, but all Buffy could summon was a laugh.

She was at a demon bar where she'd just performed on stage with *Spike* and it had been hands-down the most fun she'd had since she'd died. More than that, the most liberated she'd felt in...she didn't even know how long, but *long*. Free of presumptions, of responsibility, of anything except the moment itself, in which she got to choose and she'd chosen Buffy Summers as she was, not Buffy Summers as Giles or her friends or her mom or Angel wanted her to be. The weight of expectation had fallen away, leaving behind someone she hardly recognized because it had been so long since she'd truly seen her.

She wouldn't regret that, and she sure as hell wouldn't apologize. Especially not to a demon who had yet to prove his worth.

"So what'd you see?" she asked when she turned back. "Do you know why we can't throw a punch without a migraine?"

"Whoa there, gumdrop," Lorne replied, bringing his hands up. "You gonna take me out to dinner first?"

"I could make *you* dinner if you like."

"Rawr. Kitty's got claws." He glanced at Spike. "I'd tell you to be careful with this one, but something tells me that's part of the appeal."

"Always has been, mate."

At that, Buffy couldn't help but preen a little. Maybe a lot.

Lorne huffed and snapped his fingers at what she assumed was a waiter passing the booth, for a colorful drink was in his hand when he pulled it back. "Mmm. Esteban costs an arm and a leg, but he makes a Sea Breeze that'll knock your socks off, throw them in the laundry, and return them to you smelling Snuggles fresh."

"Esteban?"

He gestured with the hand holding the cocktail. "My bartender.

Seriously, man's a genius. You should see what he gets up to with our specialty blood."

"Just answers please," Buffy said with forced patience. "What did you see? And please tell me before I start asking less nicely."

Lorne smirked. "Ask however you like, dollface, but prepare to be thrown around if you get punchy. Caritas is under a very special sanctuary spell. Keeps our regulars from *regularly* spilling blood, if you catch my drift." He threw back a healthy gulp of Sea Breeze, or whatever he was drinking, then placed the glass on the table. "That said, I suppose I can respect that you want to get down to business, so here goes. Whatever's going on in your heads? I couldn't see everything, but I believe you're dealing with a standard issue cerebral shock collar."

Buffy blinked and glanced at Spike, who was no longer reclined all sex-godily against the wall but had straightened and was providing Lorne his total undivided. "What's that?" he asked sharply. "They put something in our noggins?"

"Wow. You got there faster than I thought you would. Shame on me for judging a book by its cover." He gave his own wrist a light slap, chuckled then picked up his drink again. "Not sure how it works, of course, but—"

"We can't hurt anyone," Buffy blurted. "These army guys came for us, and we were just sitting ducks."

"Sitting ducks with fangs, but I see your point," Lorne replied, swirling his finger in his drink then lifting it to his mouth. "I do wonder about the *anyone* caveat, though."

"What about it?"

"Just that I saw a few things in the ol' noodle that make me think maybe this shock collar business isn't as restricting as you two seem to think it is." He sipped again, closing his red eyes in apparent cocktail-induced bliss. "Also, loving the dynamic here. Mortal enemies turned hot and heavy lovers. It's the stuff of great daytime television. You two make a hell of a power couple."

Buffy was too busy turning the first thing over in her head to focus on the second. It wasn't until Spike lurched forward, thumping his fist on the table hard enough that a few drops of Sea Breeze leaped out of

the glass and onto the surface that she realized anything of note had been said at all.

“We’re not a sodding couple.”

Lorne didn’t so much as flinch, rather raised his hand to his head to tap his temple. “Not according to up here.”

“Bugger that.”

“Well, I didn’t get the full Skinemax subscription, but based on what I did see, it wouldn’t surprise me.” He lifted his glass back to his lips, though stopped short of taking a sip, still staring at Spike. “Strudel, I don’t know who you’re trying to fool, but I’m guessing this is one of those situations where the saying ‘point at me and three fingers are still pointing at thee’ comes into play. Getting upset with the messenger ain’t gonna change the message even a little bit. You want what I saw to not come into being? You have a couple of options but I think you’ve missed the exit ramp for most. And I tell you now, you try to get out of this little heartsick predicament you’ve gotten yourself into by bringing out the less-fun kind of wood, you’ll spend the rest of eternity regretting it. My advice? Stop fighting it and start loving it. You will sooner or later anyway, and why put off to tomorrow what you can get done today?”

There was a long stretch in which a whole lot of meaningful nothing happened. Spike glaring daggers or stakes or maybe whole bazookas at the green demon, who seemed thoroughly unbothered by the attention and applied most of his focus onto his drink, which he nursed with almost indecent enthusiasm. Buffy wasn’t entirely sure she’d caught all the nuances of what had been said—or implied—but the gist was enough to leave her way confused and maybe, stupidly, a bit hopeful too.

Mostly, it left her doubting that Lorne had seen anything at all. She and Spike had put on a show, yeah, and they definitely were going to have a lot more sex before this was over—she hoped, because it would be a damn shame if they didn’t—but he’d been perfectly clear about the whole *killing her* thing. That she was a means to win back Drusilla, *after* he’d won the Gem of Amara, *after* they got this mess with their heads taken care of.

“Back to the other thing,” Buffy said before Spike decided to start

protesting the state of their relationship again, “you said the shock collar might not be as restrictive. What did you mean by that?”

Lorne lifted a shoulder. “Just that if you get zapped every time you throw a punch, I saw something in your not-so-distant future that should’ve had you both on the floor. So, kiddos, you gotta ask yourself, who exactly would the army want to keep you from hurting? And who would they consider fair game if their science experiment was suddenly on the prowl again?”

Buffy frowned, then thought back. The pain hadn’t presented itself until she and Spike had been forced to fight their way out of her house. They hadn’t once tried to hit each other—except *yes they had*. Spike had thrown a punch because he’d gotten into one of his moods and she’d given back as good as she got, and nothing up top had hurt at all.

And back at Angel’s office, it was Cordelia she’d kicked in the demonstration. Not Angel or the other guy who definitely had at least some demon in him. Add it together and there was only one conclusion.

“Humans,” Buffy said, riding a wave of equal parts relief and disgust. “The shock collar only works on humans.”

Spike furrowed his brow and looked at her.

“We can hit other demons,” she repeated.

“We can?”

“You punched me *last night* on the way to my mom’s. And I hit you back. No pain. The pain didn’t start until Riley and those other guys showed up.”

Spike stared for another moment, saying nothing but somehow also saying a lot. He couldn’t help it with those eyes of his, how expressive they were. How she was able to follow the second he went from confusion to memory and then to understanding, his entire face lighting up with a combination of relief and frustration—relief that he wasn’t entirely powerless, frustration that he hadn’t realized it sooner. Before this moment. That neither of them had remembered that they had traded blows between leaving Giles’s and arriving at Revello Drive, and probably before then too. Violence was just one of the ways they communicated—so much so they had both taken it for granted until the ability had been stripped away.

“You two are truly something else,” Lorne muttered, and polished off his Sea Breeze. “I was gonna say it was just a hunch, based on what I saw in the old noodle, though I’d say that confirms it. But don’t try it out in—”

Too late. Spike had already tried to smash his fist into Buffy’s jaw. *Tried* being the operative word seeing as he didn’t make contact, rather seemed to collide with an invisible but very bright force that not only blocked the attack but made the wall crack with as forcibly as it threw Spike into it. He barked a curse and shook his head, turned to glare at their host but Buffy snatched his wrist before he could do more than that.

“You idiot, weren’t you listening? There’s a spell on this place to keep the peace.”

“Clearly wasn’t, thanks ever so,” Spike retorted, jerking his arm free. “Had to test it out, didn’t I?”

Buffy shook her head, turning back to Lorne. “Thanks for the tip,” she said as she started to scooch. She might not be hip to this *being a demon* thing but social cues were a specialty, and one always left after causing property damage—either by request or to avoid a run-in with authorities. “And for everything else. This has been very helpful.”

“You could thank me by covering the repairs,” the demon replied, staring glumly at the Spike-shaped indent against the wall of the booth. “Do you have any idea how much a good contractor costs in this city?”

Spike snickered and made to follow. “Right, mate. I’ll leave my sodding card.”

“It really is the least you could do,” Lorne called after him, but it was no good, and he seemed to know it, for he didn’t do more than that, just scowled before turning his attention to the demon on stage.

And honestly, Buffy reasoned, it had kinda been his fault. There was no way Spike *wouldn’t* have tried to inflict violence after being told demons were fair game. Anyone who had the ability to see into people’s heads or auras or futures or whatever should have known that without advance warning.

Even so, Buffy made a point of not looking back as she navigated between the tables toward where Cordelia, Doyle, and Angel were

waiting, the first two studying the crooning demon on stage with mingled expressions of fascination and disgust, and the latter greeting them with a trademark glower.

“Get what you came for?” Angel asked, his voice ensnaring his friends’ attention.

“Definitely a place to start,” Buffy replied, deliberately ignoring his tone and body language and everything else practically screaming that he was pissed and ready to let her have it. She also seized Spike’s wrist and squeezed, hoping he’d interpret the gesture in the let-me-do-the-talking nature in which it was intended. Either he’d full-circled his way back to a crap mood or he understood, for he made no effort to intervene.

Good. It was going to be tricky enough getting the others to agree to anything without Spike running his mouth.

Buffy shifted her focus to Doyle. “How many other guys do you know?”

He frowned, threw a glance at Angel that reeked of a child asking for permission—it was so hard to not see now that she’d seen—before clearing his throat. “Guys?” he echoed.

“Of the ‘I know a guy’ variety. That’s how you heard about this place, right? You strike me as the kind of person with a lot of guys.”

Doyle shifted and scratched the back of his neck. “I might have a few contacts in a variety of industries, now that you mention it,” he replied. “Anyone in particular?”

“Yeah. Preferably someone good at brain surgery.”

“Finally getting that personality transplant?” Cordelia asked, smirking.

Buffy snickered appreciatively. She was pretty sure the ship on that had already sailed. “Lorne, the host guy, thinks there’s a shock collar or something in our heads. We get that taken care of and we’re out of your hair. And don’t make me make you look like an asshole, Angel,” she added, for her ex’s mouth had dropped open. “I already know what you’re going to say. I know every word of the argument by heart, because it’s the exact same thing I would’ve said if the tables were turned. But here’s what I wouldn’t have considered that I’m hoping you will: not being able to hurt humans leaves us vulnerable. If those

army guys want to grab us again, there's nothing we can do to defend ourselves except run faster. And if that sounds like a reasonable trade-off to you, then I'm sure you won't mind if after we leave, we phone in an anonymous tip on where they can find not only one of the most ferocious vampires in history, but one that has a soul to boot."

"Damn, Buffy, you are savage." Cordelia propped her hands on her hips. "I kind of love you like this. Granted, if you *do* turn against Angel, I will have no choice but to hunt you down and stake you, but I'd feel a little conflicted about it."

"Well, let's hope it doesn't come to that," Buffy replied before meeting Angel's stony glare once again. In many ways, she was starting to appreciate that coming here had been pretty much her and Spike's only option—the more time she spent around her ex, the less their breakup and his subsequent rejection of her as a vampire hurt. If anything, his implacable attitude was making her wonder just what she'd seen in him in the first place. "So, what is it?"

Angel held her gaze for what felt like forever before finally turning his attention to Doyle. "I might know someone if you don't."

Doyle didn't bother to hide his surprise. "You do?"

"He'll be hard to track down if he's still alive, but yeah. It's possible."

"No," Spike said suddenly, jerking his arm free of Buffy's grip. "Don't think so, mate."

"Spike," she tried, but it was no good. He rounded on her with a snarl.

"You think I'm gonna go under the bloody knife by someone sodding *Angelus* recommended? If the least this bloke does is try to take our heads, we can consider ourselves lucky."

"Angel wouldn't do that," Cordelia said, genuinely affronted. "If he says he knows someone who can help, he does."

For the first time, Buffy found herself wondering just how close her ex and her former classmate had gotten since they'd started working together. It wasn't the sort of office romance she could easily see developing but hey, turned out she hadn't known Angel all that well to begin with.

Spike, for his part, snorted and shook his head. "The more you

believe that, ducks, the more it'll hurt when he proves you wrong. Take it from someone who's known the bastard longer than the lot of you have been alive."

Angel rolled his eyes. "Spike, if I wanted you dead, I'd just stake you the second we step outside."

"You were the one who said Angel has a soft spot for family," Buffy added, trying to take Spike's arm again. He jerked free of her before she could get a grip.

"Yeah, he does," Spike agreed, not looking at her. "You're thinkin' too small. It's not *help* or *kill*. It was never the kill he fancied. That was the masterpiece's finishing touch, and what he liked was *creating* the masterpiece. Catch him the way we did today, poppin' in unannounced, is one thing—he wasn't in charge then. We put him in charge and dust is better than whatever he comes up with."

"Umm, you seem to be forgetting the fact that this guy, unlike you, does have a soul," Cordelia said tersely, clapping a hand on Angel's shoulder. "Yeah, he might be a twisted psychopath when he gets horizontal, but seeing as he's not doing that anymore—"

"You're already dead if that's what you think, pet."

"Look," Doyle said, trying—to his credit—to put himself between Spike and everyone else. Like he was the voice of reason. "I won't pretend to know the family dynamic here, just that, from the look of things, it puts the *fun* in *dysfunction*. But fact is Cordelia's right. Angel here, he's on a different mission now. One that happens to have me on speed dial to keep him on the straight and narrow. Can't think the bloody Powers would be all that jumped up to put as much faith in any one vamp as they have in this guy if half of what you say is true. You came to us for help and if Angel knows how to deliver, he will. That's that."

Buffy took a breath without meaning to but ignored the accompanying stab of pain. "I trust Spike," she said, and was surprised to realize it was true. Maybe not across the board wholesale but in this, she absolutely did. He hadn't lied to her once, not even about the things like his intent to kill her after all this was behind them. It was why she'd gone along with the plan to go to LA in the first place—she'd believed him when he'd said it would be all right, which meant she needed to believe

him now too. If he'd changed his mind or had doubts, there had to be a reason. "Look, put yourself in our shoes. In *mine* if not Spike's. Angel did threaten to kill me when I called for help the first time and Spike has known him the longest."

"That doesn't mean he knows him the *best*," Cordelia snapped with enough fire that Buffy thought it likely she'd talked them out of a place to stay the night. Then Cordelia sighed and made a flippant gesture with her hand. "But fine. Whatever. Use Doyle's connections instead, if he has any. Once you guys leave, it's your problem. Now if *we* don't leave right this second, I'm not going to get any beauty sleep, and trust me when I say you will all pay if I am denied my eight hours. Angel can drop me, Barbie, and Ken off at my place and Doyle—you start digging around the lowlives you know for someone who can help, and for the love of *god*, let's get out of here."

Buffy pressed her lips together and waited for the objections she knew had to be coming. Angel and Doyle exchanged a long look in which a lot of unspoken things seemed to be communicated before finally breaking away with a nod, and then everyone was headed for the door. No argument. No appeals for second thoughts. That was all it took. Angel evidently thought of Cordelia as an adult.

Wonder what that's like.

The thought didn't have time to grow legs—or stew further bitterness—for Spike was suddenly at her side again, taking her hand. "You said you trust me," he murmured when she raised her eyes to his.

She had at that. "I have really shitty judgment sometimes, if it makes you feel better."

Spike studied her as though trying to spot a lie, his too-expressive eyes filling with something unlike whatever he'd regarded her with before. And she might have asked, might have wondered, had he not immediately broken away the second they were all outside, stormed up to Angel, and decked him in the jaw.

Amid the chorus of *what the hells* and the flurry of insults and threats that followed, though, he found her gaze again and grinned.

"Told you I had to test it," he said, and winked before Angel's return punch sent him to the ground.

YOU'VE GOT TO PROMISE NOT TO STOP WHEN I SAY WHEN

SPIKE KNEW IT WAS PROBABLY NOT THE BEST IDEA HE'D HAD, BUT even after the yelling and the accusations and the shoving and the general bloody mayhem, he couldn't say he regretted it. God knows Angel was owed more than just a bruised jaw.

In the end, Buffy had gone inside to fetch that green bloke who, aside from being less than thrilled to find a brawl happening ten feet away from his precious sanctuary, had quickly assured the naysayers that Spike and Buffy had, in fact, not been faking their respective conditions this whole time. An accusation in itself that Spike found beyond ridiculous—what possibly could either of them gain by spinning such a yarn? If they had wanted to kill Angel, they'd more than had the opportunity back when the cheerleader and the little Irish chap had left the premises. The conclusions people would leap to just because you gave a man the punch he'd been begging for all night.

It had been a slightly more irritable Cordelia who walked them up to her flat, a cozy place in a part of LA that Spike marveled that she could afford. The Angel he knew wasn't one to lavish those he considered his underlings with wealth, but rather do whatever he could to keep them dependent on him so they never strayed too far. The answer to this came quickly enough, though, as Cordelia stood under the

awning that guarded her front door, rummaging through her purse for her keys.

"Okay, so, house rules," she said, not looking up. "The first and most important—no eating your host."

Buffy threw Spike a look like he'd done something wrong. "I swear, Cordy, we can't—"

"I am not loving the word *can't*."

"*Would not anyway*," Buffy assured her. "We're not even here to kill Angel when, clearly, we both have ample motive."

Cordelia looked up at that, her dark eyes darker as she glowered through the curtain of her hair. "Look, I get that Angel screwed the pooch in a big way, but rule number two. He's my boss and my friend, and while I might not have a sanctuary spell in place—which, believe me, I am so going to get now that I know they're a thing—I will not have vamp-on-vamp violence under my roof. So if Angel comes over, you keep your fists to yourselves, got it?"

Well, she was just sucking the fun out of everything, wasn't she?

"Done," Buffy agreed. "And if Spike doesn't play nice, I will personally kick his ass for you."

"That kinda is against the spirit of said rule, but you know what? I'll allow it." Finally, Cordelia pulled her hand back to show off a jingling set of keys. "Rule number three. No vampire sexcapades. If the host ain't getting any, neither are her guests. And don't give me that look." She aimed a particularly unwarranted glower at Spike. "You two practically fornicated on that stage tonight."

"Oi. I'm not the one who chose that song," Spike fired back.

"No, but you're definitely the one who grabbed Buffy's boobs in public, and while I am thrilled to know she is finally having decent sex, she will be having none of it while you guys are staying here."

Spike rolled his eyes. Yeah, well, they'd just see about that.

"And," Cordelia continued, jamming her key into the lock and giving it a twist, "I am not your mom, so it's your job to make sure all windows that could fry you to dust are closed or that you're not in range of them by the time the sun comes up. I think that's it."

"What about your roommate?" Buffy asked. "Didn't you mention a roommate?"

Cordelia threw the door open, then reached around to flick on the interior light, revealing a posh interior to match the exterior. "I did. And here, it's time to meet him. Oh, Phantom Dennis?"

For some reason, even with that introduction, Spike didn't put together that the phantom was an actual spook until he was shoved from the threshold hard enough that he nearly toppled over his own bloody arse. When he looked up, Cordelia was regarding him with a smirk.

"Dennis says hello," she told him cheerily. "He's very quiet and respectful of space, and if either of you decide you want to try a Cordelia sampler during your stay, he'll knock you into the sun. Isn't that right, Dennis?"

The lights behind her flickered twice, which Spike took to mean the ghost was communicating his agreement.

"Bloody perfect," he muttered, edging forward again. "Right then. Think you proved your point."

"Stipulation of me allowing two soulless bloodsuckers to stay the night," she assured him. "But now that you know the house rules, I can officially invite you into said house. Please wipe your feet on the mat when you come in and I'll give you the grand tour."

The tour came with the tale that explained how a girl on Angel's payroll could afford the rent—a good haunting knocked the asking price off a lot of real estate. Buffy ooh'ed and ah'h'ed her way through the joint, though Spike wasn't sure if that was genuine or if she were just trying to play the role of the interested guest. He thought it probably the former, as she didn't seem to have any reservations about saying exactly what she thought these days.

"If I'd found a place this nice last summer, I might never have come home," Buffy observed as Cordelia led the pair of them into the living area, which she'd said would double as their guest room. Right in front of a bloody giant crescent-shaped window that took up the entire east-facing wall, mind. Not exactly the spirit of hospitality but at least she did have curtains.

"Oh, you should've seen where I was living before Doyle found me this place. Or no. You shouldn't see it. No one should. It was a rat trap. And a roach trap. And probably a few other kinds of demonic pests

that I never actually saw, but you could feel them moving around the walls. Seriously, I know I've seen the actual mouth of hell and everything, but that apartment was way scarier." Cordelia made a face and shuddered. "And even then, it was stretching my budget."

"Okay, I guess my place wasn't that bad. But it was close. And I'm betting you didn't have to get your ass pinched on the nightly just to afford it."

"What the blazes are you on about?" Spike demanded, rounding on Buffy. "Who's been pinchin' your arse?"

"No one besides you, recently."

"She's talking about when she ditched Sunnydale last summer," Cordelia explained. "It was this whole thing."

"After I killed Angel," Buffy clarified. "But yeah. Mom had kicked me out, I was wanted for Kendra's murder, and I'd just sent my boyfriend to hell, so I decided to run away from home."

"And everyone majorly freaked out for no reason," Cordelia agreed, sinking into the cushions of her sofa.

Buffy turned to her, an eyebrow arched. "I don't remember you exactly standing up for me while I was being humiliated in front of half the school. Couldn't pry your lips off Xander long enough to tell him he was out of line?"

Well, there was an image that was never leaving his brain. And here he'd thought the bird had decent taste in blokes. Between that walking insult and her devotion to Angel, Cordelia was just another cautionary tale in the making. But Spike decided not to say as much. He was all too aware of how tenuous all this was at the moment, and despite a reputation he could admit he'd earned, he didn't always let his mouth run away with him.

"Hey, considering that you're pretty much at the mercy of me and my sometimes not-friendly ghost, maybe cut back on the attitude, like a lot?" Cordelia rolled to her feet in one fluid movement. "I'll go get some pillows or whatever. You guys don't need blankets, right?" She didn't wait for a response, rather disappeared quickly from the room and began loudly rummaging.

Buffy appeared like she wanted to say something, but after meeting his eyes, seemed to decide it wasn't worth the fight. Instead, she

turned and started fiddling with the curtains until they stretched across the window. The fabric was on the thin side, but it would do to keep either of them from bursting into flames, or at least not be so immediate that he couldn't scarper to safety before his skin started to sizzle.

"Here you are," Cordelia said as she reentered the room, carrying two very fluffy-looking pillows. "And I think, for the sake of abiding by the house rules, I want one of you on the couch and the other on the floor."

Spike just looked at her. So did Buffy.

"You know, so no one can roll over and *oops*, would you look at that? Now I'm on a penis."

"Have you *ever* had sex before?" Buffy blurted. She got a face-full of pillow in return.

Spike snickered and snatched the one Cordelia sent hurtling at his head with ease. "Bloody puritans could've learned a thing from you, pet."

Cordelia rolled her eyes but didn't reply, rather spun on her heel and started back for her room. "I'll see you in the morning if Dennis hasn't kicked you out. If he does, well, it was nice knowing you both. Good *night*."

The sound of a door closing punctuated her dismissal, leaving them alone for the first time in hours, which shouldn't have felt significant in the slightest but somehow did, especially after all the rot that demon back at the club had spewed. The same that Spike had been trying unsuccessfully to shove out of his skull like the ridiculous thought it was, only finding it harder than it had any right to be.

Try as he might to tell himself otherwise, something had changed. Something significant. He didn't know when or how—wasn't sure he wanted to know, either. Also didn't know how to shake it off, change it back, except to keep to what he'd promised himself.

The entire reason he'd come back to this corner of hell was to prove that everything Dru had told him had been rubbish. Her explanation for snogging something as disgusting as a chaos demon, then doubling down and spreading her legs for some fungusy thing that had left foul-smelling stains on their sheets, unmasked at last. Over and

over, *you're covered in her, she's all you see, you won't let her go* while he'd been standing there bloody agog at her nerve of being sour with him when she was the one shagging her way through South America.

It had all been so clear not that long ago. Before he'd run into the Slayer at that bloody party and caught on that she wasn't living anymore. That one, immutable fact that had made his whole head explode, turned his world upside down and driven him mad with the need to understand why. Why it mattered that she was a vampire, why he couldn't stop thinking about her stupid face, why her whole mad approach to unliving bothered him at all when the only thing he should be doing was planning just how he intended to kill her.

But that wasn't the only reason things weren't clear. Just that the more time he spent with Buffy, the more he was starting to realize he didn't want her dead at all. In those moments, unguarded and honest, he understood that he was actually, despite the absolute circus his life had become, having fun. A true, earnest sort of fun not dependent on expectation or performance, just following where his blood led him. Buffy driving him crazy with anger and lust in equal measure, keeping him on his toes, making him feel—*this* for the first time—like he had a true ally. Not someone who would melt and simper if Angel crooked his little finger at her.

It was pure and undemanding, and the more he got the more he wanted. Such that even seeing that sodding chaos demon earlier tonight hadn't nettled him the way it would have without her. No, what had rattled him had been understanding that in a sense, he was starting to let go of Drusilla.

That he might want to.

That he was slowly opening himself to the possibility that she might have seen something he hadn't. That the reason he'd come back to Sunnyhell hadn't been to collect anything but to see for himself if she'd had a point. Buffy being within reach, the whole business with their abduction and escape, and everything that had followed had little to do with Dru and everything to do with her. Perhaps Buffy was the choice he'd made without knowing it, and he could fight, or he could give in.

The thought of giving in left him terrified. For who was he if he

wasn't mad for Drusilla? If pleasing her, being her dark prince, wasn't his entire purpose? Who was he absent the woman who had saved him from a short, miserable life?

He looked at Buffy, found she was already looking at him, and he hated her so much he could love her.

Christ, what if he already did?

"Even if Cordy hadn't insisted, I don't think both of us would fit on the couch," Buffy said. "So...flip for it?"

"You have it," he replied like an absolute git. "I've slept in worse places than the floor."

"Oh." She blinked as though genuinely surprised, then threw the pillow Cordelia had tossed at her to one end. "Well, thanks. If there's a next time, we'll swap."

"Hopin' for our next time to have a nice, cushy bed."

"And then neither of us will sleep very much."

"You complainin'?"

Buffy glanced up, this time with a grin. "Way with the not."

And that was it—that grin. That grin and that accompanying twinkle in her eye, the way he heard how much she meant it. All of it told a story, and the moral of that story was Spike was a bloody dolt who hadn't seen the obvious.

Dru had been right. Goddammit, she'd been right.

And he had no sodding idea what to do about that. Or if there was even anything *to* do about it. Just because Dru had been right didn't mean he had to take it lying down. If he'd fallen for the Slayer, it stood to reason he could unfall quickly enough. It wasn't like he'd asked for this, and it was even less like he wanted it. No irreparable damage had been done just yet—could be he'd shake it off like a bad cold. Find something about her that would break whatever spell she'd cast over him. Make him remember who he was and why he not only *needed* to kill her, but why he *wanted* to, and for himself. Not to get Dru back or prove a sodding thing or anything else.

He wasn't ready for her to win just yet. Even if Buffy hadn't the faintest idea that they were playing at all.

Neither of them said anything for a few minutes, just went about settling themselves where they were going to catch their kip. He didn't

have much to do—the Slayer told him to keep his jeans on, knowing intimately what he wasn't wearing beneath them. Evil, he'd protested, but she'd rolled her eyes and said something about being guests in someone's home, something confirmed a second later when the pillow Cordelia had tossed out for him lifted off the floor and smacked him across the face of its own accord. Right. Had more than just Buffy's sensibilities to keep in mind. They were being chaperoned by bloody Casper.

"Can I take off the shirt, at least, or is that too much sodding temptation for you?"

"Boots can come off. Shirt can, too, on one condition."

Spike arched an eyebrow, ready to rail at her. Then melted like a ponce when she made a grabby motion with her hand.

"You want to sleep in it?"

She shrugged. "I left my travel bag in the car."

Nice, sensible explanation. Spike nodded, yanked the fabric over his head and tossed it at her face, hoping he looked apathetic because that was what he was. Didn't matter that she immediately seized the chance to strip down to her knickers before pulling on his shirt, which hit her right at mid-thigh. Also didn't matter that there was no seduction in her movements at all. Or that the lack of seduction would make it even more seductive. That brief glance at her rosy tits, miles of perfect skin just begging to be explored, never mind the ripe scent of her arousal—both left over from earlier and blooming fresh now—had the attention of his fangs and cock in equal measure.

Spike hadn't wagered he'd get much sleep tonight—it being far too early for any self-respecting vampire—but sharing space with her was going to be bloody unbearable, especially with all the thoughts running through his head. He'd planned on spending a few hours trying to talk himself out of this insanity, and relished the quiet for that very reason. Stupid bloody plan, that, and now all he could think of, all he could see, was bending her over that sofa and showing her what vampires like them thought of things like house rules. Give the ghost who was spying on them something to truly resent.

Buffy was a drug. Worse, she was *his* drug, and it had been far too long without a fix.

He needed a distraction.

"Came here after you killed Angel, eh?" he asked with forced calm as she climbed onto the sofa. "Never told me how that played out."

"You never asked," she shot back. True enough, he had not. Too occupied with all things Dru, as was his eternal bloody lot in life. The only observation he'd had when he'd come barreling back to Sunnydale was that the ponce seemed to have found his soul and was less dead than he'd hoped, but at least not a serious rival for Dru's affections anymore.

"Askin' now," Spike replied. "When I left in that fight—"

"You ditched me after claiming you wanted to help save the world."

"World's still spinning, innit? I did my part."

Buffy snorted as though he wasn't right, which he was, but if pressed he supposed he could appreciate her frustration. He had wanted to save the world—he'd just wanted Dru back more. And after the world-saving end of things was squarely in the Slayer's court again, he'd hauled his lady into his arms and made for the bloody door. But the fact remained that he *had* done his part. Kept the Watcher alive, knocked Angelus off his arse when he'd started grandstanding, and given that the Slayer had managed to come out the other side without that ugly stone sucking everything into hell, Spike thought he'd done a decent job of playing the hero. It had, after all, been a novelty for him.

And maybe her own new outlook had softened her to his way of thinking, for when she started speaking next, the bitterness in her voice was gone, leaving behind a ragged exhaustion he knew all too well. "When the library was attacked and Giles snatched, the others had been trying to restore Angel's soul. We'd found the information Miss Calendar had been digging into when Angel killed her and I thought it'd be a good way to slow him down. Angel with a soul seemed less gung-ho about world-endage than Angel without."

"Also mighty convenient," Spike drawled. "Seen' as your mates were keen to stick a stake in him and you were in love with the big sod."

"That wasn't the point," she shot back, and even if his hearing had been compromised, he still would've managed to catch the warning in her voice.

"No, 'course not. Just not a bad perk."

"I knew I had to kill him."

"Knowin' something's not the same as doin' it."

There was a pause during which he imagined she was entertaining ways she might off him in his sleep. Not that she would—that wasn't Buffy's style anymore than it was his. Didn't mean she wouldn't enjoy turning it over all the same. Yet when she spoke, she surprised him. None of the expected vitriol made it to her voice.

"I never thought I would get him back," she told him. "Even if he was soul guy again, I believed it was over. It wasn't about being with Angel at that point. I knew I had to kill him. There was no coming back from everything he'd done."

"Changed your tune, didn't you?"

"Not however you think I did. When the raid on the library happened, that was over. Kendra was dead and Willow was in a coma. I had no idea if Giles was alive or not." She swallowed. "Then you happened and everything changed. The thing is I didn't know that Willow was planning to try the curse again, especially since I'd told her not to. But she did, even if it was too late. The sword was out and he had to die. Still, I had him back for a minute and that was... It's still hard to talk about. Is that weird?"

"What part?"

"All of it. I'm a vampire now, just as soulless as he was then, and I'm over here remembering what that was like and about to lose my shit." She sniffed, and he got the first telltale whiff of imminent tears. "I thought that I'd stop caring about stuff if I was turned, and... I mean, it's not the same as it was before. I don't think of things the way I used to but I still feel so much, and no one can tell me why."

Spike worked his throat, and god, though he didn't want to, it was there anyway—an answering twinge in his chest. An echo of something he'd felt so long ago and buried so bloody deep he'd managed to forget it existed in the first place. But it had—that bit of *something* that had made him feel sidelined when the family dynamic had been its strongest. Yeah, he could tear into people just fine, spill as much blood as he liked, be the nightmare that slayers had before they went out on a

hunt, but there remained a part of him that not even he could smother.

It wasn't just that he felt. From everything he'd gathered over the last couple of days, Buffy had had a lot of rot shoved down her throat on the subject of vampires. And he reckoned some of that even made sense. Warrior mentality and all. Less thought spared for the thing you killed, the better, and that was especially true for someone like the Slayer. *This* Slayer. Part of what made her so good at what she did was how much she genuinely cared. He'd caught that from the start—along with her bravado and raw, innate strength, she had a tremendous amount of heart. The sort that could break easily if not handled with care.

"You don't stop feelin' things just because you're a vampire, love," he told her at last. Seemed right that someone should. "Would be easier if you did."

"I didn't think vampires could love."

"You still think that?"

"I don't know. It's... It's different."

"Mhmm. Different but not gone. Doubt it'd have hurt as much when your mum tossed you out today if you didn't love her still, yeah? Why the sodding hell are you so bloody determined to be a good girl if love's not a factor?"

"I just... I don't know. I didn't want to be different."

That was her story no matter what, wasn't it? The Slayer forever trying to fit herself in a shape that was pleasing to others regardless of how bloody miserable it made her. "Part of bein' a vampire is bein' free. What everyone expects of you—your mates, your teachers, society itself. Those rules don't apply anymore."

"I know that. I just... I love the people I love, I guess. And I want them to still love me." She paused. "I guess that means I do think we can love."

"Now we're gettin' somewhere."

"But it's not just that either. I don't... I don't care about other people the way I used to. I know what's easy and I know what that would make me, and I don't want to be that because then they'd be right."

“Who’s they?”

“Everyone who tells me I’m not Buffy anymore.”

“Wankers, the lot of them.”

“Who are just waiting to tell me *I told you so.*”

Spike figured that much was right, and furthermore that she didn’t need him confirming it. “So the git got his soul back and you had to kill him anyway. Bloody tragic.”

“Hey, it was!” But there was a note in her voice that told him he’d caught her enough off guard that he’d nearly surprised her into laughter. “But yeah. Acathla woke up. I put him back to sleep. Then I took off.”

“And Angel decided not to stay dead.”

“That was later. We don’t know why he came back, only that it seemed to be with this larger purpose in mind.”

“How you figure?”

“Something stopped him from killing himself last Christmas.”

“Somethin’ meaning you?”

“No, doofus. Like, it started snowing right before sunup. He was going to dust.”

Spike rolled his eyes, somehow managing to hold back a snort. Yeah, he just bet that had been the plan. Couldn’t just stake himself like a man but had to be as bloody theatrical as possible. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know the rest, but he imagined there had been a load of sobbing and self-pity and it had all been very noble and boring. Also staged somewhere for Buffy to find him at an opportune moment to play the damsel. Nothing Angelus loved more than a good damsel—usually in creating them, but it stood to reason the soul changed how he liked his meat cooked.

“You took off to sunny LA after you killed him?”

“Yep. I was here for around three months. Big fun to come home to.”

“Why’d you go home at all?”

“Because I... I wanted to.” She fell quiet again, and he wondered if she was weighing her words. Trying to suss out how much of what she’d said was true because she meant it and how much was true because she wanted to mean it. Or if she were dreaming up what her life might

look like had she just decided to stay away. Every decision this girl made had a certain poetry to it that made her both fascinating and infuriating. Then, softly, she said, "I guess I was just tired of being alone."

He wasn't expecting *that*, which was why the words hit them the way they did. Why he felt like he'd been shattered and heard at the same time, as though Buffy had peered inside him and glimpsed the self he was most desperate to hide. Only that wasn't what had happened at all and he knew that, too, and that unnerved him even more.

"Sorry you went through that, love."

"What?" she asked, her surprise and confusion so thick he could bloody swim in it.

And maybe he should have just let the question dangle—god knows he'd already said more than he'd ever planned tonight. But Spike had never been good at not filling the quiet, especially when he should hold his tongue. "Know what it's like, is all."

Though if ever there was a time to learn to keep quiet, it was now. The air between them remained charged after that in a way that recalled too many nights spent in some snooty parlor while wankers who would eventually be silenced by railroad spikes stripped him down for everyone to see. Just another bloody joke to be shared over cigars and brandy.

Then, suddenly, Buffy was there, moving with that lethal combination of slayer and vampire grace that could conquer the world if she put her mind to it. He hadn't heard—hadn't seen, either. Only registered her presence a second later when her lips feathered over his. Soft and tentative, a question she wasn't asking with her voice, and that was the moment he broke. The moment everything bloody broke. His anger and resentment, the excuses he kept making for her and himself, the stories he was telling that even that insipid green git hadn't believed. If Buffy had ever been a means to an end, a trophy to claim and call his own, that time had gone. He was too late, too addicted to this. The way she felt against his mouth, under his hands, the sounds she made when he clutched her to him, when he surrendered to every-

thing his own stupid body was telling him, and had been from the start.

Spike sat up, and she went with him, and then they were entangled in each other. She somehow in his lap, straddling him at the waist, he with one hand bracing the back of her head, fingers tunneling through her hair, and the other arm hooked around her, desperate to keep her right where she was. Kissing him like that, like she couldn't get enough of him. Like every taste was a tease for something more that he was holding back. He'd delve and she'd push, all lips and tongue and glorious slayer making those little sounds that were fast scaring off the remaining sense he had. And then her nails digging into his skin, first at his shoulders and then up the sides of his neck, and he growled and she growled back, grinding down on his cock, and these bloody jeans had to come off but not before he touched her. Slipped his hands under the T-shirt she'd snagged from him to skate along her skin and tease the swell of her breasts. Then finally tugging to draw the fabric away so he could do the same with his mouth, only Buffy pulled back with a hand on his chest, shaking her head, her eyes full of *we shouldn't* though the rest of her was in clear disagreement.

Maybe a better sort of bloke would nod and let her go, but he wasn't a better sort of bloke.

"Evil here, remember?" Spike murmured, the first thing either of them had said aloud since she'd joined him on the floor. "And you're my Barbie girl. Can brush your hair, undress you everywhere." He again went to pull off the shirt, and this time, *thank Christ*, she didn't resist, and then her breasts were in his hands and her head was tipped back, exposing that masterpiece she called a neck to his mouth. His tongue at her skin, then his teeth, and Buffy giving the most delicious little whimper and again, *we shouldn't*, to which he replied, "Come on, Barbie, let's go party," before fastening his lips over the mark that had made her immortal.

"Oh *fuck*." She made another sound, one of frustration and arousal, intimately entwined with the tension constantly simmering just beneath the surface. The control she was so desperate to cling to beginning to snap. "But she said—"

"I heard her just fine." Spike shoved Buffy with enough force her

back met the floor, but he was on her before she could do more than pout up at him. "Tell you what. Her little ghost mate has a problem with what we're doin', he'll let us know. Until then..." He lifted himself onto his forearms to gaze down at her, those wide emerald eyes brimming with hesitation and excitement alike. "Think I'll just have me a little tour."

"Tour?" She lifted her head as he began nibbling his way down her neck. "Pretty sure you've seen everything there is to see."

"You ever had a place you loved visitin'? Couldn't get enough? For me, that's you, honey." He ran his tongue around one of her pert little nipples and grinned when she arched into him. "Seems no matter how many times I see the sights, I'm always hungry for a return trip. Make sure these tits are as lovely as I remember." To emphasize his point, he cradled her breasts against both hands, rolling them toward one another while snapping his teeth against her skin, and oh, did baby like that. Baby liked that a lot.

Being with Buffy was an experience outside any other—heady and addictive in all the right ways, making him crave more by getting more. Making him desperate to always be the one who helped her discover these things about herself. He'd already had his fangs inside of her, felt her come undone in his mouth and around his cock in equal measure, and there was so much more beyond that. He could see why Dru had fancied teaching him so much, why she'd been so insatiable in those early years. And if he were generous, maybe understand why she'd flitted from bed to bed in search of it again—why he alone hadn't been enough.

But there would never be enough Buffy.

"What are you doing?" she whimpered when he continued his way south, now licking a path around the cute indent of her bellybutton. Spike flicked his eyes up, meeting hers in the dark, and grinned before hooking his thumbs under the crotch of her knickers and pulling them down to bare her pussy to him. It hadn't been all that long since he'd been inside her—a few hours separating this moment from those they'd shared the night before—but he hadn't had his mouth on her but one time which now, looking at her, seemed like a proper crime,

especially once he factored in how much he loved having the taste of a woman on his lips.

That the woman in question was the Slayer, was *Buffy*, made this the closest he reckoned he'd get to a religious experience without burning. Hell, even *with* burning. He wasn't sure he'd mind.

"You—you're doing that again?" Buffy asked, all wide-eyed innocence as literally no other vampire in the world ever could be.

"Do you have a problem with it?" he replied, gripping her by the thighs to persuade her legs apart. Thankfully, she didn't need much encouragement, and then he was between them, mouth separated from her by just a few inches of air. "Feel free to stop me if that's the case."

"I-I don't want to stop you."

"Didn't think so."

"I just... I didn't know it was something that guys liked doing."

"The ones who aren't complete wankers do, at least." Spike grinned up at her, holding her gaze as he took a long, decadent lick along the seam of her pussy, just an appetizer, and doing his best not to moan when her juice hit his tongue. Better to keep playing at the illusion that he was the one with any power here. "I like feeling it on my face, how hot you are for me."

Buffy sucked her lip between her teeth, her eyes saucer-sized. "You do?"

"Knowin' that it's me that gets you like this? And it is, isn't it, Slayer? You've never been this wet for anyone else." He lowered his face to her again, slipping one hand under her thigh and lifting it until its weight was on his shoulder, and he was as close as he could get without falling into her. "See," he went on, now gliding his other hand up her leg, slowly, watching as her eyes glittered and feeling her body shake, and then her dew was on his fingers, and his fingers slipped into her pussy. No warning, and no resistance. Just the pure bloody thrill of watching some part of him disappear inside her and having her clench around him as though determined to keep him there. "Feel that?" he asked hoarsely, pulling his fingers out by degrees and groaning at the low growl that he doubted she even realized she'd set free. Watching as her hips moved of their own bloody volition to draw him back. "Feel how hungry you are for it? For me?"

"Yeah," Buffy replied, restless. She had a hand of her own in play now, dragging her nails across his scalp and winding her fingers around his hair. "You can skip to the main course anytime."

"Why? You not enjoying yourself?" Spike didn't wait for a reply, rather let his tongue go to work, licking a line from her opening to her clit, and Buffy gasped and bucked again, sharper than before, trying to find his mouth when he pulled back. "Cause baby, to me this is the main course."

He drew another circle around her clit, then another, then flattened his tongue against it as he slid fingers back home. And her wonderfully expressive face gave the bloody game away with her furrowed brow and her parted lips and still those eyes, those fucking amazing eyes that followed his every move.

"You still wantin' me to stop?" he continued, finding a nice tempo with his fingers. The air filled with rhythmic wet squelches he pushed into her again and again, splitting his attention between her face and her cunt. "This puss of yours tells a different story."

Buffy shook her head so fiercely she whipped her hair. "No. Please don't."

"Gettin' some mighty mixed signals here, Slayer."

"Signals are silly. Stupid, silly signals. I just... oh *god*..."

He grinned as she gasped again, arching her hips to try to shove herself onto his retreating fingers, but she was making his mouth water and he hadn't even properly taken a drink, so it was his tongue's turn to plunge inside. And Buffy fell apart under him, groaning loud enough to wake the bloody dead, but the dead in this house were already awake and enjoying themselves—including the ghost, who he reckoned was getting a hell of a show—so it didn't matter. Spike dug his fingers into her hips and feasted, spearing her with his tongue again and again, lapping and swallowing and moaning into her amazing cunt as she writhed and rolled and painted his face with her, the grip she had on his head growing tight, demanding, just painful enough to make him regret not freeing his cock, at least. And then he was licking his way back up her slit, filling her once more with his fingers by the time her clit was under his lips, she was writhing all over again, trying to fuck herself to her own bloody pace,

and if he didn't need to taste her orgasm so badly he might have just let her.

Instead, he twisted his wrist that way he knew she liked, pressing against her from the inside as he fastened his mouth over her clit and sucked hard, and Buffy bloody well tumbled apart, crying out with the sort of raw abandon that made the floor shake. And more, more, he needed more, not knowing what more exactly, only his fangs had no trouble following there, for they had pierced the soft, perfect skin of her inner thigh the next second, drinking as her pussy spasmed around his fingers, and she'd roared and then gone quiet and when he looked it, it was because she had her own fangs buried in her forearm. Chomping through flesh and muscle ostensibly to keep all other sounds inside, and the sight of that—of Buffy tearing into herself to try to keep quiet—was what broke him.

The next thing he knew, he was over her, jeans open at the fly, cock inside of her, pounding into her cunt and she was so wet, so wet everywhere, her blood mixing with her juice, her yellow eyes shining fierce into his, her fangs snapping and her face, her beautiful face, contorted in the sort of ecstasy that surprised him for how innocent it was. This magnificent creature still trying to understand herself, shocking herself when learning what her body could do. Meeting his lips when he swooped in for a kiss, not flinching from his fangs and not trying to fight him either. Just pushing at him with teeth and lips and tongue and roaring her approval when he started his way down her neck again. Nodding when he gripped her by the knee, even though he knew she had no idea what he intended to do and letting loose another growl-groan as he shifted to hook it over his shoulder. And she was so tight like this and she felt so good he knew he wouldn't last long, but he also didn't mind because there would be more. More nights like this. More Buffy under him, over him, her blood in his mouth, her fangs in his neck, and he could keep having it. Dru be damned. The sodding gem be damned, too. All he needed was her clenching and claspings and squeezing around his cock like that and he could dust a happy bloke.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Preferably without an audience, though with the racket they were making, he was more amazed it had taken as long as it had for Cordelia

to come thundering back into the room. Spike didn't pause, just kept thrusting into his lady, though he did throw a look over his shoulder to meet the bird's indignant glare with one of his own. If the fangs didn't convince her to back the hell off, the snarl he let loose in warning certainly did, for she sighed and rolled her eyes, muttered a quick, "Whatever," and disappeared back down the hall.

"That wasn't nice," Buffy informed him when he met her gaze. She'd melted back to human, though the smile on her face was pure vampire, and his heart lurched at the sight. "You're gonna get us kicked out."

"Better make it count, then," Spike replied, and kissed her before she could protest.

Not that he thought she would, given the way she trembled around him, but a smart man didn't take chances.

DON'T YOU DON'T YOU
DON'T YOU

BUFFY FULLY EXPECTED MORNING TO COME ALL *SECOND VERSE*, *SAME as the first* style, complete with another eviction because she and Spike just couldn't seem to keep their hands off each other. Instead, she awoke to the smell of brewing coffee and something delicious cooking in the microwave. It wasn't until she braved opening her eyes that she realized Spike was not, as he had been all night, curled up behind her and that the person in the kitchen making all the good-smelling stuff definitely had a heartbeat.

That jolted Buffy up in a big hurry. She whipped around to the vacant spot of floor where Spike had been and, frantic, began beating her hand against the carpet. No little tufts of dust bloomed up but that didn't mean anything. Cordelia might have cleaned up the evidence. And no, that wasn't a ridiculous thought. As hard as Spike had fucked her the night before, Buffy wouldn't have put it past herself to sleep right though the roar of even the loudest vacuum.

She was on her feet the next instant, looking around. The curtains were still closed, so nothing there, and there didn't seem to be any sign of a struggle. But if the stakeage had happened after they were all post-coital cuddly then there wouldn't have been a struggle at all, and it

wasn't like Spike could have defended himself if there had. Buffy was just starting to really panic when Cordelia shrieked.

"Oh my god! Put on some clothes!"

Buffy whipped around just fast enough to watch her kinda-sorta friend slap a hand over her eyes. "Where is Spike?" she demanded. "What did you do with him?"

"Me? You're the one who kept me up half the night despite my very clear *no boning in the house* rule."

"So you dusted him?"

Cordelia glared at her through the gap between two wedged fingers. "Are you mentally deficient? I thought vampires had, like, amazing senses and all."

"What?"

"He's in the shower, you freak. Now, I'm going to go pour some bleach on my eyeballs. Please have clothes on when I get back."

Cordelia turned and stomped off, muttering abuse under her breath as she went, but Buffy was less interested in that and more in taking in what, exactly, about her nakedness had been so offensive. Also trying not to melt in relief and embarrassment that she hadn't thought to check all her senses before leaping to the *he must be dust* conclusion. Because Cordelia was perfectly right—in tandem with the breakfast smell was the gentle hum of the shower. Spike had apparently just been the first to rise that morning and gotten dibs.

Leaving her alone and naked in a strange place so she could look extra stupid in front of her former classmate.

If he hadn't made her come so hard she'd actually sobbed the night before, she would kill him herself.

Instead, Buffy drew in a deep breath—these were thankfully starting to hurt less and less—then turned her attention to the disarray that marked the area they'd claimed for themselves. Her duffle was where she'd left it in the car with its fresh clothes and underwear, though the purpose of underwear was starting to elude her. Odds were she needed a shower just as bad as Spike had—worse, actually, considering the dried blood caked to her arm and inner thigh, not to mention the dried not-blood—and if Cordelia wasn't kicking them out, then she needed to seize advantage of things like toiletries while she could. So

Buffy snatched Spike's T-shirt from where he'd tossed it after peeling it off her the night before and fitted it over herself just in time to throw Cordelia a look of pure innocence as she rounded back into the room.

"Ugh." Cordelia sniffed, stopped dead in the doorway, clutching what smelled like a steaming mug full of blood. "That is not fully dressed."

"You just said put on clothes. You never said fully dressed."

Her grumpy host just rolled her eyes and continued forward. "*Clothes*. Notice the plural."

"Isn't that one of those words that is both singular and plural? Like, you wouldn't call this just a clothe." Buffy plucked at Spike's shirt, though she didn't take her eyes off that mug. "Did you bring me blood?"

"I know how crabby you vamps can be first thing in the morning," Cordelia muttered, though she looked like she might be reconsidering what could only be called a peace-offering. "You know, people can surprise you. Like I never once pegged you as a big ho."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm just saying. Wearing next to nothing and all the racket you two made last night. Plus, I was pretty sure they were gonna call the cops on you at that club." At that, Cordelia offered a smirk, then thankfully handed over the blood. "Being a vampire really took out the prude, huh?"

"I was never a prude," Buffy argued, doing her best not to just jerk the mug to her lips because she was pretty sure spilling in the living room was a stakeable offense. Hopefully the aforementioned grumpy host wouldn't look too closely at the rug before they had a chance to clear their stuff out. "I just...only dated the one guy. Well, three. There was Scott last year until he dumped me. And Owen. So three. Three guys. Definition of anti-prude."

"Ahh, Owen. He was scrumptious. Still don't know how he chose you over me, but there's no accounting for taste." Cordelia met her gaze in a look that was half-challenge, half-joking, then turned without another word and headed back toward the hall, but in a way that Buffy was pretty sure meant, *follow me, we're still talking*.

So follow she did, past the generous bedroom to a seriously

spacious kitchen. Definitely worth sharing a roof with a ghost. It was hard for Buffy not to be a little bitter about the living conditions she had endured knowing that someplace like this was out there, even if it was on the completely wrong side of town from where she'd worked. Not like she couldn't have waitressed somewhere else.

"You take coffee with your blood? This stuff's fresh."

Buffy didn't bother to try to hide her surprise when she looked up this time. "You're being all with the hospitality."

"I know. It's really big of me, isn't it? Especially after last night." Cordelia seemed to take her non-answer to the coffee question as answer in itself, for she poured a mug then turned to lean against the counter. A nice, respectable distance from the vampire. Well, both vampires, actually, as there was a door off the kitchen to the bathroom and its still-running shower. "But I'm not blaming you for that. I'm blaming Dennis."

"Your ghost?" Buffy asked, helping herself to a seat at the small table Cordelia had tucked in a corner. Nice and close to the bathroom, away from the window and the sun but near enough she could appreciate the warmth.

Cordelia nodded and brought her mug to her lips. "He *claims* that he's not the one who orders the Pay-Per-View movies but I think last night's live show cost him his alibi. I'd be actually annoyed if I didn't think he deserved a little vicarious action. His mom was a real piece of work, and I seriously doubt he got to enjoy anything too physical while he was alive."

"You're basically saying you're okay that Spike and I had ridiculously loud sex because your roommate is horny and without options."

Cordelia shrugged. "That's how I'm choosing to look at it this morning. It was either that or ask him to throw you both into the sun."

"Thank you for your restraint. Would that you were my mother."

"Eww, what?"

"Sorry, that came out weird. Just that my mom threw us out yesterday morning—or was in the process of throwing us out when the military boys came a'knocking."

"You boned him in your mother's house?" Cordelia made a face like she wasn't sure whether she should be impressed or mortified.

"Strangely enough, I can see how that wouldn't go over well. You guys are stupid loud when you bang, you know that."

Buffy lifted a shoulder, smirking a little. "He brings it out in me. What can I say?"

"So the Angel of it all? Not a factor anymore?"

"Did you see the welcome I got yesterday?"

Cordelia inclined her head as though in agreement. "Just weird is all. I've known you for what, three years now? Most of that time you were gaga over him to the point where you put my life and the lives of a whole lot of other people in danger—and suddenly you're all with the fangs, and you'd think that would spell happy ending for the most star-crossed of star-crossed lovers out there. Yet instead, you're having ridiculously hot vampire sex in my living room with that eighties fashion reject."

The water in the other room shut off, making Buffy all too aware of just how quickly the eighties fashion reject in question would be within earshot. Not a problem under normal circumstances, but the circumstances she found herself in were hardly normal. She'd been bagged and tagged by some shadow branch of the US government, escaped, and was on the run from them, and been more or less ignored by her watcher and tossed out on her butt by her mother. Her only company was her former mortal enemy, who still professed his deep desire to kill her—in between those times he was kissing her lips off, telling her she was beautiful and strong and that he needed to show her how to embrace this new life and learn to have some fun. He was the last person she should confide in, flirt with, or let fuck her brains out, especially since Spike's own brains were probably right where they were supposed to be, even after the fucking. He could be nice to her, do those things with his lips and tongue to her, and still want to kill her. He could screw her while loving someone else.

Spike was not the sort of guy she should have feelings for. Yet they were there. Feelings. Lots of logic-defying feelings. They had crept up from nowhere to slam her sideways with their intensity, like some sort of internal switch had flipped and the guy she hated just happened to be someone she didn't hate anymore.

"Uh-oh."

Buffy snapped her head up, meeting Cordelia's eyes. "What?"

"I know that look. You *are* off Angel completely now, aren't you? It's not just a weird vampire thing that I don't get. You're *seriously* into Spike."

How was it that she was a vampire yet could still feel like she had in junior high when her former best friend had spread the word that she had the hots for Tyler? Even being a relatively popular girl, and therefore immune to the sort of gossip that had ruined the lives of less fortunate classmates, Buffy had been mortified.

"I'm not *into* Spike," she argued, doing her best to keep her voice down. "Can vampires even be into anyone?"

Cordelia gave her a *what the hell* look that was surprisingly refreshing. "Why the hell can't they?"

"I'm just going by what I've been told."

"What you've been told? Buffy, you're literally a vampire now. Screw whatever you've been *told*. I think you know better than Giles or Wesley or whoever. Even Angel. God love the guy, he's still just one person, and he doesn't get a vote in how you or any other vampire feels." She snickered and shook her head. "If you like Spike, there's nothing stopping you from going for it. You're already a social outcast but so's he, so you can be social outcasts together."

In the world of Cordelia Chase, that was likely the closest thing to a pep talk that Buffy would ever get. Strange thing was it worked—way better than any of the other pep talks she'd received over the last month. And it probably said something that of everyone Buffy knew or had known, the people who had made her feel the most like herself, or the Buffy she wanted to be, had turned out to be a classmate she'd never really gotten along with and the vampire who was supposed to have been her mortal enemy. She just wasn't sure what that *something* was yet.

Before she could try to come up with a response that was even halfway intelligible, though, the door to the bathroom opened and Spike came padding into the kitchen wearing nothing but a very low-slung towel around his incredibly edible hips. Buffy turned to catch his gaze—also take in the handiwork that was her claw and bite marks and other little telltale signs of how thoroughly she'd marked his body the

night before— and experienced a thrill of what she could only call pride.

She had done that to him. *Her*. Buffy Summers.

“On the other hand,” Cordelia said, her voice having taken on a husky edge, “there’s something to be said for social outcasts.”

Buffy didn’t mean to snarl, really, but that’s what tore out of her throat when she turned and caught the way their host was eyeballing her vampire. Like he was a lollipop waiting to be licked. And something inside of her promptly unlocked—a primal something that was large and awkward, a something she knew immediately she needed to stop but couldn’t, for it couldn’t be recaptured after being knocked loose. Like the boulder in that Indiana Jones movie, gaining momentum as it rolled. Buffy had always been prone to jealousy—quick to think the worst of herself and assume that every guy who ever showed her the time of day was just waiting for someone else to come along and make a more enticing argument. Before, that had made her feel small and helpless, even as the Slayer, but vampires were not small and helpless, and they sure as hell didn’t just stand aside when threatened.

And that was what this was. Spike wasn’t hers and never would be. He’d made that very clear—or rather, the fact that he was only in this to win back the woman he actually did love. He had been thrust into Buffy’s path by circumstance and nothing more, and while they were linked by a common goal, he was going to teach her how to enjoy her new lease on life. Embrace her inner vampire even if he planned to claim her dust in the end. And there was nothing in there that suggested that Spike wouldn’t lock gazes with someone else, someone like Cordelia, and decide that he could have fun with her, too. Nothing except Buffy and her fangs and the deep, animal desire to put them to use. Rip out the throat of anyone who might take Spike’s focus off her. Make him want to fill his time with someone else.

“Easy, Slayer,” Spike said, and suddenly he was there, behind her, his hands bracketing her by the upper arms and hauling her back to his chest. “Unless you’re anglin’ for another headache.”

Buffy went rigid, then blinked and glanced down at herself, the fog in her head thinning a bit. She hadn’t even realized she’d started

toward Cordelia, much less that her fangs had come into play. It had just felt natural, following some primitive instinct to protect what was hers, to eliminate anything that might challenge her ownership.

"You're delicious," Spike rumbled into her ear, somehow both easing that sense of animal possession and making it a thousand times worse. "So fucking delicious, baby."

"Uhh, less delicious for me," Cordelia retorted. "Jesus, Buffy, what's your deal?"

"Her deal is she doesn't fancy sharing."

Okay, make that a million times worse. The fact that Spike understood without needing to be told, that she was *that* transparent, made her wonder if she should just go for a walk in the sun. "Sorry," Buffy bit out. "It was just...there. I don't know what happened."

Cordelia pulled a face, somehow managing to come across completely grossed out and offended at the same time. "Like I'm the vamp ho in the room. Grow up. Better yet, don't bite the hand that made you the blood you're drinking this morning. *And* convinced Angel that the best course of action was to help you, not stake you."

And now Buffy wanted to kill Cordelia just to shut her up. Like this hadn't been humiliating enough. "I'm going to shower," she said, jerking away from Spike and stomping hard toward the room he'd just vacated. Trying not to wonder what he must be thinking—how stupid and silly she was, how maybe she was starting to get ideas about what they were. Ideas he might need to discourage by taking advantage of her absence, and maybe she'd come back to find Cordelia bent over the kitchen counter, and how that mental image stoked rage unlike anything she'd felt before.

This was bad. Really bad.

Spike *wasn't* hers. He never would be. She needed to get that through her head now—get used to the idea of him wanting other people. Just because she'd decided she wanted to keep him didn't mean anything had changed.

Which, hey, that was something. No one could claim that vampire Buffy was any different than human Buffy when it came to making stupid heart decisions.

“Go me,” she said miserably, and shut the bathroom door behind her.



“WELL, THAT WAS DRAMATIC.”

It took strength, but Spike managed to pull his gaze off the door behind which Buffy had just disappeared. Everything in him screamed to follow—to throw her against the wall and show her just how little she had to worry about where possession was concerned. How touched he was that she cared enough to be possessive at all. How the part of him he’d only just realized existed wanted to hold tight to her jealousy and believe it meant something he knew it didn’t.

But god, it would be fun to pretend.

“Seriously.” Cordelia was in mid-eyeroll when he returned his attention to her, shaking her head like she had been put out. “She’s always been a bit bloodthirsty when it comes to the men in her life, but I didn’t think she’d actually attack.”

“Wouldn’t take it personally, pet,” he said, and started down the hallway. “Slayer’s a baby vamp just gettin’ a feel for her fangs.”

“That wasn’t vampire. Believe me, I know vampire. I also know girls. That was one hundred percent girl reaction.”

He shook his head, but decided it was wiser not to argue. Better for Buffy if she didn’t rejoin them here to discover the topic hadn’t changed. And better for him to walk away before the bird had the chance to convince him of things he knew weren’t possible.

Thing was, he’d been a baby vampire himself, once, and remembered well how that felt. The power and drive, the lust burning just beneath the skin—the hunger for blood and brawls and bloody epic shags. He’d sworn he was invincible right up until the time Angelus had burst that bloody bubble. From there he’d learned not only how fragile he was, but also how vampires thrived on satisfying their base impulses. Jealousy was as much a motivator as anything else, even when there was nothing but hatred beneath the surface. Or if not hatred, then whatever the complicated mess of bollocks that had comprised his feelings toward Angelus up until the end. How he’d craved the

bastard's approval while resenting the sight of him. How the wanker praising someone else while looking right over Spike would sting. It hadn't been love or affection in the sense he reckoned anyone outside the life would understand, but a hunger all the same. A yearning to be seen and recognized as something special and a fiery burning hatred of anyone who threatened to steal the limelight.

Buffy might be brilliant, might be the most powerful fledge the world had ever seen, even, but she was still new. Still getting used to those conflicting, confusing sensations. Add to the fact that she was hellbent on being a good girl while the whole sodding world had gone pear-shaped on her, and yeah, it made perfect bloody sense why she'd be threatened by the thought of Spike giving the eye to another bird.

But Christ, with last night's revelation still fresh in his head, how he wished he could fool himself into thinking otherwise. That Buffy was having the same thoughts he couldn't chase off—that she might not just be addicted to the shagging and the blood, but to him too. That she might fancy him for reasons beyond the fact that he was there to share this uncomfortable experience.

"Bugger," he muttered when he made it to the living room, which was still fragrant with the heady combination of sex and blood. He hadn't thought ahead when he'd parked the DeSoto, hadn't really figured that the visit to Angel would be more than a pitstop. As such, he'd decided to leave his spare trousers and other accouterments behind. Not that it bothered him much, but the Slayer still had his shirt so the most he could do was pull on his jeans and he wasn't sure how she'd react if she found him wandering around half dressed.

He opted to just stand there like a wanker until Buffy wandered back in, wrapped in a towel herself and holding his T-shirt, which she handed over without making eye contact.

"I left my travel bag in the car," she told the floor. "Figured you left...whatever you had there, too. So you might need this."

"I did." He kept his tone measured. Then, before he could stop himself and because he was a complete tosser, he sputtered, "You all right, love?"

She lifted her gaze to his, her expression guarded. "Why wouldn't I be all right?"

“No reason. Just thought I’d ask.”

“If it’s because I wiggled out earlier, well, don’t flatter yourself. I might not know what that was, but it wasn’t...whatever you might think it was.”

Nothing he didn’t already know but he couldn’t say that it didn’t smart, the fact that she hadn’t even wondered herself if she was more attached to him than she’d initially thought. “That so?” he replied, more tersely than he needed but hell, a man had his pride. “And what do I think it was, then?”

“That I care who you bang.”

“Sayin’ you don’t?”

“Why would I?”

“Well, we’ve been awful close, you and me. Would understand if you were thinkin’ things.”

“What, that you’re suddenly someone other than Spike and don’t want to kill me anymore? That you’re not going to go back to tearing out throats when we get these implants removed?”

He scoffed at that. “Well, yeah, and what of it? That’s what I am. And since you brought it up, how’s playin’ by the rules treated you thus far? Dunno what your plans are after you get this noggin situation sorted but clearly tryin’ to be *Buffy* ain’t enough for those mates of yours.”

“Fuck you,” she spat, her eyes flashing yellow.

“Sure you will later.”

Buffy curled her lip back and he just knew, if Cordelia hadn’t chosen that moment to remind them that they were in her house, he would have an armful of slayer ready to pummel him and then fuck him in equal measure. Unfortunately, the bird *did* choose that moment, all rolling eyes and exasperation, and boldly placed herself between them before either could lunge.

“Okay, you two can just keep it in your pants for a few more minutes. I just called the office, and it sounds like Doyle hit paydirt on someone in the back-alley brain surgery business.” She crossed her arms and treated them both to a glare. “You wanna rip each other a new one, that’s fine. Just not here.”

Spike kept his gaze on Buffy, ready to match whatever she threw

out. Funny. He would have sworn once that Dru was the most impossible person in the world to predict, but then the Slayer had danced her way into his life and turned everything upside down. He'd never known anyone as fiery or volatile—anyone who could keep him guessing, keep him on his toes, all the while remaining more or less on equal footing. That was part of the draw. Part of why the realization that he might be as lost as Dru had suggested didn't frighten him all that much, rather felt like an inevitable conclusion he'd just been too thick to consider.

Right now, she could decide to ignore the cheerleader and answer him with the punch he knew she was starving to land on him. She could spew out more venom, more denials, she could decide to throw caution to the wind and tear his clothes off in a flash of fang and fury. She could do any of these things or all and none would surprise him, for they were all Buffy.

It was also very Buffy to rein in her instincts. So when she finally moved, finally turned and nodded at Cordelia to show she understood, Spike remained unsurprised. And he wouldn't push. The explosion, when it came, would be sweeter the more time it had to sizzle.

"Do you have any clothes I can borrow?" Buffy asked Cordelia, gesturing to her towel. "I kinda left everything I packed in Spike's car."

"Sure." Cordelia replied, her eyebrows arched. "We're the same height and equally proportioned. That won't look weird at all."

"I know. I'm not asking for a miracle. Just, like, shorts and a T-shirt will work."

Cordelia sighed and jerked her head toward the hall. "Follow me. Let's see what we can find."

Spike decided not to point out that, as vampires didn't perspire the way human folk did, it took a bit for clothes to start to smell particularly ripe, and neither one of them had done much the previous night that would have compromised what they were wearing. If Buffy wanted to play dress-up, he wasn't going to stop her. Might be better for keeping tempers calm if they took some time apart. Unless Cordelia was daft enough to mention the sore spot she'd unwittingly hit that had caused the tension in the first place, and he didn't know her well enough to assume she was too smart to do something that stupid.

He snickered and tugged his shirt over his head, then turned to hunt down the socks that had slipped away to corners unseen the night before. Better to be ready to bolt at a moment's notice—nice as the bird was, Spike didn't reckon sticking around would be good for his health or his sanity, and the latter he'd come to prize as it was about the only thing of value he had left. He had just finished lacing up his boots when the sound of someone pounding on the front door shot through the place like a bullet.

"Dennis!" came from the bedroom. "Could you get that?"

In answer, the deadbolt gave a subtle clink, and then that Doyle bloke was helping himself over the threshold. "Take it there's nothin' to read into the fact that a ghost just let me in," he said in a tone of measured calm and bravado the second he locked eyes with Spike. "Cordelia's just in the other room, is she?"

"The Slayer needed help pickin' out what to wear." Spike edged a step forward, threw a glance at the door as it swung shut once more. "Angel not joinin' the party?"

"Not exactly optimal travel times for the undead. Thought you'd know that. Don't think today's the day for goin' up in flames."

"Perish the bloody thought." Spike turned back to the room—a bold move, maybe, given the company but he caught enough *other* in the bloke's scent to trust that if Doyle got any funny ideas, Spike would be more than capable of sorting him out without bothering the little bug zapper. It seemed like a stretch that this lot, minus Angel, would go to so much trouble to not kill them before just to do them in now. Still, he hadn't lived as long as he had by being an idiot.

He took his time walking toward the last bit of clothing he needed to reclaim—the duster that was strewn over the couch. When he turned to face the lad again, he saw Doyle hadn't moved at all, rather stood surveying the state of the living room with an expression that indicated he likely wasn't a keen poker player.

"There a fight in here or what?" he asked dryly.

Spike lifted a shoulder. "Or what, more like."

"You with Angel's ex-squeeze. Don't mind tellin' you, you got a healthy set of gonads comin' up here and flauntin' this under his nose." Doyle shook his head with a chuckle that matched his tone. "Just when

I thought His Broodiness couldn't get any, well, broodier. That little number you two put on last night really got under his skin."

Yeah, he just bet it had.

"Can I ask a question?" Doyle was eyeing him now shrewdly. "Doesn't seem like the kind of song a guy like you would have memorized."

"A guy like me, eh?"

"Color me curious."

He snickered and began fitting the duster over his shoulders. "Angel ever talk much about Drusilla?"

It was a stupid question, and one answered quickly just from the expression that crossed the other man's face. No surprises. Angel wouldn't want to blab about those days. Not if he was all soulful and the like. Such memories must be painful for a saint.

"Well, Dru. She has a thing for dolls. Never goes anywhere without her favorites. Sometimes they talk to her, or she reckons they do. Most of hers are the older sort. Dolls she fancied when she was a sprog, well before the big bad Angel entered the picture. She's been keen on others here or there, though. Including bloody Barbie for a time back in the sixties." Granted, that hadn't ended well for the doll in question. Spike had brought his ladylove the contents of a toy store window one evening, thrilled in her delight and her affections, only to find her in pieces a night or two later, the Barbie's hair burned off and her eyes gouged out, Drusilla in one of her fits screaming about how the fire would consume him, too. It had taken time to calm her down but after that, he'd learned his lesson. No new dolls. Not unless she asked for them.

Hadn't stopped him from catching the song on the radio when it had first hit the States, though, even if playing it for her then had been a gamble. By that time, Prague had been behind them and Dru at her weakest, and her fits all the more devastating because recovery took twice as long. He hadn't known if introducing her to the song would boost her spirits or make her start tearing her hair out again—the thing about Dru's madness was you were never sure if her triggers remained the same. Some words or subjects he figured were always verboten, excepting the times, of course, that others casually

mentioned them and revealed that no, she'd just been in a mood that day.

Still, he'd taken the chance and she'd enjoyed it. At least at first. Then, one day, she'd stopped enjoying it, and the song had been unceremoniously evicted from his daily life, and though his ears were pleased the damage to his brain had already been done as nothing would ever make him forget the lyrics. He was like that with songs and poetry—once he'd heard or read a thing a couple of times, it went into the memory vault and that was bloody that.

Thankfully, he was spared having to explain any of this by Buffy stomping back into the room, looking especially mouth-watering in an oversized tee and a pair of shorts that he could tell were meant to hit a mite shorter than they did on her. But she clearly wasn't of a mind to kiss and makeup just yet from the glare she aimed at him, so he made a point not to undress her with his eyes or favor her with a smile or anything that would indicate he was counting the seconds to his next seduction. Odds were she would piss him off plenty in the time between now and when he got between those heavenly thighs again as it was, and god knows he had no intention of holding back.

"Hi, Doyle," she said in a rushed, irritated voice. "You know someone who can help us?"

"Well, top of the mornin' to you too. I am here as a favor, you know. Wouldn't kill you any more to show me just a teeny bit of appreciation."

If possible, her eyes grew narrower. "Sorry. Woke up on the wrong side of the floor."

Cordelia, who had followed her in, gave a snort and crossed her arms. "Considering what I saw last night, you have no business being crabby. I, on the other hand, whose house rules were so egregiously violated and had negative hours of beauty sleep as a result, will waste no time in demanding that Doyle give you the information that'll get you out of my apartment post haste."

Doyle's eyebrows shot skyward. "Oh, that's nice. Straight down to business." He sighed and took a moment to look at them each in turn before rolling his shoulders back. "I called in a favor from this mythra demon that owed me one, who then did some sniffing around on her

own. Dunno how it all shakes out but there's this guy operating out of Denver. Ex-military turned anarchist type, with a background in the right kind of stuff to be of use to you. He doesn't ask too many questions, either, so long as you've got the cash to cover whatever it is you're needin'. And he don't come cheap."

"Define *not cheap*," Buffy said.

"Don't quote me on this because I didn't actually talk to the guy, but what I was told was ten a head." Doyle paused. "That'd be *thousand*, mind."

"I figured," she replied wryly. "So how do we get in touch with him?"

"Accordin' to my source, he won't do any business except face-to-face. Paranoid sort. Nothing that could involve a wiretap or a paper trail or the like." Doyle shifted and pulled something out of his back pocket—a slip of fragile receipt paper. "You get to Denver and go to this joint on East Colfax called The Hole. There's a bulletin board in the back—"

"Excuse me," Cordelia interjected. "Called the what?"

"The Hole," Doyle repeated. "Like hole in the wall."

"Wow. Classy."

"Place knows what it is, all right? And there's this bulletin board in the back. You leave a note. 'Found tabby cat, name Simon on the collar' and the number of wherever you're stayin'." Another pause. Doyle fixed his attention on Buffy. "Make it low-key. Our guy spooks easy and if there's a lot of security around, he might not come knockin'."

"Knocking," Buffy echoed. "Rather than calling."

"Told you, nothin' but face-to-face business. He'll figure out where you're stayin' based on the number, then either show up himself or send someone to arrange a meeting to determine what services you need."

"This all sounds like the plot of some really bad noir movie. You know that, right?"

"Look, it's what I got. Up to you if you wanna take the lead you have or just live with those zappers in your heads goin' forward." Doyle lifted his hands, palm-out. "And yeah, before you ask, I trust the

source. The mythra herself might be scum but her info's always been good, not to mention valuable. If she hadn't owed me one, this much woulda cost me no less than my kidney. I don't think you're gonna have better luck anywhere else."

Unfortunately, Spike was of a mind to agree. Coming to Los Angeles had been his idea, and though he couldn't say it had been a mistake, he also wagered they'd gone as far as they could go here without further assistance. He had no contacts in the city—no one he'd trust, anyway, to point him in the right direction—and their unique situation left them more vulnerable than he'd like were he to try to find someone on his own.

There was also the Angel of the matter. While Spike stood by his belief that Angel had been the best bet when they'd been without direction, he didn't much fancy standing still too long while they were in close proximity. It seemed perfectly likely that Angel would brood himself into thinking that putting them down was an act of mercy, or what all, despite the family connection. That family connection had gotten them as far as getting the answers that would lead them to whatever came next—only a true ponce would press his luck.

And if it turned out this Denver solution was a dead end, Spike could think of something else. It would, after all, take time to get to Colorado. Time with more forced Slayer proximity, which would also help him work out the loving feelings he was having and, more importantly, what he aimed to do about them once they were on the other side of this whole bloody mess. If there was even anything he *could* do.

If he weren't already doomed.

"Right then," Spike said, nodding. He made a point not to glance in Buffy's direction when she whipped her head around to stare at him. "Guess we'll be makin' our merry way soon as we have a clear shot to the car."

"We're going?" Buffy demanded. "Just like that? No discussion, no question, just yes, this is the plan?"

"You wanna discuss, Slayer, I'd wager we'll have plenty of time when we're on the road."

"How about where the hell we're going to come up with twenty grand?"

At that, he rolled his eyes. “Gettin’ the dosh is the easy part. Worry more about what we do if we get to sodding Denver and this bloke can’t work the miracle cure that’ll give us our fangs back.”

“How in the world is the money the easy part?” Cordelia snapped. “And can you please share your secret with Angel so I can stop worrying that there might be weeks where I go without a salary?”

“Dunno that he’d approve, ducks. My way’s a bit too much *vampire* for the likes of the grand forehead.” And having said as much, Spike finally met Buffy’s gaze. “All rot you need to learn anyway, way I see it. Especially if you aim to keep your hands clean and your stomach full at the same time.”

“Ugh. Stupid moral convictions,” Cordelia groaned. “It’d be so much easier to get money if I didn’t have scruples and standards.”

“You think this is what we should do?” Buffy asked, speaking as though no one else had. As though she and Spike were the only ones in the room. “Road trip to Colorado? You and me? Back alley brain surgery from someone we’ve never met and are paying a fuckload to crack open our skulls? None of this strikes you as a bad idea?”

Spike lifted a shoulder. “Think we don’t risk anythin’ by going to sniff it out, pet. Less than we risk by stayin’ in one spot.”

She furrowed her brow, but the decision was made. It was there in her eyes. In the tightness of her jaw. In everything she radiated in a simple look. And for perhaps the hundredth time since he’d stumbled upon her—this vision that was slayer and vampire combined—he realized just how impressive she was. Not rushing. Not arguing. Not falling back on her worst impulses or relying solely on instinct. She’d dragged the person she’d been into the person she was now.

If she’d been any less the Buffy he’d come to know over the last couple of years, she wouldn’t be nearly as interesting.

And he wouldn’t be wondering just how the bloody hell he’d managed to fall in love for the first time in over a century when that should have been impossible.

Yet here he was.

God bloody help him.

THEY'LL SEE IT'S ALL RIGHT WITH ME

ONCE AGAIN, BUFFY WAS MARVELING AT HOW DIFFERENT ANGER felt as a vampire. Like a jolt of caffeine straight to the bloodstream or something, only without the crash. As a human, anger had been a useful tool, though one liable to land her in heaps of trouble if she didn't keep herself in check. She could get reckless, too consumed by her emotions to focus on what she was doing, and that—as Giles had often warned her—was a great way to end up seriously hurt, if not outright dead.

Back then, the most dangerous thing about anger had been how it felt when it started to peter out, when her body hit the max of bad it could feel in a single setting and all that negativity naturally receded, leaving her drained and sleepy and maybe in need of a good cry. It wouldn't go anywhere permanently, always remaining handily within reach, but the worst of the bad couldn't last for long stretches. Eventually, everything fell back to earth. Tied there by the binds of humanity and, more specifically, what the human body could sustain without exhausting itself.

But her body was no longer human, no longer impeded by those barriers that had helped ensure she didn't wear herself out. Rather,

anger had become a talisman, one that kept her energized, helped hone her focus and, most importantly, ate away the concerns and doubts she had about the plan they had settled on. And she did have doubts. A buttload of doubts. Despite the fact that in order to get whatever was in her head *out* of her head would of course involve some sort of brain surgery, that fact had seemed less terrifying during the few hours it had spent as a hypothetical. A thing to worry about when later came and replaced the fixations of the present. Namely, all things Spike.

Not that much had changed there, except she could stew on Spike while also dreading whatever was at the end of the road in Denver. Reserve the bulk of her anger for the fact that the stupid vampire was right and, regardless of the risks, they did need to move and keep moving. Better to assume Riley and his friends had ways of tracking them than to let their guard down. Also, the thought of putting more distance between herself and Sunnydale wasn't exactly a bad one. She was honestly starting to wonder if she would ever go home again.

One thing she wasn't wondering about, though, was Spike. Spike and his cruel but accurate assumptions of what her life was going to look like once the crisis was over—alone and beholden to a moral code no one believed she could maintain, determined to maintain it anyway if for no other reason than spite, but mostly because, human conscience or not, it was important to her. She couldn't say why, couldn't explain it in a way that would make sense to anyone, herself included, but it was the truth—her truth—and she refused to give it up. Then there was also Spike knowing how much the thought of him and someone else had bothered her. As though witnessing her demon-sponsored freakout hadn't been enough, he'd actually tried to do the whole easy letdown thing. *It's understandable if you're thinking things. You are, after all, a silly little schoolgirl who's prone to getting her heart trounced by vampires.* The latter part might have been more between the lines than spoken, but that didn't make it any less there, and she wasn't an idiot.

Only she so was. Even knowing, logically, that her anger was not going to make anything better, she refused to let it abate anyway, rather kept it wrapped around herself because at the end of the day, the anger was something else that was hers. Something that wouldn't

leave and head off to South America the first chance it got to woo back a lover who clearly had moved on.

But she didn't say any of this. Wouldn't, no matter what happened. She'd already sacrificed enough of her pride at the altar of Spike's ego and wasn't about to give him more ammunition. That morning had been humiliating enough.

Thankfully, though, Spike did seem to have enough sense not to mention it again, at least not while they had been trapped by the sun at Cordelia's place. She'd thought he might start yapping the second Cordelia left for work—with strict instructions to the ghost to ensure the vampire squatters didn't steal or mess up anything, and that Dennis owed her because he was a perv who had gotten enough phantom spank bank material to last him a few decades—but Spike didn't say a word. Just helped himself to the kitchen and the ready supply of blood Cordelia kept stored in the fridge, as well as a few things from the cupboards. Apparently, that didn't count as theft in the eyes of Phantom Dennis, though leaving an unwashed bowl of blood-smeared shredded wheat in the sink had the ghost flipping up all the blinds in the house and pinning Spike in the kitchen until the dish was sparkling clean.

And though Buffy was grateful Spike wasn't making things more uncomfortable, she couldn't deny that the silence was making her stomach twist with anticipation. She watched him carefully as he puttered around the place, the need to say something, the tension escalating if only in her own head but she knew, *she knew*, not only in her own head. But dammit, she wasn't going to be the one to break. She was Buffy Summers, only daughter of Hank and Joyce Summers, and she knew how to throw a tantrum without saying a goddamn thing.

Eventually, she left him channel surfing and made her way down the hall to the kitchen, both surprised and not surprised to discover Spike had left some blood for her. Drinking everything that provided actual nourishment seemed like the petty sort of thing he might do when pissy, but doing so apparently hadn't occurred to him.

Or maybe the bad mood was just on her side. That thought was rather lonely.

As though in answer—and maybe it was, she didn't know how ghosts worked—one of the end kitchen cabinets flew open, and before she could do more than blink in surprise, a large chocolate bar floated onto the countertop.

"Dennis..." Buffy bit her lower lip, her eyes suddenly stinging. "Thank you. Though, how much trouble are you going to be in for letting me into Cordelia's chocolate stash?"

The cabinet door closed, opened, then closed again. She took that to mean *a lot*.

"You're very sweet. Definitely the best ghost I've ever met." Maybe a stronger, or at the very least more selfless version of herself would have had the resolve to turn down such an offering, but Buffy wasn't feeling very strong at the moment, let alone selfless. She plucked the chocolate bar off the counter and wasted no time unwrapping it, not even slowing down enough to wonder if she still liked chocolate—her diet had been pretty blood-exclusive since dying—before taking a big, slayer-turned-vampire sized bite that brought all her tastebuds to life.

"Oh my god," Buffy moaned around her mouthful, then promptly tore off another piece. Somehow, she'd gotten it in her head that people food was little more than a blending tactic to use around humans. Angel, after all, had hardly indulged when they had been together. Maybe never indulged, even when she'd insisted on popcorn that one time they'd gone to the movies. She knew that the lore about vampires not being able to consume human food was a lot of bullshit and, given how much pleasure she'd derived from pigging out as a human, had just assumed vampires didn't share the same vices. They had a slew of their own.

Turned out that was just because Angel was a wet blanket. Chocolate, she was certain, had never tasted better. Like every other sensory overload she'd experienced since turning—smells being richer, deeper, hearing and eyesight insanely sharpened, the burst of rich flavor was so overwhelming it felt almost indecent.

"Enjoyin' yourself?"

Buffy opened eyes she hadn't even realized she'd closed to find Spike lounging in the kitchen doorway, looking both amused and a

different kind of hungry. The sort that she was fast learning typically resulted in her legs being wrapped around his waist or over his shoulders, and that alone was almost enough to make her forget she was annoyed with him and mortified with herself. Almost.

"I didn't know food tasted this good to vampires," she admitted coolly. "Dennis let me in on Cordelia's chocolate stash."

"Can see that. Wouldn't mind a nip myself. Adds flavor to the blood."

He stared at her expectantly, though not without an edge of trepidation as though he knew he was pushing his luck, which he totally was. And for a moment, Buffy just stared back, daring him to ask just so she could tell him where he could shove his question before going right back to the silent treatment. Or maybe the not-so-silent treatment—maybe it was time to fight him for real and get it over with.

But it turned out she was more pathetic than she'd thought, for instead of blowing him off, she found herself nodding at the cabinet.

Not that it did any good. The second Spike started to peer inside, the cabinet door slammed shut. He frowned, glanced at her, then tried again. No luck. Dennis, it seemed, was firmly on Team Buffy and not shy about letting either of them know. And it was stupid—*she* was stupid for feeling this cut up about anything Spike-related in the first place—but Buffy's heart swelled and her eyes threatened to spill fresh tears. The ghost might just be her favorite person in the world.

"Spook's a sanctimonious little bugger, is he?" Spike muttered, glaring at the cabinet.

"I'm sure calling him names will help."

"You know what would help? Havin' the first bloody clue what I did to make you cross with me." He turned his glare on Buffy, though it lost some of its edge when their eyes met. "You need me to tell you I'm not interested in the cheerleader? I'm not."

It was times like this she was glad that she lacked the ability to blush and that her heart couldn't do anything that would give her away. Buffy forced herself to hold his gaze and slowly, deliberately, took another bite of chocolate. "I didn't say you were."

"You think I don't know what happened? What it's like?"

"Again, I think you're very full of yourself thinking I care who you fuck."

"But you do care."

The calm assuredness in his voice was going to make her scream or cry or kill him, maybe all three. "I do *not*."

"Fine. Have it your way. *I* care, how about that?"

"What?"

Spike lifted a shoulder and looked away, which she would have considered a victory a few seconds ago. Now she didn't know what it was. "I care who I shag," he said. "Who *you* shag, point of fact. Dunno if it's like this for all vamps or not, but I've always been a jealous bloke. Dru was too, though she made a game of it. Wanted me to go out and try to get a rise out of her so she could reclaim her territory. I'd do it then. Sometimes on the hunt, too. Knew she'd be doin' the same. Loyalty's viewed differently when you're a vampire—physical loyalty, anyhow."

"I don't remember asking you for any kind of loyalty."

"That's what I'm sayin', Slayer. That's the point I'm tryin' to make. Jealousy's never been a bloody game for me. I don't get off on it the way she did." He met her eyes again, his expression open and unguarded. "We have a deal, you and I. Get our heads back on straight, me teachin' you how to be a vampire in exchange for the gem."

"And then you try to kill me."

"That was the plan."

"Is it not anymore?"

He didn't answer—not right away, though that was telling all in itself. At last, he sighed and offered a lopsided grin that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Dunno. Guess we'll see when we get there. Until then, though, I'd like to keep at what we're doin' now."

She swallowed. "What we're doing now?"

"Think you know what I mean."

"The sex."

"Yeah." He hesitated, then took a step toward her. "You want me to play games the way she did, I'll bloody play. But if it's all the same to you, Slayer, think I'd rather keep whatever we're doin' just between the two of us. I'm not the type who fancies sharing if I don't have to. And

if you're of the same mind, I can bloody well promise you won't find me sniffin' around some other bird's knickers while we have this deal, all right? No matter who it is."

He looked at her expectantly, but Buffy didn't know what to say. She'd gotten accustomed to the idea of Spike being able to read her, even if she wasn't entirely comfortable with it—how easy she was to discern, especially by someone who prided himself as being her mortal enemy. The fact that he knew exactly what she needed to hear was cause for both alarm and embarrassment, because it truly shouldn't be this way. She *shouldn't* care who Spike was interested in, who he decided to fuck, or who would take her place once their little shared excursion had reached its end. That he would go back to Drusilla, or try, had always been there at the forefront, knowledge she'd never shied from as it was just the way it was. Spike and Drusilla were a package set. Spike and anyone else, well, those rules were less established—hell, even foreign. Buffy hadn't even realized it was a possibility until that morning and her inner monster's response to what had been a truly nothing, throwaway comment from Cordelia, that Buffy *hadn't* been able to throw away. Some deep part of her had viewed it as a threat.

And that was the rub—the thing she'd been trying to ignore or make untrue all day. Despite knowing what she knew about him and Drusilla, despite knowing that whatever they were doing was *just for now*, Buffy had managed to catch feelings. Feelings that shouldn't even be possible according to Giles and everything she'd ever learned about vampires, but were very much there and not going anywhere, regardless of how hard she tried to smother them out of existence.

She was growing to like him. Appreciate his frankness and how he didn't feed her platitudes. How he treated her, more or less, like she was Buffy. How he was the *only* person in her life to do that—not to question her inherent Buffyness or make her doubt herself, to recognize that her determination to remain a good vampire was ludicrous both in how it boldly defied nature and in how she had so far succeeded. Hell, that he wasn't trying to make her be bad, either. He might think her resolve to remain good was stupid but he respected that it was her decision and had volunteered to help her figure out how to do that, and yes, there had been a quid to that pro quo but all things

considered? That was the tamest possible thing she could have imagined. All the while he hadn't tried to deceive her into thinking anything that wasn't true. Like the fact that he viewed her as something other than an enemy that he was determined to kill once she stopped being of use to him, no matter how much that contradicted pretty much everything he said regarding the future she was staring down.

It was just so refreshing after several years of people trying to dictate what she should do or know or how she should feel. Spike didn't make any assumptions or demands, and maybe it was the demon in her, not seeing evil where the other her would, but Buffy liked that. A lot.

In fact, she was starting to worry about how easy it would be to love it. If maybe she already did, and that was the reason she'd reacted the way she had that morning and why it had hurt so much.

"So," she said at length, "as long as we're boinking, we're only boinking each other?"

"About sums it up, yeah. Unless you change your mind."

"You mean unless you do."

"I'm not going to."

"How can you possibly know that?"

"Cause I know who I am," Spike replied. It was unfair that the most erratic, obscene, emotionally volatile vampire on the planet could also present this picture of total and utter calm. "I don't have anything to figure out, here."

"Did you make the same deal with Harmony?"

At that, he paused, his brow furrowing as though he didn't understand the question. "It was never like that with me and Harm."

"What, you weren't boinking? I'm pretty sure I was there when you told her that she was the one you were with to keep your dick wet."

"Yeah," he agreed, drawing the word out, "also told her that we were nothing. Didn't know she thought she was my girlfriend until she used the sodding word and I was quick to set the record straight, wasn't I?"

"So you and me would be more than you and Harmony."

Spike rolled his eyes, and that calm façade cracked down the

middle. "What the hell are you after, Slayer? A bloody promise ring? We both know what this is and what it's not. I'm just sayin' that so long as it lasts, we don't wander. Thought it might help keep your fangs in your head to tell you I won't be puttin' it to anyone else."

"Because you think I care." Great. She had officially entered the *talking in circles* part of the argument. If this was even an argument and not a perfectly nice olive branch that she hadn't been able to keep from getting her Buffy insecurities all over. What she wanted him to say was he wouldn't fuck anyone else because he didn't want anyone else. Because he only wanted her. Because Drusilla was off macking on fungus demons and he'd decided he liked women who were, well, not. Women who were Buffy-sized, Buffy-shaped, answered to the name of Buffy, and happened to be standing right in front of him. That didn't seem too much to ask.

Only it was. She knew it was. Which was why she wasn't surprised when he replied with exasperation. It was the least she was owed.

"You do and you bloody well know it. I'm not sayin' I think it's more, just that you're the possessive sort when it comes to the blokes you're knockin' boots with. Particularly if you've been abandoned by everyone else."

Well, that cut to the quick, being both utilitarian and true, and the only answer she'd get to the question she couldn't stop asking.

"Yeah. I need to... Yeah." Buffy glanced down at the chocolate bar. It hadn't started melting. Why would it? She was room temperature. She lifted it back to her mouth and took another bite, distracted herself with the decadent hit of flavor along her tongue and tried to find the good in everything they had just talked about. In essence, nothing had changed. She'd gone into this thing understanding that it was fleeting, that it was just for now or until they got everything settled with their heads and the gem. That he would be going back to Drusilla one way or another. All he'd done was remove the possibility that he might want to fuck someone else while they were working together and that was more than she could or should have expected.

Just because her feelings had changed didn't mean his had.

"Yeah?" Spike stepped closer, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "That all right, then?"

"It's good. I'm sorry I made everything weird."

"Nothin' to apologize for, kitten." Another step. He was close enough now to tuck her hair behind her ear, lean in and brush a soft kiss against her lips. A kiss that almost broke her because she could imagine, so easily, how it might mean more than it did. How all of this might. Maybe the smart thing would have been to just stop with the sex altogether, seeing as she was all attached, but that wasn't what she wanted and being that she was a vampire now, what she wanted trumped what she knew was best. She'd just enjoy whatever he gave her and then figure out the next steps when the steps were ready to get nexty.

"Reckon the spook would let me raid the cabinet now?" he asked when he pulled back, that smile still in place.

"Is that why you're being nice? To get chocolate?"

"No. Just a perk, is all." Spike turned and strode back to the cabinet in question, but it remained firmly closed when he tried to open it. And despite the fact that her anger had cooled to room temperature, Buffy couldn't deny she was pleased that Dennis wasn't as easily swayed. It went a long way toward making her feel less like an idiot.

"Bloody git," Spike grumbled, stepping back from the cabinet. "What's it take?"

Buffy hmmm'd in thought, strolling up to his side specifically so he wouldn't miss it when she took an exaggerated bite of her chocolate bar. And maybe it was evil, but hey, so was she, technically, and this was a nice, victimless way to embrace it. "I think maybe he just likes me better. Mark of good taste, I say."

Spike aimed a glare at her, then dropped his gaze to her chocolate. "Do try mixin' that with the blood. Think you'll fancy it. Pour a mug and heat it up for a minute or so. You'll thank me later, probably with a treat better than chocolate."

"Not before we're on the road again."

"No? Still got some time to kill before the sun goes down."

"And I think you can wait just fine."

He leaned toward her, lowering his voice. "I think you're starting to feel for the ghost a little and don't wanna tease him with what he can't have."

“He did give me chocolate. That’s more than you’ve given me.”

A smirk brightened his face. “That a fact? You have any complaints about what I’ve given you?”

“I’m not answering that on account of you’ll just want to give me something and I already told you, not until we’re gone.”

“You’re cute when you’re trying to behave.” Spike dipped his head and pressed his lips to hers in what she thought would be a brief kiss, but then his tongue was there, all soft and stroky, and inside her mouth, and she could feel her reservations slipping away with what remained of the tension that had taken residence in her muscles that morning. Not all the way, though, just enough to make her want more. Want it all. And of course that was the moment he pulled back, right when she was about to give in entirely, again with that smirk that she hated and loved in equal measure.

“Good chocolate,” he murmured against her lips. “Don’t let it go to waste.”

Then, without another word, he turned and sauntered back toward the living room like the cocky jackass he was.

And she knew then that she was in more than just trouble or feelings. She was in love. She’d fallen in love with her mortal enemy.

And there was nothing she could do about it.



THEY DIDN’T WAIT for Cordelia or any of Angel’s crew before taking off, though the Slayer insisted on leaving behind a nice little thank you note because she was the fucking cutest thing to ever walk on two legs. And, at least until they had this mess sorted out, entirely his.

Though Spike wasn’t sure he’d come out of that conversation unscathed. She’d asked a lot of questions that he hadn’t seen coming for something that he’d thought he’d had figured pretty well. Honestly, up until she’d mentioned the chit, he’d forgotten Harmony even bloody existed, let alone that she’d been warming his bed these last couple of weeks. Even still, he’d gotten to the end without giving the full game away, which meant he had his pride if only that.

But he also had her, and she was talking to him again. Smiling at

him, flashing those soft green eyes and making all sorts of fun comments he was eager to turn from suggestion into reality. And bless her, she didn't waste any time once they were alone, either, which made the trip out of Los Angeles a lot more interesting than it had any right to be. Weaving in and out of wall-to-sodding-wall traffic while Buffy explored whether or not she'd gotten any better at suckjobs since the last one.

The answer was he didn't know. She'd made magic with her mouth before and she was making it again, pulling his cock into her mouth with just enough pressure to inflict the right kind of hurt. It was all he could do to keep his eyes on the road. After he'd popped his top, she pulled back with a dainty little wipe of her mouth that made him hungry to have her again, only they hadn't even made it beyond city limits at that point and he hadn't much wanted to risk being pulled over by someone whose neck he couldn't snap. Not that Buffy would let him, anyway, but he liked knowing he had the option.

"I have a question," she asked demurely after they had finally hit the right kind of open road. "About the Gem of Amara."

"That so?" He shook his head to clear it. In truth, the gem had never seemed further away than it did now, even before he'd been sold on the location and how easy it would be to unearth, because he'd been a simple fool and simple fools had a gift for overestimating their own talent. Most of the time he didn't mind—anything he hadn't measured accurately or accounted for at all was part of the thrill. Never knowing whether you were going to be caught off guard and what that might cost you. Being forced to improvise in the moment, the threat of death or even something worse always there, waiting for you to trip.

"It makes you invulnerable. Sunlight, stakes, holy water, the full nine yards."

Spike nodded, keeping his eyes on the road. They had decided it might be wiser to keep their travels to night. A car covered in black smears and cardboard would be a lot easier to remember than one speeding down a lonely highway after dark, and they might not know for certain that those government gits were on their tail, it seemed wiser to assume they were. One way to avoid being caught off guard.

"You were really going to use it to go against me?"

"What better way to put it to the test?"

"And if it didn't work?"

"I'd go down swinging, done in by the best bloody Slayer I've ever come across. Either way, I'm a happy bloke."

"Really? You'd be happy to be killed?"

"Not on principle, but by you? Yeah, Summers. Figure you'd make it hurt in all the right ways."

She wrinkled her nose, looking so bloody beyond adorable it was almost painful. "You're kinda twisted, you know that?"

"Kinda *vampire* too," he replied dryly. "Sex and violence go hand-in-hand, or haven't you sussed that out for yourself yet?"

"No, I've...*whatevered* it out, and I still think you're a breed of twisted above the rest of us."

"And how would you like to be done in?" he asked, then, casual as you may, dropped his hand into her lap. She was still wearing those over-large shorts of Cordelia's, which made it easy to dive his fingers beneath the waistband holding them up and venture into more delicious territory. And though he knew to expect it, finding her wet and eager just from having sucked him off was a bloody aphrodisiac. "If you had a choice about it, how would you meet your end, Slayer?"

"I..." Buffy's voice shook, the slightest of wobbles. "I can't say that I've ever thought about it."

"Bollocks." He danced his fingers between her slick folds, heartened by her sharp intake of breath and her short, eager nods, which he wasn't sure she even knew she was giving him. "You're the Slayer," he continued, drawing a line back up her slit until he was just barely grazing her clit with the pad of his finger. "Death's always on your heels. Know you had to have considered how you'd like to go out."

"Well," she said, arching her hips under his touch, bringing herself into more direct contact and hissing another breath through her teeth. Those were coming easier for her, the breaths. Just a couple of days ago, she'd been complaining about how much they hurt—the pressure on her chest, the way everything inside her seemed to grow tight with the effort. Now she was on the verge of panting and seemed none the wiser. He didn't know what that meant but wagered it had to be some-

thing good. Something that was only his. "I don't...know. I already died once."

"How we ended up with a pair of slayers rather than the chosen bird all on her lonesome."

"Yeah."

"How'd that happen?"

"The Master," Buffy replied, rolling again to help slide him along where she wanted him. "There was a...a prophecy. Slayer death, yadda yadda."

"And you died?" He tapped her once, twice, then started drawing circles around her clit, spreading her slickness, making her writhe in turn as she arched and twisted to chase his wandering finger, her scent heady, her throaty little whimpers filling the air, the wild looks she kept throwing him, all of it going straight to his dick as all things Buffy inevitably did. "All blaze of glory or what all?"

"Hardly. He cheated."

"Wouldn't put it past ol' batface. How'd he cheat?"

"Used some mind-melding magic."

"Ahh. The thrall. Bloody figures." Spike pressed against her clit again and she growled, the sound as intoxicating as the rest of her. "Nifty parlor trick."

"It's a parlor trick?"

"For most. You get serious gits like the Master and he's had time to work the mind mojo. Or like Dru, who's a bit touched to start with." He stole a glance at her, noted her sucked in cheeks and slightly flared nostrils, and moved his fingers down until they were poised at her drenched opening. "So," he said, and slid those fingers into her, swallowing his immediate groan when her pussy clamped down around them, drawing him in deeper, "he got his hooks in you and that's how you snuffed it."

"He bit me," she told him, the words riding out on a sigh. "He bit me and then threw me into a puddle. I drowned."

Spike blinked. Whatever else, he hadn't expected that. It was so undignified, insulting. A definite cheat, too, to her point, because Batface had felt above the need to do it proper. A slayer like Buffy deserved a good fight—the sort where her death would feel like a

release rather than a conclusion because she'd fought so hard to keep standing and her opponent, having proved his worth, would give her the rest denied in life. It would be poetic and heartbreaking and invigorating all in one go. Something for the ages—a battle well waged and a death well deserved after everything she'd given back.

And then he figured it was no sodding wonder those breaths she fought for hurt as much as they did. Breathing, or trying to breathe, was what had killed her the first time around. She'd opened her mouth and dragged on her lungs and died as a result. Her body had betrayed her, and now that function was fairly useless.

There was so much to her that even she didn't see. That he was starting to think few ever had or could, for how easily they had let her go. And here he was, the lucky bastard who wasn't exactly known for his brains the one who had known not to toss her aside. Maybe not immediately and not for the right reasons, but he'd gotten there before it had been too late. Gotten there and had his fingers buried in her soft, perfect cunt as a reward, listening to the howling mewls that scratched at her throat as she arched and bucked and tried to fuck herself on his hand without leaving her seat. Not realizing how wet she'd gotten simply by answering his questions about the fight, about death, and yeah, she'd been hot when he'd shot his load into her mouth but she was hotter now. Hot as he was, because she was the same as he was.

She was the same. Christ, *they* were the same. A piece of himself he hadn't known was missing until she'd landed in his lap, and he'd almost thrown away because that terrified him.

"Told you this before, why it brassed me off so much to learn how that bitch did you in," Spike told her, keeping his voice low, partly not to break the spell but mostly so she wouldn't hear it shake. "You deserve a warrior's death. You deserve the fight, to go knowin' you did everything you could, that the person who's claimin' your life earned the privilege by besting the best."

"I'm not the best, though," she replied, her head tipped back against the car seat. "I've died twice and it was because I got sloppy."

"No, it's because the other git cheated, like you said. Both of them did." Spike drew his fingers out of her pussy with a wet, decadent

sound that went straight to his balls. Then he drew a soft line along her folds until he had her clit under his fingertips again, and pressed down with fingers soaked with her and swore his blood sang when she whimpered and thrust up, shaking with need he didn't think she'd known existed before he'd shown her. "Only way they could win, makin' sure the fight wasn't even. They knew you were dangerous. Knew that if they faced you honestly, you'd mop the bloody floor with them. So they had to cheat, didn't they? It was the only way they could win."

"Spike..."

"That's it, baby. Let go."

He expected her to fight, because fighting was what Buffy did, but she didn't fight this time. He pressed down on her clit as she thrust up and then she was trembling and whimpering and crying out, her eyes squeezed shut and her hips in motion and he couldn't keep his eyes off her, bugger the road ahead or anything else. His cock was straining again, throbbing with a need that only being inside of her could satisfy. And when he found the strength to pull his hand away from her, he decided she needed to taste that strength for herself. Perhaps that way she could see what he did. Spike raised his fingers to her mouth, groaned low when she sucked them between her lips without needing to be told, and teased him with her tongue as she lapped up her own honey.

"That's what a warrior tastes like," he whispered, abandoning the wheel altogether, just for a second, so he could free his cock once more. "Glorious, innit?"

Buffy rolled her eyes back and nipped at the fleshy tip of his index finger just enough to hurt, and he couldn't wait. He didn't care what happened next—didn't care if they never made it to sodding Colorado, didn't care if the DeSoto careened into the side of an embankment and went up in flames, because *fuck*, it would be worth it. And she must have read his mind, must have understood the same, for she was shuffling out of those ridiculous shorts the next second. Stripping herself down then sliding along the bench seat, onto his lap, sinking onto his cock with a satisfied purr that stole the last bit of his heart that she hadn't already managed to claim.

All that mattered was this. Buffy bouncing on his lap, scaling her fangs along the side of his throat, strangling him with her cunt and loving him with her mouth, even if only in his mind.

And somehow, despite the odds, they didn't crash into anything but each other.

IF I LOVE YOU TOO, OH PLEASE,
DON'T HURT MY PRIDE

IF SPIKE HADN'T KNOWN HE WAS IN TROUBLE BEFORE, HE WOULD have cottoned on over the next couple of days as he and the Slayer crossed the distance between Los Angeles and Denver. They kept to a rather loose schedule of nighttime driving and daytime eating, sleeping, and shagging in various motels they encountered along the way, along with a few detours he insisted they make for reasons he invented on the fly.

Granted, a lot of those detours were necessary, as they had twenty thousand dollars to scrape together before hitting their destination. Whether he and Buffy decided to go through with that Doyle bloke's contact and have some stranger crack their skulls open, there wouldn't even be a conversation without the dosh. This happily turned a trip that could have been over in fifteen or so hours into one that would take several days to complete, giving him the time he wanted to consider things that would have been downright blasphemous to have considered before.

Like that he might not be going back to Dru after all. That they might be well and fully done.

Seemed pretty straightforward, actually. Dru had kicked him out. Humiliated him in one of the worst ways possible. Spike had done

what any bloke would do in that scenario—picked up the pieces and made a plan, the sort that would both prove the bitch wrong and win her back. Going on without her had been out of the question. Either he succeeded in regaining her respect, or he licked his wounds, evaluated where he'd gone wrong, and tried again. Keep trying until she staked him the way she should have from the start.

What hadn't been in the plan was stumbling across his mortal enemy, the perpetual thorn in his side, or, well, *any* of what had happened as a result. Now here he was, plagued with all these twisted feelings, those he knew were love even if he hadn't quite settled the matter with himself. Loving the Slayer might not be a choice, but what he did with the knowledge was. He hadn't meant to have these feelings, so maybe he could just ignore them, make them go away. Return to Dru anyhow—he *did* love her too, after all—and make a go of it knowing a bit more now of what might have inspired her to toss him to the curb in the first place.

Only it was different, wasn't it? A different kind of love with Buffy. He'd been nothing but wholly, unabashedly himself since the start of all this in ways he hadn't even realized he wasn't when he was with Dru. That there were parts of him he kept secreted away, knowing she knew they were there but that they would both be happier if they pretended they weren't. For instance, Dru would never have gotten on stage and rubbed up all over him just to brass off Angelus—she would've done it to encourage a real fight, see if they would actually come to blows over her, if her daddy would stake his claim the way he always had whenever sappy William had started getting ideas about who Drusilla truly belonged to.

With Buffy, it wasn't a game. She was starting to let go of Angel. While the performance they'd put on had been in part to drive the plonker out of his wits, it hadn't been because she'd wanted him. It had been because he'd hurt her and she'd wanted to hurt him back.

Furthermore, while Spike still maintained he did love Dru, the love itself was not the same as it had been these last hundred years. The burn wasn't intense—it was barely there at all, and he thought it might fade if he let it, become a different breed of love altogether. One he would happily carry with him for everything she was and all she meant

to him, what she'd done to rescue him from the man he'd been doomed to become before her, but not one that would possess him. Make him ache both with it and because of it, consume him the way love always did.

For while the burn for Dru was flickering its last, Spike was still on fire. Just for the woman at his side.

Thankfully, he had a bit before he had to have anything figured out, and more than his own confusing thoughts to occupy his mind. There was the money they needed, and the promise he'd made to the Slayer that he intended to uphold, whatever else happened between them. He figured he could teach her the basics of swindling as well as breaking and entering. First sitting cross-legged on whatever bed they would shag themselves to exhaustion in later, a pile of cards between them, Spike going over the hands and moves and tricks, then the best places to sneak in cards and where to hide them, then stopping here and there to catch games with actual stakes to put those new talents to use. One memorable night, after deciding she needed to learn how to shoot pool as well as cards, he'd broken into a bar in a no-name town filled with establishments that didn't keep demon hours to introduce her to the game, and they'd ended up having a right brilliant shag against the green felt.

A cynic might say a lot of this was more for him than it was for her, and while that cynic might have a point, Buffy *did* need to learn these things if she meant to keep to her principles. He was doing her a favor, really, imparting knowledge that would help her navigate the world while keeping well fed and all the gits who crossed her path still breathing. Otherwise, she was liable to find herself in a tight spot where human life seemed more negligible, and while he didn't see the problem with that, he knew she would. Her reasons might be barmy, but they were part of what made her Buffy, which meant they mattered to him too.

Goddamn her.

At the pace they were going—frequent stops to swindle cash for their upcoming operation, if not steal it outright, and try out Buffy's budding talents—Spike wagered it might be mid-November before they made it all the way to Denver. Bloody fine by him, as long as Buffy

didn't complain. All the better to milk every second of the remaining time they had.

Right. So he was pathetic when it came to the women he loved. At least he knew it.

It was after a night spent testing Buffy's new lockpicking skills—which Buffy had celebrated by filling her travel bag with an assortment of goodies that Spike was already eagerly anticipating getting to peel off her—that another thought occurred to him. Well, not so much occurred as became obvious. They had just helped themselves into a motel room—secured courtesy of Spike's nimble reflexes, Buffy's perky tits, and a cunt-starved berk manning the front desk—and he switched on the telly just in time to catch the area's morning news show.

"Bugger, it's Halloween," he said, studying the cheerful bint on the morning news who was discussing what trick-or-treaters could expect from the weather that night.

"So?" Buffy asked as she went through her travel bag. "Ugh. Remind me to grab more casual wear next time we're breaking into places. All the stuff I got is nice but not loungy. I need loungy things. That or a laundromat. We might not sweat the way humans do, but I still feel grody wearing stuff that hasn't been washed since last time."

"So, it's *Halloween*."

"Why are you saying it like that? I thought the whole thing was we take Halloween off."

Spike rolled his eyes, both of which were now firmly on the Slayer and off the weather bird. "Yeah, we take it off. It's like a holiday, innit?"

"It *is* a holiday," she replied, now looking at him like he'd gone soft in the head.

"Right. And what do you on holidays, love?"

"Well, depends on the holiday. Like Thanksgiving or Christmas, I'm usually with my mom or my friends to celebrate." A shadow crossed her face at that, and he didn't need her to say what she was thinking. It was there in the quiet. The things unsaid. Buffy shook her head and refocused. "Are you telling me that demons get together to celebrate Halloween?"

"Some do, yeah. One night out of the whole bloody year where

even the humans are toasting us. Bit of a kick, that.” Spike waited for a beat. “You’ve known Halloween’s quiet. Did you ever wonder why?”

“I did,” she said, and there was a hint of embarrassment in her voice this time. “Just, you know, not very much. It never occurred to me that demons might have culture.”

That made sense. It wasn’t in the watcher’s best interest to humanize the Slayer’s prey, lest she start asking questions about the sorts of creatures she was out there silencing forever. For that reason, he snapped back the insult that wanted out and decided to look at this as the opportunity it was. Buffy had never before been on this side of demonhood on October 31st—seemed showing her what she’d been missing was the least he could do to further her vampire education.

“Everyone likes a holiday every now and then,” he said. “Bloody good way to unwind, let off some steam.”

“What exactly do demons need to unwind for?” she retorted. “Isn’t our entire existence already all with the unwound? What are our big stressors? Not enough property damaged this month? Falling short of the victim quota?”

“Awful large brush you’re usin’ to paint that picture of yours.”

“What brush should I be using?”

The insult pressed again, and this time, he reckoned it was fair game. “I thought you were cleverer than this, Summers.”

Buffy scrunched up her face, her eyes bright with indignation. “Hey!”

“All different types of demons that are out there, that you’ve seen, and you think they’re all the same? Not a single one of them exists that doesn’t get their jollies by making messes wherever they go? All on one side of the coin. One big bloody boring monolith?”

“Mono-what?” But her irritation had faded into something he thought might be chagrin. “Okay, so my demon education is woefully woeful. We just tended to deal with the demons that were causing trouble and the others didn’t get on my radar.” She paused. “Though there was this demon guy a few months back who wanted to cut a deal with me and Faith. He definitely seemed more the harmless kitten variety so I ixnayed the slayage.”

Spike nodded, wondered who Faith was since she seemed to think

he knew, but decided he didn't care enough to ask. "Right, well, there you go. And there are a good number of demons who fancy Halloween as a celebration of themselves."

"Okay. Point conceded. I still don't know why you're telling me this."

"Because it's a *holiday*, pet. Somethin' I wager you need now more than you ever have." He rose off the bed to close the distance between them, capture her face between his hands, revel in the smooth silkiness of her skin against his fingers. "Have half a mind to give you a night out. What do you say?"

There was a long beat in which she seemed to consider him, as though worried he might be having her on, before her face split into a broad smile, and he had his answer.

"Define *out*," she said coyly. "Where would we go?"

"Can't be too hard to find a spot."

"A demon spot?"

She sounded skeptical, and that wouldn't do. Another thing the Slayer needed to learn—just how vibrant demon life was outside of her Sunnyhell bubble. Might not be the hotbed that she was used to, hailing from the Hellmouth, but any city of more than ten thousand was bound to have at least a little nightlife. All he had to do was find it.



TURNED out he'd underestimated his fellow demons.

There were certain signs a fellow got accustomed to identifying when on the road—silent nods to ne'er-do-wells who might be traveling to let them know they were in friendly territory. Or at the very least, territory where they would find others of their kind. It didn't have to be anything flashy; in fact, typically, the more understated the better, but demons as a whole tended to get bolder the closer the calendar grew to October 31st, ramping up with the sort of behavior typically blamed on the local teen population. Pranks and the like taken a step too far. Sometimes several.

The first indicator came courtesy of a roadside sign, which was otherwise unremarkable save for the seven pronounced claw marks

stretching across its face. The sort of claw marks that any expert would identify as being too large for a bear even before you considered the number of digits. Spike slowed when they caught his attention just enough to give them a thorough look-over as the DeSoto trundled past. When Buffy asked what he was on about, he pointed with a grin.

"That's the work of a gnarmack demon."

"Or a sasquatch with a couple too many fingers," she replied dryly. "How do you know?"

"Just do. Wager we'll see a few more the closer we get to town."

"And what does that mean?"

"Usually that the place is considered claimed territory for anyone lookin' to settle down and stretch their wings."

"And if you don't have wings to stretch?"

"We find ourselves a load of revelers lookin' to have a nice, civilized holiday. Gnarmack are sociable types."

"Sociable types who mark signs to warn off other demons?"

"Not demons, other gnarmacks," he corrected, leaning toward her just because he could. "This lot could give a piss about other demons. More the bloody merrier. Trouble happens when you get other gnarmacks in the area. *Then* you're in for a bloodbath. There are about fifty different tribes, and not a one of them gets along."

Buffy didn't look nearly as impressed as she should. Here he was, a veritable font of knowledge, filling in the gaps of her education, and all she could do was frown.

"Then don't the claw marks kinda advertise to other snarcacks that they're around? Like, if you're that volatile, wouldn't it make more sense to fly under the radar?"

Spike shook his head and turned his attention back to the road just in time to catch another set of claw marks on an upcoming mileage post. "Don't think any of them *want* to go to war. Hurts their population too much, especially considerin' how long it takes to breed a new generation. More the principle of the thing. The marks let others know to steer clear if they don't want bloodshed. Think we found our party town."

The party town in question was a sight smaller than he would have expected, but this part of the country was sparse on population

outside of large metropolitan areas as it was. In fact, taking in the sights—a few more gnarmack identifiers, with the other odd rune or symbol carved into telephone poles, the sort a less trained eye would mistake for hobo signs—it wouldn't surprise Spike to learn the whole place was overrun and humans were the minority. He wagered if he pulled over to top the car off, he'd find the convenience store clerks doubled as butchers, that along with the pamphlets of attractions were detailed grids of the local sewer system. Hell, barely a mile into town he caught sight of a would-be animal shelter advertising *fresh kittens* on the marquees.

And there, at the apex of town, was what was unmistakably a demon bar.

A place called The Hellmouth.

He didn't need to point it out, either. Buffy saw it before he got the honors.

"Oh my god, they cannot be serious."

"Imagine they are." Spike smirked, much too pleased with himself, and steered over to a curb to park. There were closer spaces but he knew the score. Revelries could spill onto the street the longer the night drew out and, holiday or no, he didn't much fancy the idea of chancing their wheels. "That's the thing, Slayer. Places like this, our kind can hide out in the open. Even more than in sweet ol' Sunnyhell, I'd wager. No hellmouth energy to draw unwanted attention, so things stay quiet. Demons can live in peace, or as close to it as they get."

"Are you saying there are no humans in town?" Buffy slid gracefully from her seat the second he moved, throwing back her head in time for her hair to catch a breeze that swept down the thoroughfare. Standing there like that, her eyes closed, her chin pointed up, golden strands flowing behind her, she had never looked less like a vampire. Just a girl on the town with her fella—her date for the evening. Beautiful and carefree and timeless. She was wearing one of the dresses she'd stolen last night—a strappy, dusty pink number that hit just above the knee and came with a sheer black overlay patterned with wildflowers. She'd chosen it after they'd decided to hunt out Halloween festivities and had been as close to giddy as he'd ever seen her, getting ready for something. Made him feel like a right proper

date. The black pumps she'd slid on were the bloody cherry on the bloody sundae.

And now, looking at her, Spike felt his mouth run dry. He wasn't sure what it said that he was stunned stupid just at the sight of Buffy stepping into the night, but whatever it was, it wasn't anything good. More that whenever this journey of theirs came to an end and she decided he'd outlasted his usefulness, moving on would be something beyond difficult.

"Spike?"

He managed to snap his mouth shut before her eyes were on him again. "What?"

"I asked you a question."

Had she? He frowned and thought back, berating himself all the while. "Sorry, love, must've missed it."

She gave him a look of pure exasperation, the sort that went straight to his prick. "I asked if there are *any* humans in this town. Since the demon population is so...out and proud."

Yeah, that sounded vaguely familiar. Spike cleared his throat and tried to put some swagger into his answer. "Course there are humans. You're just not likely to see any of 'em out and about after sundown if they can help it. Have a bit more sense to them than the types that live back in Sunnydale. Not that it matters; if the demons 'round here are smart, they don't snack on the locals. This place is right off the highway, so odds are they get a good number of travelers just lookin' to make a pit stop."

"Like a never-ending delivery service."

"Now you're gettin' it."

Buffy wrinkled her nose, the sort of look that was more pensive than disapproving. "What happens when it gets colder? It's already a little chilly out so tourists will stop touring pretty soon."

"Could be they keep their freezers full. Stock up for wintertime."

"Yeah, that's not disturbing at all," she replied, though her tone was wry with amusement that both tickled him and made him want to whoop in triumph, but he wasn't keen to draw more attention to it.

Another thing he'd noticed over the last few days—Buffy might be committed to living as a vegetarian vampire, or whatever you called a

vampire that didn't kill its prey, but she'd started to drop what he assumed was the attitude she'd adopted while acclimating to soulless life around her mates. Not looking like she was getting away with something, for starters, if she let an off-color remark slip censor-free past her lips. Laughing at the sort of jokes that would scandalize the gits who used to make up her social circle.

Becoming more comfortable with being a vampire.

"Ready for a night on the town, pet?" Spike asked, coming around the car to join her. He held his hand out to her without thinking and tried not to let her see what it meant that she took it without even needing to look at him. That she knew he was there and reached for him on instinct.

Fuck, he truly was a lost cause.

"So," she asked as they made their way toward the front of The Hellmouth, swinging his hand with each step. "What exactly should I expect in here? I'd hate to make some sort of Halloween faux pas my first time out."

From the sounds, which he knew reached her ears same as his, Buffy didn't have a thing to worry about. All he could hear was raucous laughter, screaming-loud conversations, and the soundtrack to what he thought might be an old *Nightmare on Elm Street* movie. Hopefully the first one, though the sequels certainly had their virtues. He also picked up hints of chocolate and caramel, interspersed with less family-friendly scents, but nothing outside the normal range of refreshments typically served at such gatherings. Maybe, if he was lucky, he'd get to see Buffy bob for apples in a tub full of blood.

"Not possible, pet. That's the beauty of this holiday. No expectations at all." He gave her hand a squeeze and tried not to swoon like a sodding schoolboy when she reciprocated. "Places like this I've been before have mostly been demons wearin' their own faces proudly while exchangein' war stories and watchin' old favorites on the telly. Maybe throwin' back some of the candy your lot hand out to the sprogs who troll the neighborhoods and the like."

"I don't think you can call humans *my lot* anymore."

That was true, though he thought it likely Buffy wouldn't take kindly to the observation that she still had on her vampire training

wheels, so he opted not to say anything. As much as he enjoyed getting under her skin, he wanted tonight to be something else—something where she wasn't glaring stakes at him all night, rather smiling and playing bloody footsie and perhaps agreeing to wank him off if they found a dark enough corner. He wanted her to enjoy herself without thinking too hard about what anyone thought.

When they reached the door, Spike beat Buffy to the punch in seizing the handle, then ushered her inside. Looked like the owner of the establishment had decorated the place with the inventory of one of those novelty shops that popped up during this time of year. Fake spiderwebs were strewn from wall-to-wall, the lights themselves alternating between pumpkin-orange and deep purple. The second the tell-tale bell above the door tinkled, a slew of demons crowding the bar, some wearing paper masks over their clearly demonic faces, swirled around to scrutinize who had wandered in and almost immediately started whooping their joy as they identified more of their own. Spike didn't manage to get even two more steps inside before some massive plonker with tusks and a floor-length beard pressed a drink into his hand. He turned in time to see Buffy thank the gnarmack who had handed her something that wasn't entirely blood but close enough to likely guarantee she'd have a fun time once she drained it.

"Okay, this is amazing," Buffy said with unbridled glee, swinging her head around. There was a lot to see—demons everywhere in various states of dress—or undress—talking loudly with one another, ordering drinks, or trying to shush the people around them to better hear the show on the telly, which was indeed *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Looked like Spike had arrived just in time to watch Johnny Depp go up in a blood fountain—always a good time. He grinned, both at their surroundings and the look on Buffy's face, then tugged her deeper into the space in search of a booth or a table they could call their own.

"What is this?" Buffy asked, lifting up her glass of mostly blood. "It tastes good but kinda funky."

"Reckon it's a Halloween special, or what all," Spike replied. He leaned over to get a direct sniff, then grinned. "Yeah, thought most of it was human. The rest, I think, is varmylous blood."

"I am learning all sorts of new words today."

“Varmylous are a bunch of purists who take the name of *demon* to mean something special. They’re among the types of demon who consider vampires almost lower than humans. Since our kind isn’t born, rather made, we’re tainted. We’re not properly demon or human in their eyes. Less than, bein’ that we’re dependent on humans to keep living.” He took another sniff, then, after glancing at Buffy for permission, helped himself to a small sip and nodded. “That’s it. Think you’re in for a treat, Slayer. Varmylous blood gives you one hell of a buzz.”

“And why did they just hand me this on the way in?”

“Cause a varmylous would view it as an insult to be food for anythin’ as lowly as a vampire. Think this was the bartender’s way of sayin’ they’re friendly to us.”

She blinked, all innocence, and it hit him again. Despite her education and skill, the things she had seen and learned and, more impressively, *stopped* over the years that she had been a menace to the demon world, there was still so much she didn’t know. So much the gits who had considered her training their responsibility had thought she hadn’t needed. And balls, maybe they had been right. Wasn’t like Spike had ever been on the other side of the equation, himself. What use would a slayer have for understanding social customs of a joint she was likely never to set foot inside? Had she come through those doors with a heartbeat and a pulse in tow, even on a night of frivolity and rest among demonkind, she likely would’ve been greeted with a good attempted killing.

“Like I said,” Spike continued in a low voice, spotting an empty booth and nodding to guide her in that direction, “vampires aren’t welcome in all demon places. They gave you that to let you know you’re among friends.”

Buffy was quiet until she was seated, her brow furrowed and her narrowed eyes following him as he slid into the spot across from her. Then, she leaned forward, elbows on the table, and said in a loud whisper, “You’re telling me you decided to come here even knowing that they might, what, kill us on sight for not being the right kind of demon and we just happened to luck into a place that doesn’t consider us garden variety pests?”

“You tellin’ me it would’ve stopped you anyway? Don’t live my life

like that, Slayer. Besides..." Spike helped himself to her glass again and threw back a hardy gulp. "It's Halloween. One night a year rot like that doesn't mean much."

"I just like knowing what I'm getting into before I go to a place."

"No, you *think* that's what you like. It's what you're supposed to like. What your watcher and every other stuffed shirt has told you is good and proper. But you're not some domesticated kitten, kitten. And that, to you, is why the risk is worth it." He arched an eyebrow and waited, but she didn't protest, just looked back with an expression that was all defiance. "What you like is the rush. The thrill of bein' in a fight that makes you earn your right to keep livin'. Not some easy victory—a true fight to the other side."

Buffy crossed her arms primly on the table. "You think so?"

"Tell me. Ever have as much fun in a tussle as you have with me?"

She opened her mouth, closed it, opened it again, but whatever response she hoped would ride to her rescue either had stage fright or didn't exist. Spike banked on the latter, and he knew she knew, for the scowl she wore deepened and she shifted a bit in her seat. Poor baby had never thought about the fight in those terms, had she?

"Add to that," he went on, "you're a vampire now. You have that itch inside, don't you? It was there before but it's louder now. That need for violence—to rip things apart. All that power just simmerin' beneath the surface, waitin' to be let out. It's part of what you need now. More, I'd wager, given you're not gonna be killing for food. That animal instinct wants blood whatever way it can get it. Ignore it too long and you're liable to do somethin' you'll regret once the dust all settles."

"Assuming the dust isn't mine in this case."

"You tell me, *Slayer*. Kept promising that any fight between the two of us would be unfair on account of how much stronger you are than a regular vampire. Was that all talk?"

Those narrowed eyes grew even narrower, and his jeans grew tight in response. He wondered idly if he could talk her into coming around to his side of the booth. Then, if she were so inclined, she could help herself right onto his cock and they could have a right nice celebration

here. He'd even wrap his duster around the both of them to preserve her modesty, should that be an issue.

"You still hoping to find out?" Buffy said at length.

"Just how strong you are? Bloody hell, yes."

"And are you still planning on trying to kill me anyway? Once the whole shock collar thing is fixed and you have that gem?"

The questions were getting a bit personal. Spike's own grin slipped a bit. "Told you I wasn't decided on that."

"That was before we left LA. Have you decided now?"

He had—hell, he had when she'd asked in LA—but he didn't want to tell her just yet. She'd only have questions, the sort he couldn't answer without betraying every treacherous thought that had run through his head since she'd barreled back into his life. "Eager little thing, aren't you?" he replied instead.

She lifted a shoulder. "Guess I just wanna see where I stand. Get a reality check."

"Thought we were gonna have a right nice time. Supposed to be takin' the night off and all."

"You brought me to a demon bar overflowing with demons who might have turned on us the second we walked in the door and that didn't bother you because you might get to see me in action," Buffy surmised with annoying accuracy, even if she was glossing over some of the broader points he'd made. "Hey, don't blame a girl for wondering what's at the end of this road trip when we get there. I just want to know—"

But that was as far as she got before the door to the place flew open, steering her train of thought into a bloody canyon. He knew because it happened to him too—happened to everyone in the sodding bar. That solemn, almost sacred understanding and purpose that charged through predators when prey stumbled into their path.

A couple of humans had come into The Hellmouth.

"This isn't good, is it?" Buffy asked, her eyes not leaving the pair who, though they seemed to sense something was off, wandered toward the bar anyway, looking the right kind of clueless. Travelers, then, and not locals. The sort Spike had speculated were the primary

source of food for the human-hungry in town. Looked like he was about to see that theory put to the test.

“Not for them,” he agreed, and waited to see if she would ask more. She didn’t, though. She understood.

A lion might take a night off hunting, but that didn’t mean it wouldn’t snap at a zebra thick enough to wander into the pride.

“Well, fuck.” Buffy threw back the rest of the blood she had been given as a peace offering. “Guess you’re gonna see after all.”

“See what?”

She slammed the glass onto the table and rose to her feet as the first growl broke through the air. “Exactly how much stronger I am than a normal vampire.”

IT WAS A GRAVEYARD SMASH

ALL BUFFY COULD THINK ABOUT AS SHE MADE HER WAY TOWARD THE wayward couple that had unluckily stumbled into a demon bar on Halloween, of all things, was how boring her patrols had been since she'd been turned. And that Spike, once again, had had a point about the thrill of being in a fight that required more than just showing up to win. Already she could feel the thrum, the threat of violence against her skin. The rush and anticipation, the primal hunger and promise. Whether consciously or not, everyone in the place was riding the same vibe.

Everyone knew things were about to get bloody.

“—directions to Springdale,” the man was saying as Buffy edged close enough to distinguish words from the surrounding cacophony. Demons were so loud in their silences, all smacking lips and thundering hearts and low, inner growls that would have a hell of a time reaching human ears. The murmur of conversation from the human party-crashers had been immediately clear, though she hadn't been focused on that, rather alert for a sign that any of the others were going to leap into action before she had a chance to put herself between them and danger. But no, the demons were waiting. Anticipating. Soaking in the tension.

And why not? Even with her limited experience, Buffy could tell that stoking the fear made the blood taste better. More like hard-won prey.

"Springdale," the decidedly not-human bartender croaked back with a mean sort of smile. "Good stretch from here. Did you get off on the Freetown exit?"

"We did," the woman confirmed. While there was a definite wobble in her voice, she wasn't cowering, which was more than a little admirable. There was no way not to sense the preternatural hunger in the air. "I told him to keep on but he insisted this was shorter. So we should head back to—"

"It's late," the bartender replied. This time when he smiled, he showed off more than one row of very sharp teeth. "Why don't you stick around a while? Have a drink?"

That was evidently the cue the others had been anticipating, for a large furry demon thumped a clawed hand onto the man's shoulder, then leaned in and took an exaggerated sniff of his hair. "Or a bite."

"Or," Buffy said, shaking her head and her fangs loose and shouldering her way through the tightening crowd, "how about you all back off and let these nice folks go back to their car? We take the night off, remember?"

The woman met her eyes and swallowed hard, though her voice was still remarkably steady when she spoke. "You do seem to take Halloween very seriously in here."

"You don't know the half of it," Buffy replied dryly.

"Look here, bloodsucker," the tall furry demon snarled, thrusting his snout into Buffy's face and serving her with a heady whiff of raw-meat breath. "This isn't for you to decide. Maybe if you're good, we'll save you some scraps."

She offered a saccharine smile. "And maybe if you back off, I'll let you keep your head."

"This must be your first Halloween," the bartender noted. "Yeah, we do take the night off. But we don't say no to free delivery."

"Don't mistake our hospitality," came another voice, maybe belonging to the demon who had thrust the drink into her hand when she and Spike had first come in. She didn't know. The crowd had

become one massive demon wall that had unanimously decided to add *vampire* to the menu.

A thrill raced down her spine and the place where her heart used to beat suddenly felt full.

This was not going to be like patrolling in Sunnydale. It was going to be a slaughter.

And she was starving for it.

Buffy offered a toothy grin, dragging her tongue down the length of one of her fangs. "Last chance," she said, looking at the bartender. "You guys wanna live to see another Halloween, you let the humans go. I'll even buy a round of whatever everyone is drinking to show no hard feelings." That would put a serious dent in their brain surgery fund but, well, they could break into five shops tomorrow rather than just one or two. She wasn't unreasonable. "Your choice."

The bartender smirked a smirk she had seen before. The same one that exceptionally built guys used to give her before she introduced them to a little humility. She'd be lying if she said this wasn't exactly the outcome she'd hoped for, though she could at least appease the little Giles-like voice that still resided in her head, urging caution and warning her about giving herself over too freely to those darker impulses.

There were degrees of dark, though. Slaying a barful of demons who were about to munch on two lost and clueless travelers was, in her estimation, on the lighter end of the color spectrum.

"I think we need to start by reminding minuscule bloodsuckers where they are on the food chain," the bartender replied, all smarm. "You get a free drink, and you think you own the place."

The air shifted just enough to give her warning and set her body into motion, instinct overriding thought and deliberation. She whirled around in time to catch the meaty claw that had been swiping for her head, allowed herself a blink to enjoy the shock that crossed the owner's face, then snapped the trunk-sized wrist with a delicate flick of her own. It all happened fast, two seconds at most, but the moment after seemed to stretch an eternity. The demon's wide eyes went wider as shock graduated into pain, and then the rest of his hairy face followed suit. His jaw fell open, a loud, thick cry tearing through his

throat until the walls were ringing. And then, in a move that betrayed his own stupidity, he clubbed his other hand forward in a wild swing. Hoping for what, Buffy didn't know and didn't have time to wonder. She was too busy catching the flailing arm and leveraging her strength to flip the demon over her head so his hulking body came crashing down onto the bar right in front of that smug bartender. Glass shattered and chairs toppled back, snarls filling her ears and all her senses going on high alert.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Buffy said, and grinned down at the demon she now had splayed across the bar. Then brought her elbow down hard enough on his hairy chin that the bone snapped clean through.

So. One down. Lots more to go.

It wasn't like it was in the movies—not here, at least. There was no orderly line of bad guys patiently waiting their turn, rather a swarm of motion that closed in around her and brought attacks from all angles. And as she had so many times before, Buffy detached mind and body. Not all the way but enough so every move was instinct and the thoughts that did break through were brief but bent on survival. For instance, the bottle in Demon A's hand could be used to sever Demon B's throat while she lashed at Demon C with her fangs. The body of Demon B could then be used as a shield when Demon A realized what had happened and lunged in for the kill, giving Buffy enough time to quickly deal with Demons D and E who had launched themselves at her back, still with the trusty broken bottle, before tossing the dead weight aside and seizing a handful of Demon A's tentacles. When the head popped off in much the same manner as a cheap plastic doll, Buffy could then turn it into a cannonball. Or maybe make that a bowling ball, considering how many demons it flattened at it soared to the other end of the bar.

When Buffy brought her head up, when she looked into the face of the next demon ready to run her over, the unearned confidence she'd seen just a moment ago was nowhere in sight. Instead, she caught the exchange of uncertain glances, eyes wide with surprise and fear and more, and she couldn't help it. Being underestimated as the Slayer had been a heady enough feeling, especially once she'd started doling out

the punishment. Being underestimated now, when she felt close to invincible?

Honestly, if she had a soul, she might be moved to give these bozos a fighting chance in the name of fair sportsmanship. But Buffy didn't have a soul, nor the desire to be a good sport. It was time these demons learned just how dangerous some vampires could be. Sure, it wouldn't help them much, since she didn't plan to let anyone out of here with their lives apart from the lost humans, but a good lesson was a terrible thing to waste.

Just her luck, the demons here at The Hellmouth still had a long way to go before it sank in.

"What the fuck did you put in that blood?" someone stage-whispered.

Buffy smirked, glanced around. Briefly met Spike's eyes from where he sat admiring her still at their booth, and swelled a little at the grin on his face. The pride. "Do you really not get it yet?" she asked the room at large.

The room really did not. A new crowd of demons had shouldered their way to the front of the line, eyeing her like she was lunch. Buffy rolled her eyes and turned to the human couple, who stood where she had left them, covered in bits of rapidly drying not-human blood and staring at her in with the same sort of terrified wonder as her demon admirers, though perhaps more so as it didn't look like either of them had fully realized she had formed her one-woman army for their benefit. Buffy might have been annoyed but she didn't have time—the next attack came, and all her senses disengaged once more, shunting back in favor of those that would keep her alive.

Still, she did manage to catch the eye of the woman before she'd whirled around in full. And bark out a command she could only hope would be heard and understood.

"Run."



THERE WAS ALMOST no point in getting up, himself. Almost. Apart

from the fact that Spike would not waste a ringside seat to a one-sided slaughter, he didn't want her to have all the fun.

And she was, too. That was the beauty of it. Buffy was having fun.

And she was fucking magnificent. No surprises there, granted. That was just her, his Slayer. His little vampire. Carving her way through demons like they were nothing more than fancy paper dolls, tossing heads and hearts and limbs and, at one point, a full torso over her head just because the debris was in her way. The few demons she couldn't simply mow down took at most three hard swings to slam to the floor, Buffy's attention flitted on to the next thing by the time the tweety birds stopped spinning. And when those demons raised their ugly mugs to get a look at what was left of their brethren, well, there they'd find Spike. Not as fast and definitely not as strong, but as eager to crunch bones and tear into leathery skin as a vampire could be. Determined not to miss out on the fun, because god knew after everything that had happened over the last few days, he deserved more than just a spot of violence.

He deserved a full bloody massacre.

"Oi!" he spat through a mouthful of fangs, ducking under the arm of a flailing demon who hadn't yet realized that his throat had been ripped out. The human gits for whom Buffy had started this bloody party were standing among sopping scraps, staring open-mouthed as the Slayer carved her swathe through their would-be executioners. "Believe the lady gave you an order."

The gent who had started this whole mess slowly turned to meet Spike's eyes, his face spattered with various types of blood. "What is this?" he asked in a hollow voice.

"It's your second chance, mate," Spike replied as he closed his arm around the still-flailing moron to snap its neck. "So grab the missus and bloody scarper. Thank your lucky stars that if you had to stop in a demon bar t'night, it just happened to be one with her in it." He pointed at Buffy just as she roared and launched herself at the bartender, apparently having saved him for last. "My girl has a soft spot for humans the rest of us don't. Be on your way, then."

Thankfully, that seemed to reach the bloke—either that or his brain had decided to stop working and allow instinct a turn at the

wheel. The man seized his traveling partner by the wrist and dragged her toward the door, leaving Spike alone among the remnants of what had been a kicking party.

And Buffy. She was panting, likely harder than she realized, and staggering away from the bartender's corpse as its knees hit the floor. Her hair was a mess, the pretty dress she'd slid into for tonight's date ripped and splattered with blood. One of her heels had broken off at some point during the skirmish, which she didn't seem to notice until she'd already crossed more than half the floor with lopsided steps. She paused, wrinkled her nose, and kicked off her other pump with a low snarl that went straight to Spike's cock. Well, along with everything else about her, for he had never seen anything as amazing in his life than Buffy right now. Her yellow eyes, her wrecked dress, the bits of gore clinging to her hair from where she had plowed right through those who had tried to get in her way. On the telly, Nancy giving her speech to Freddie about how he didn't have any power over her, or some other rot, as the network promised more Krueger to come in the lower right-hand corner. No one here to watch anymore because Buffy was the Slayer and would always be the Slayer, and the Slayer meant saving the day for those poor sods too thick to spot danger for themselves.

Some part of him had reckoned her future might have its share of tussles with those less than human, but nothing on this scale. Just her trying to satisfy boredom by stalking the cemeteries in search of her own brethren to slay. It was either that, in his opinion, or surrender to the inevitable. The realization that Spike had had it right from the start and trying to walk in both worlds was a waste of time. Perhaps she'd forget her own strength or get into a tight spot where there wasn't a blood bank handy and instinct kicked in, and she'd understand that she was a predator underneath it all and that was more fun than this whole do-gooder act.

But no, he'd had it wrong. He'd had it so wrong.

Buffy knew exactly who she was without confusion or doubt. Maybe not in the way she thought mattered but certainly in the way that mattered most. She had defined the sort of vampire she wanted to be and made it the sort of vampire she was, despite every bloody

obstacle that had been thrown her way. Her watcher, her mates, her own mum, the sodding military, and never mind the supreme git who also happened to be her ex, all of them keeping their distance. Not believing her. Outright telling her they knew her better than she did. And while Spike liked to think he outclassed the others—he was, after all, the one who was still with her—he couldn't say he hadn't been skeptical. He knew vampires, their need for mayhem with their blood, the thrill of the hunt, the satisfaction that came with smashing bones and ripping flesh. Fuck, he'd been saying as much just a few minutes ago before she'd turned the Halloween celebration into a massacre, but even he hadn't understood the way she had.

She didn't need to keep reminding herself who she was. It was everyone else that didn't understand.

"You're glorious," Spike said, staggering toward her on legs that couldn't help but tremble.

She glanced at the carnage she had created, the yellow in her eyes receding as her brow smoothed and bones shifted and the monster she kept at bay took its place inside of her where it belonged. "I, uhh... I did all this, huh?"

"You sound surprised. Thought that was what you were aimin' for, love. Showing me exactly what you can do these days."

"That was the plan, but I didn't expect it to be so fast."

"Well, wasn't like you were at it alone. I'd like to think I helped a little." He grinned, reached up to drag pieces of demon innards out of her hair once he was close enough. "My only complaint. Leave a few good kills for your date, yeah?"

At that, her eyes found his, wide with shock that probably wasn't unearned. "You fought with me?"

"Course I did." He paused, then lifted a shoulder. "Mostly just stayed outta your way."

"Because I didn't leave good kills for my date."

She might have just been parroting back his own words, but damn if that didn't make him swell with pride any less. "Just sayin', next time you wanna take on a tavern full of demons, might do to be a little less greedy."

The darling thing blinked and shook her head, again taking in the

full measure of the destruction she'd wrought. "I wasn't expecting that. I mean, I knew I was going to kick some ass. I just didn't know it'd be...*all* the ass."

Spike wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her to him, this slight slip of a girl who had turned his world on its sodding head. The questions he'd been asking himself, everything he'd wondered about where to go after all was said and done, what lay in store for him, who he was if he wasn't with Dru—all that seemed like thoughts that belonged to someone else. Someone who hadn't seen what he'd seen, hadn't been here to appreciate just how rare a gem the Slayer was and how fortunate he was to be in her orbit at all, let alone the bloke at her side.

There was no backward. There was just her.

Buffy locked her hands behind his neck, pressing close enough he could feel her nipples against his chest. Bless her for skipping a bra as she'd gotten ready and bless her more for being as hot for it as he was. For the sweet scent filling his nostrils above the carnage, for the hunger in her eyes and the soft parting of her lips. For not wasting time before rolling her hips so she was grinding against his cock. For being her, still the Slayer and Buffy, for making him feel, truly for the first time, that he really wasn't alone. "Sorry for ruining Halloween," she murmured. "I wasn't good at following the rules as a human, either."

"Bugger the rules." Spike seized her by the hips and twisted, propping her up on the mess that remained of the bar, then slid his hands under the hem of her dress in search of her knickers, growling when his fingers encountered nothing but bare skin. And then, as he bunched the skirt over her thighs and spread her open, thinking how bloody fortunate it was these demons had already been slaughtered, for some of her kicks had been incredibly high and this sight was for him and him alone. "Followed the spirit of the holiday, far as I'm concerned. You gave these wankers a hell of a trick. And now, think it's time for a treat, don't you?"

She grinned and ran her nails along his neck. "That was terrible."

"Was it? You seemed to like it just fine," he observed, pushing two fingers into her with a light growl. Christ, he would never get tired of

that—of the way she looked, her cunt wrapped around him, pulling him in deeper. “See? Look how ready for me you are.”

“Are we really doing this here?”

He took his time lifting his gaze to hers, letting his own roam over the artwork that was her body, lingering in all his favorite places. Taking her in just as she was—covered in blood and dirt and more besides, and all the more gorgeous because of it. When their eyes finally met, Spike arched an eyebrow and nudged her clit with his thumb, watched with more than a little satisfaction as she melted. “I’m sorry, love, would you like me to stop?”

“I will rip your head off.”

“Mmhmm. Don’t I know it.” He made to kiss her, but she beat him to it, striking like a bloody viper to capture his mouth. Making him growl and growling back with challenge and enthusiasm. She tasted of the blood and violence, of sugar and spice and everything nice, of Slayer and Buffy most of all—that heady combination he felt he’d spent the past century and some change trying to find but had almost not recognized when the day finally came.

He had from here to Colorado and back to Sunnyhell to decide how to convince her that this was more than a fling. That they were better together, that the whole bloody world could be theirs if they wanted. That there was no reason every night couldn’t be like this one. It might not be what she thought her new eternal life would look like, but that was all right.

Hell, tonight had proven something he’d never thought possible—he could have just as much fun ripping apart other demons as he had humans. The result was the same. He had a bloody good time and the floor was littered with carcasses, only these were mostly gits who thought were vampires little more than nuisances they had to tolerate. They hadn’t considered the possibility that he could be a threat at all, and while Spike was definitely not the big noise in a comparison with the Slayer, he did love making people eat crow right before he ripped their jaws off.

If she insisted, he could be happy doing this. Fighting demons, showing them he wasn’t the average bloodsucker, and even doing in other vampires would be a bit of a kick. All prey destined to put up

more of a fight than the average human. The only thing he'd miss would be the satisfaction of eating his kills, but it would be a worthy trade if Buffy was part of the deal.

It'd be more than that. For the chance to keep her, it'd be the easiest decision he'd ever made.

Spike forced that thought back with a tremble. Better not to get ahead of himself. He could do with not having his heart broken a second time this year. Right now, he needed to give her reasons to want to keep him around when all was said and done. Something she drove home the next second when she pulled away, panting slightly against his lips. Still not noticing the breaths she took, never mind how deep they were. Like it was second nature. Or all nature.

Like being a vampire.

"I thought I was in for a treat," she said and stuck out her lower lip, all pouty. "Aren't you going to give me a treat?"

Spike grinned and nipped at her mouth, rubbing his thumb over her clit again. "This not treat enough for you?"

"I mean, I took out an *entire* bar of demons. I feel like I should be more rewarded."

"Oi. Not alone, you didn't."

"Yes. You were a *big* help."

At that, he rolled his eyes, but the grin didn't go anywhere. Couldn't fault the lady for speaking the truth, even if it did reinforce what he'd said before—in the future, she needn't take on everything by herself. Let a fella have a little fun, too.

"What would you like as your treat, then?" he asked, slowly dragging his fingers back along her cunt and swallowing a groan when she tightened and clenched as though to keep him. "Tell your Spike what you want."

"My Spike?" She sounded surprised but didn't let the question linger. "I think I'd like your mouth."

"That a fact?" He dipped his head to tease one of her breasts through the thin fabric of her dress, pumping his fingers back into her, his thumb nudging her clit again. "Where?"

But it seemed Buffy wasn't in the mood for games or playing coy. The next second, she had fisted a handful of his hair and dragged his

head back until their eyes locked, her own dark, on that tenuous border between keeping human and flashing yellow. "Spike," she whispered, and there was a growl in her voice too. One that he felt all the way to his balls. "Eat my fucking cunt."

If there was any part of him left wondering, any shred of doubt still clinging to his battered heart, that was the moment it died. Drusilla might have been his salvation, but Buffy was why he had been saved in the first place.

"Whatever my mistress demands," Spike swore, voice coming out somewhere between a groan and a growl, and let her direct his head where she wanted it until his face was pressed flush against her soaked pussy, her sweet juice smearing across his chin and mouth and nose, and yes, this was where he was always meant to be. Right here, with her back bent over the bar, pulling his hair, thrusting her pussy against his mouth and melting into him when he began to lick. Teasing his tongue over her wet flesh with a hearty growl, which made her tremble and gasp, but the grip she maintained on his head didn't relax in the slightest. And good. He didn't want her to let go, too emboldened by this version of the Slayer who hadn't even known she liked being eaten before he'd come into her life. He let her drag him wherever she fancied, taking his cues like a good boy. Lapping and teasing and sucking her clit when she guided his mouth there, licking along her slit when she pulled him back and not hesitating to thrust his tongue inside of her when she guided him to her opening. Taking long, indulgent laps, making sure to voice his approval every time he swallowed her honey down his throat.

"Oh fuck," Buffy whimpered, and when he let his gaze wander back to her face, found her watching him with a sort of fevered intensity that nearly made his bones melt. And that was it—his poor cock couldn't take it anymore. He tore one-handed at his belt, keeping his gaze on hers all the while, and had just been guided back to her clit by the time he managed to free himself. His hand was a poor substitute for what he really wanted wrapped around him, but he wasn't going to pull back. Not with her looking at him like that. Not for bloody anything.

It didn't take long. Fuck, it barely took anything. He was too

worked up—high on her taste and smell and the fire in his blood, and the way she thrust up to rub herself against his face. Buffy squeezed around the fistful of hair she was guiding him by and screamed her climax, bloody drenching his face and that was it. The moment. Spike kept his mouth on her as long as he could, then pulled back and pumped his cock and spurted onto her. Watched white ropes of semen splatter along her belly and her swollen cunt. Watched her realize it too, her eyes rounding as she looked at the mess he'd left along her skin, looking both like a demure virgin and a voracious sex kitten, which drove him the rest of the way out of his mind.

When he met her gaze again, he found her watching him with bright, round eyes.

"Were you... You were touching yourself?" she asked.

"Mmm," he agreed, dipping to drag his tongue around her clit and firming his grip on his cock once more, swelling against his palm. He was nowhere near satisfied, and if he knew his Slayer, she wasn't either. That had been the treat, as she'd put it. The first course. The appetizer. He was an entrée sort of bloke, though he wouldn't mind going in for seconds before the rest of the meal arrived.

Then something occurred to him—something that hadn't before—and he pulled back. "Can I?"

Buffy stared, uncomprehending. "I... Of course you can. What does that mean?"

"Didn't ask permission before."

"Permission? To touch yourself? You don't need that. I was just surprised. I thought this was only for me."

Spike arched an eyebrow and licked along her slit, relished in the way she trembled and sighed. He kept his grip firm around his now fully hard cock but took pains not to give in to the need to stroke. "Can be, if that's what you fancy."

"No, I meant... I didn't know you liked it *this* much. That you'd want to touch yourself. That you...get this much out of it."

Buffy seemed to be losing a bit of her nerve. The grip she'd had on his hair was gone and the heady command in her eyes had softened with her orgasm, and as much as he loved that too—loved how she yielded control as easily as took it—he wanted her in charge just now.

Wanted her to know it was okay to be in charge, that everything they were doing was okay. Was brilliant. That she even needed to be told was so novel to him in ways he doubted he could articulate without betraying just how bloody hopeless he'd been in the beginning. He saw so much of himself reflected in her—the things he hadn't known, had had to learn, hungry and eager for it but also, for a stretch, worried he might make a misstep that would cost him the wonderful world he'd gained. Realizing just how little he knew pretty bloody fast after the whole incident with his mum, and how quickly everything he relied on could be lost forever.

"There's nothing I don't love about this pussy," he told her thickly. "The way you smell. How wet you get. Your taste. How pretty you are spread out in front of me. And yeah, having you in my mouth gets me hot. The sounds you make, the way you were holdin' on. How you look right now, knowin' I did that to you. I'll keep my hand off my prick if you'd like to play—can be a treat with the right person. But eating you will never be just for you, pet. Not when it's me doing the eating."

And god, the thought of anyone else getting to try had his chest tightening. But he wouldn't share as much—not yet. He wasn't ready to let her know just how much power she had.

Buffy licked her lips with the sort of naïve innocence that drove him out of his sodding head. "So you'd just...do what I tell you? Not touch yourself while you're eating me? And you'd do that?"

"I would."

"Do...do you want me to do that? Give you orders?"

"I want you to do whatever you fancy, love. No rules here. Not with us."

She worried her lower lip between her teeth. "I don't know that I'm good at giving orders like this. Sex orders."

"The first one you gave me was bloody brilliant," he retorted. He'd be replaying that for a while, the roughness in her voice, how her eyes had flashed, the fantastic tugging on his head. But that was the thing about eternity—there was no rush to do anything. She could take as much time as she wanted finding out what she liked and didn't like, what was good for her and what was too much. All he wanted, truly, was to be the one she practiced with, then kept on after she'd

perfected the craft. Spike tried to push that back, though, taking her cheek in his hand. "Tell me what you want and I'll give it. You wanna boss me around, tell me where to stick my tongue, I'll have a merry ol' time. You want more of what we've been doin'? I love it. Every second."

"You do?"

If she hadn't asked so earnestly with that look on her face, he might have laughed.

"Slayer, I've never been with anyone like you. It's all brilliant. Every second." Balls, he was half a breath away from saying something poncy like she was the best he'd ever had at all, holding himself back just because he wasn't sure if it was true yet. Everything with her had been beyond what he could have imagined—ecstasy in its purest form—and it kept getting better. The more he had, the more he wanted. The more he loved her, the better she felt. He hadn't loved her at the start—at least, if he had, he hadn't figured it—but every time since their first time had filled him with the sort of satisfaction, of *rightness*, he'd only ever experienced with one other person. And they were just at the start. It would only get better, more intense, more *everything* from here.

"I love everything we do together," he said simply. "Everything. Even singing sodding karaoke."

At that, some of the tension left her face and she grinned at him. "You are a very good singer."

"Good dancer too. Was plannin' on showin' you tonight, but you beat me to it." Spike stole a kiss before she could respond, the hand at her cheek moving around to cup the back of her head, his other returning to his cock and giving it a good, long stroke, base to tip. "How do you want me, love?" he asked, pulling back just enough to get the question out. Also to catch her eyes as he teased the head of his prick along her folds, wetting himself with her, rekindling any fire that might have started to fade. Watching as the uncertainty in her gaze melted back into something tender. "Tell me."

"Can you just be inside me?"

He answered with a groan, pressing his brow to hers and breathing her in. Savoring how she felt against him, the way she held onto him,

her fingers digging into his forearms. The slight tremble and gasp she betrayed when he nudged her clit with his cockhead. All soft, honeyed perfection that was somehow his. The fire from before there, still burning, but a different sort of burn. One that felt more like the heat to which he'd spent the whole of his life chasing. The one he could almost mistake for love.

"Nowhere else I wanna be," he told her, nudging her clit again. Then again, then finally dragging his cock back to her opening, trembling himself now. And then he was pushing into her, that perfect wetness clamping around him, pulling him in deep. Hugging him with those bloody fantastic muscles and whimpering into his kiss when he took her mouth again.

And how she felt when he began to move, pushing up into his thrusts, scratching her teeth against his lips. Then pulling back to bury her face in his throat, her breaths hitting the spot where her fangs would be in a few blissful moments. Buffy clinging to him, whimpering, reaching between them to stroke his cock as he worked in and out of her, squeeze her fingers along the sides just to remind him that even though she was a little vamp with a heart of gold, she was still evil. His perfect little bundle of evil and sweetness all rolled into one. Spike groaning low and bucking hard and soaking up everything she gave him with this new bittersweet awareness, burning with the love he hadn't been ready to give her fully until now but trying to choke it back at the same time. Protect it in its infancy until he could fortify the rest of himself, figure out just how he was going to convince her to let him keep her, because the path behind him was in tatters and all he could see when he looked ahead was Buffy.

"Buffy," he moaned, kissing her temple before skating his lips down her face, over her cheek, breaking off only when he couldn't reach her chin, and then his mouth was at its other favorite place. Right about the bite mark that was his and his alone. "Buffy...fuck. You feel so good, baby. Always."

"You too," she told his throat, her voice coming out half-sigh, half-mewl. "Spike... *Spike*..."

"Let me touch you, love." She still had her hand positioned so her fingers squeezed the sides of his dick as he thrust into her, and that

familiar pressure had begun to build. The base of his spine tingling, his balls tightening, everything around him heightened by her, how wet she was, how she felt around him, and the music she made without even trying. And the only thing better than coming inside of her was feeling her come first, feeling her muscles tug and hug and draw him in, compress until he was right there on the edge between pleasure and pain.

Buffy nodded fast, clenching again around him. "Do it."

He couldn't properly until she moved her hand, no matter how incredible it felt. "Gotta let me go first."

"No. Inside." She nibbled on his throat before pushing her own more firmly against his mouth. "Fangs. In me. Now."

He didn't even feel the bones in his face shift but they did, and then his fangs were pressing into her skin, piercing and her blood—the richest vampire blood he'd ever tasted—pouring into his mouth. And she was spasming and clenching and drenching him, and he felt his cock pulse against her fingers as he slid back into her cunt, and her own fangs were dancing along his skin and *yes, bloody hell, yes*, she was sinking in deep. Taking back the blood he'd stolen in the best way she could, and the tension inside reached its precipice and he was coming hard, thrusting and fucking and spilling into her, and it was perfect because she was perfect. Because this thing he hadn't asked for, hadn't wanted, was perfect. The purest form of bliss a man could touch, right here under his fingers, around his cock and his fangs, holding onto him like he was the precious thing that could easily slip away when he knew better.

There was no *away* from Buffy. There was just Buffy.

And he would hold onto that, onto her, as long as she let him.

IT'S ONLY FEAR THAT MAKES YOU RUN

IT WENT BY TOO FAST. WAY TOO FAST. THE NIGHTS SPENT SPEEDING from town to town, breaking into various stores to grab whatever they liked—which, admittedly, mostly came down to money that had stupidly been left in cash drawers—and the days spent in various motel rooms, watching bad TV, chowing down on takeout and blood, fucking each other silly, and occasionally even sleeping.

Every nightfall brought them closer to Denver. And every nightfall Buffy had to reckon with the fact that Denver might mean the end of whatever she and Spike were doing. Doing and very much not discussing. Not since Halloween, at least, and they had barely discussed anything before then either. Just firm objectives—get whatever hardware the government had installed in their heads all uninstalled, return to Sunnydale to recover the Gem of Amara, and then maybe Spike would try to kill her and maybe he wouldn't. The last time she'd asked, he'd still been on the fence.

But Buffy didn't think that was the question on the table anymore. She might not be good at the whole *being direct* thing herself, but she did feel she had gotten good at reading between the lines. Spike's attitude toward her had taken a profound shift since Los Angeles—hell, even before Los Angeles. The things he said, the things he did, the

things he made her feel, none of it made sense if the intention was still to kill her. Like, what was the purpose in going to the trouble to spell out that they were exclusively screwing each other if this was supposed to end in her death? None, that's what. He wouldn't have worried about her feelings or insecurities, wouldn't have reassured her that she could explore what she liked sexually on her own time. He wouldn't look at her the way she caught him looking at her. And he wouldn't be softly stroking her face the way he was now, with her cuddled along the DeSoto's bench seat, resting her head against his thigh and trying to sleep. She'd been still for a few minutes before he'd started in with tentative, feather-light strokes of his fingers. Playing with her hair, caressing her from her temple to her chin and back again. Like he couldn't stop touching her in some way, even when he thought she was asleep.

Spike liked her. He might even like her a lot. And that was somehow both everything and not enough. It didn't change what was going to happen after their little adventure had come to an end, because there were things that she was and wasn't. And somewhere along the road, she'd stopped questioning those things—how they could be, what they meant—and just just accepted them.

Like the fact that she didn't want to hurt anyone.

Or the fact that she intended to drink blood from bags rather than veins.

Also the fact that she very much still wanted to kick demon ass.

None of this hinged upon anyone believing her. It wasn't anything performative, not decisions she made to get kudos from people whose opinion of her was already pretty much destroyed. These were things she wanted. Things that would help her live with herself as a vampire. Buffy might not care the way she once had—might not experience the sort of empathy that had made being her hard—but the echoes were still there, and strong enough that she knew they would remain important to her going forward. She might be figuring more of who she was, but this part was firm and decided.

And the things she was, Spike wasn't.

That wasn't his fault, either. Just a factor of the way they had been born, for lack of a better word. The circumstances that informed their

individual upbringings. Maybe he would feel differently about spilling human blood if he'd been a demon hunter or whatever non-Chosen counterpart there was to a slayer. Maybe if he hadn't spent years under the tutelage of a crazy woman and soulless Angel, who Buffy had no trouble imagining doing whatever he could to beat the hell out of Spike's humanity. That it hadn't entirely worked—and she could clearly see it hadn't—didn't mean it had been ineffective.

And that was another thing she was coming to realize, the more time she spent with him. The Spike of her present wasn't anything like the Angel of her past, and she didn't think he ever had been. Even soulless as she was, she remembered what it had been like during those months that Angel had rampaged through Sunnydale, gleefully tearing apart everything that mattered to her, relishing her pain and the suffering of others, indulging in cruelty for cruelty's sake. But that had never been Spike. He'd never shown up just to gloat while she stumbled over the bodies of dead friends—he'd never once gone after anyone she cared about directly, not even after her mother had smacked him over the head with an axe.

Spike had only ever regarded her as a warrior. That was the terrain he'd met her on, the only way he'd ever tried to fight her. Angel had gone for the girl. Spike had gone for the Slayer.

Add to the fact his instinct had been to help in the first place, never mind the way he'd gone about it, Buffy couldn't help but think that perhaps, at a different time, they could have been something other to each other than what they were. Perhaps Spike would have been fine not hunting down humans too, had things been different.

But they weren't different, and that was all there was to it. Spike was a vampire with more than a century behind him of killing for fun, never mind food. It had been more than a year since he'd first come to her with the crazy proposal of saving the world together, but Buffy still remembered the casual way in which Spike had turned to kill the cop he'd laid out. Not because he was pissed or hungry, just because there was a spare human lying around and killing spare humans was what vampires did. And that worked for him. Was *natural* for him, even, in ways that should have been natural for her. Probably was, if she turned off the part of her brain that cared. But that part was still there, still

engaged, and if she wanted to *be Buffy*, the best thing she figured she could do was exactly what she believed she would do if she had a soul to guide her.

And then in addition to that, as if it weren't enough on its own, was the way Spike was accustomed to doing relationships.

There had been that talk back in Los Angeles right before they'd left, and the way she'd felt at the thought of him making a move on Cordelia. And yes, out of that had come the promise to be exclusive until the enemies-with-benefits arrangement no longer suited them, but also the revelation that fidelity didn't mean to vampires what it meant to humans. Spike was accustomed to a lifestyle that allowed for more wandering than Buffy was comfortable with, considering she was comfortable with *none*, and even if Spike had claimed not to enjoy jealousy, that didn't mean he wouldn't change his mind. It was how he'd lived, after all, and Buffy knew better than most how seductive the familiar could be.

Only Spike's familiar wasn't like hers—his was a common lifestyle among vampires. High on hedonism, less so on practicing restraint. Easier to return to than the familiar Buffy had tried to make work in Sunnydale. Plus, this was all assuming he wouldn't try to go back to Drusilla in the first place, which seemed unlikely considering the length and depth of that relationship. Like Buffy was going to convince him to throw a hundred years away for her. Like she could.

And if he brought Dru something like the Gem of Amara... That seemed like the sort of gift that would make up for a lot, like not killing the Slayer. Maybe even fucking her. And who knew if Dru would even be all that mad now. To the eyes of most, Buffy wasn't the Slayer anymore. Just another vampire like Harmony. Maybe even a pawn in one of those jealousy games that Spike had indicated his ex was into, which brought Buffy full circle to where she was now.

Doing her best to enjoy what time they had together, knowing it would come to an end. And hey, wasn't like it was the hard knock life or anything, unless the hard knock life came with being awakened at all hours of the day by a man who very much knew how to use his tongue. He was very good at distracting her from the sort of thoughts she found herself having in the quiet moments.

But when he touched her the way he was now, both gently and constantly, even while he believed she was asleep, her resolve wavered and she couldn't help but think about the endless stretch ahead. How much she would miss him when this was over, and how dumb she'd been to have fallen in love for the second time with someone she shouldn't have. You'd think a girl would learn but here she was, not even a year removed from the Angel heartbreak and about to go through it again, though worse this time. This time, she was with someone who actually knew her. Someone she had actual fun with which, yes, was apparently possible in relationships. At least, she didn't remember having fun with Angel. Pain? Yes. Drama. Check. Apocalypse? Covered. Torrid back-and-forth that would put most soap operas to shame? She and Angel had had that in spades. But fun?

And how depressing was it that it had taken dying to realize what her epic romance had been missing? Sure, she didn't know how much her memory was impacted by the whole *was human then* thing but fun seemed like something she should be able to recall without struggle. And definitely something that someone shouldn't have to be a vampire to expect when spending time with the person they were with. Fun was one of those rare accessories that came included in the box and not sold separately.

So yeah, the most she could say about this impending heartbreak was that she knew it was coming.

Buffy didn't realize she'd started to cry until Spike's fingers wandered from her neck back along her chin and over her cheek, then paused. "Buffy?" he asked and glanced down at her. "What's the matter, love?"

She didn't answer. Didn't move. Just sat there for a long moment, caught.

"What is it?" Spike asked, because not once in his life had he just let anything go. "Talk to me."

When in doubt, play dumb. Hey, it had worked for her all throughout high school.

"What?" Buffy replied, trying her best to affect a suitably sleep-roughened voice as she pulled herself into a sitting position. Maybe she

would have pulled it off if she hadn't immediately started wiping her face clean.

Or met his eyes, for that matter, as they immediately narrowed. "You're crying."

"Oh." She wiped at her face again, going for puzzled. "I didn't mean to. Must've had a bad dream."

"A dream?"

"Haven't you ever had dreams bad enough they make you cry while you're still asleep?"

"Yeah, all right, but what was it about?"

"It doesn't matter."

"It does if it makes you cry."

Buffy blinked, taken aback. That wasn't the attitude anyone had ever taken with her dreams before—neither Giles nor Angel, even when those dreams turned out to be prophetic. Trust that the one time she needed to be brushed off, she was with someone freakishly keyed into her every move. And no wonder she was in love with him. She'd never had this before. "Really, it's okay," she said, and settled back into her seat. "I've already forgotten it."

"Like hell."

"What?"

"I mean I know you, and that means I know you're lyin' to me." Spike pulled his gaze off the road long enough to favor her with a glare. "Can't fix anything if you won't tell me what's wrong."

"There's nothing to fix."

"Rot."

"Spike, not everything can be fixed and not everything's about you, okay?" Ignoring, of course, that this was indeed about Spike. He didn't need to know that. "A lot has happened to me in a short period of time, and maybe it's just catching up with me. You know..." She made a rolling motion with her hand. "Disowned by my mother for the second time in less than two years. Realizing that I might not have a home to go to once all this is over, that my friends and Giles might be relieved I'm gone so I can't screw anything else up for them. Then everything that happened with Angel—"

"Angel? You're crying over sodding *Angel*?"

He sounded angry, which just confused her more. "I'm sorry. I should have asked for the *acceptable reasons to cry* list before we left. My mistake."

"Why on earth would you cry over that wanker after what he did to you?"

"I'm not crying over stupid Angel, Spike, calm down."

Wrong thing to say. The look he threw her was pure venom. "You're the one who brought him up, sweetheart. Seems a reasonable assumption that he's been on your mind."

"In relation to everything else that has gone crazy in my life, yes. Angel being the one guy I thought I could count on in this whole thing and then just proving me spectacularly wrong is not the kind of thing you just walk off." Not her, at least, even if she was getting heated defending a lie. The truth suddenly seemed incidental. "Just because I'm not in love with him anymore doesn't mean what happened magically doesn't hurt."

"You're not in love with him?"

"No, doofus, he threatened to kill me. Pretty sure whatever love I had left died then." She paused, crossing her arms and settling against her seat. She debated not saying the next thing that came to mind, especially since Spike seemed somewhat mollified now, but hey. Wasn't like she had anything to lose and he had her feeling just reckless enough to play with fire. "If vampires even can love."

This time when he looked at her, it wasn't with venom but a mixture of shock and confusion. She didn't have to sit under that stare long, thankfully, but longer than she would have liked. Spike drove with the sort of careless confidence that she supposed came with having spent decades behind the wheel, always seeming to know exactly what was happening on the road ahead whether or not he was paying attention to it. A few days ago, that particular skill had come in incredibly handy as they'd managed to sneak in a quickie without pulling over or crashing, but now she was less impressed and more annoyed and most of all wishing she'd just kept her mouth shut. In the game of pity versus anger, she'd take anger, even if it would probably do little more than make her feel worse.

"You don't think vampires can love?" he asked at length, his voice a

dangerous sort of low. Also a sort that spoke to her on a primal level that she couldn't ignore, rather made her shift and squeeze her thighs together.

"I don't know. We don't have souls."

"Yeah, and?"

"And is that even possible? Loving without a soul?" She tried to keep her voice level. Tried to sound like she was really asking and not like she already knew the answer. "Angel didn't love me when he went soulless."

Spike growled, and Buffy pressed her thighs together again. "Back on Angel, are we?"

"Well, why not?"

"You think he didn't love you?"

"He wanted me dead."

"Yeah, *because* he loved you, you daft twit. Told me so himself. Best way to kill you was to love you."

"How romantic."

"Slayer, you're a sodding vampire now. You mean to tell me you don't feel it?"

"Feel *what*?"

"How full you are," he retorted. "Of *everything*. Everything you've ever felt burstin' at your insides, all clamoring to get out. And it never stops. You just *feel* until you give in, and with us, that usually means by killing something. Our piss-poor way of tryin' to control the uncontrollable. Angel wanted you dead because that would mean having that control. He loved you and he hated you for makin' him love you, because love is bloody cancer. You were killin' him without lifting a finger."

Well, that was certainly a unique spin on some of the most painful months of her life. "I thought he stopped the second the soul was gone."

"That's what love looks like to Angelus," Spike retorted, at last turning his attention back to the road. "You're actin' like feelings bloody vanish rather than change. Yours didn't—why should his? Why should *anyone's*? You think humans have a monopoly on love just because that wanker's way of loving something is to destroy it?"

“That doesn’t sound like love to me.”

“Doesn’t need to. Not your way, is it? Just his.” When she didn’t immediately respond, he huffed and tossed her another narrowed look. “No two people in this world are the same, Slayer. Reckon you heard that a time or two, so why the bloody hell would the way you feel things be the same? Not like love has a sodding checklist—not like it can be studied. You know it’s love because *you* know what love feels like for you. You can never know what it feels like for someone you aren’t.”

All of that made sense—made the feeling she was carrying a little heavier, too. Recontextualized everything she’d thought she’d known before in ways she didn’t know if she liked. Not that it mattered much anymore—she truly was no longer in love with Angel and had graduated to wondering if she ever had been. Not in the sense of had the feeling ever existed, she knew it had, but if it had been based on something real or something imagined. That was less straightforward.

“Why do you want me to believe that Angel loved me?” Buffy asked at last. It was the only thing she could come up with and seemed a fair question.

And though she knew it was stupid, even impossible, she couldn’t smother out the flicker of hope before it touched oxygen and became a true flame. That he would tell her he needed her to believe because if she didn’t think vampires without souls could love, she wouldn’t believe him when he said he loved her. And he needed her to believe. Needed to know there was a chance he wasn’t alone in what he was feeling.

Spike didn’t say that, though. Of course he didn’t. She was the one who was alone.

“Just a lonely existence, is all,” he replied, once again looking out the window. His expression was far away. “You’re gonna have a long bloody life, Slayer. Seems a pity to spend it thinkin’ you can’t love just because some idiot book or watcher told you as much. Especially when you take yourself into consideration.”

Her throat tightened. “What do you mean?”

“I mean *you*. Everythin’ you’re doing now. Missin’ your mum or your mates. Playin’ by human rules when no one expects it of you. You mean

to tell me that isn't out of love? That you aren't fixed on bein' a good girl for any other reason?" Spike glanced at her again. "Only one reason a vampire turns her back on what she is, by my count. Takes on burdens no one expects of her. Keeps at it despite what she loses. Tell me that's not love."

Buffy swallowed and didn't say anything. Nothing to say. Nothing to argue. Of the lies she'd told to protect herself, she wasn't going to add pretending he was wrong to the list.

Love was what had brought her as far as it had. It was also what separated her from what she wanted.

Throw in rain on her wedding day and she might have a situation fit for an Alanis Morissette song, a thought that somehow did diddly squat to make her feel better. Just more lonely in this world of one she'd created—the place she'd stay when Spike decided it was time to move on.

All because she was in stupid love.

If she ever met the idiot who had claimed love was a many-splendored thing, she might just have to bite him on principle.



IT WAS easy enough to follow the first part of Doyle's instructions. Find a place called The Hole on East Colfax. So was the second part, leaving a note about a found tabby cat and a phone number. Buffy had hoped someone might have had the place under surveillance and would just jump out of the shadows or a booth and introduce themselves as she followed Spike back out, but that hadn't happened. Instead, they'd tacked their note on the corkboard, ordered a couple of drinks just to wait around and see if anyone gave the note any attention, then made their way to the motel where there was nothing to do but channel surf. Or have sex, but the last leg of the trip had Buffy feeling extra vulnerable and exposed and she'd worried about what Spike might see if he got her under him.

Not that she needed to be under him, as he proved later that night, barking at her to get on all fours, face on the pillow, ass in the air, and she couldn't say she minded his creative workaround. If that had in fact

been his intention. Buffy had never given much thought to sex beyond deciding who was on top and stuff but Spike had been all for broadening her horizons. She'd quickly learned he felt as amazing pounding into her from behind as he did when she was astride or under him, and that she loved it when he smacked her ass hard enough that the vague outline of his handprint was still there when she checked after. Everything he'd rasped into her ear had sounded heightened, perhaps because she hadn't been looking at him when he'd done the rasping. Just feeling him. Hearing him. Trying to pretend that made anything any less intimate or her somehow less in love with him.

It hadn't worked. At this point, it was likely that nothing would.

Unfortunately, while they waited to see if Doyle's tip had been worth following, there truly wasn't much else they could do. Not that Buffy would have known where to go—she'd never been to Denver before—but being forced to stay in the motel room was only slightly ahead of the cell the army guys had thrust her into in the first place. Delivery services kept food in their bellies but the call for something liquid would eventually edge past the *craving* side and graduate into all-out hunger. Add to the fact that she and Spike were both lousy at standing still and they might come to a different kind of blows if grounded for twenty-four hours.

So back to the channel surfing. Or more of that mind-bending yet heartbreaking sex that she worried might be slowly killing her.

There was also, though, the possibility of calling home for the first time since leaving Sunnydale.

Buffy wasn't sure why it had taken driving halfway across the country for that thought to occur to her, or why it had occurred to her now, while she was in the shower, only that it had. One moment reflecting on the strange turn her life had taken—even stranger than becoming a vampire—and how much she'd love it if she could just talk to Willow about Spike the way she had about Angel if only to get her own thoughts out of stasis and in motion, to realizing there was nothing stopping her from doing just that. She might be in Denver but Denver was in Colorado, not on the moon, and phones were a thing that existed.

That had spurred her to action. Buffy hurried to wrap up her

shower, grateful that Spike hadn't insisted on taking one with her—she'd made a point of actually needing to be clean, and he'd pouted but hadn't tried to change her mind. She barely paused long enough to drag a brush through her hair before she was bursting all towel-clad into the main part of their motel room all woman-on-a-mission. She managed to refrain from jumping on the phone long enough to throw on clothes—they were making a point to be ready at all times just in case someone knocked, which meant no lounging nakedly unless for bathing or having sex—before snatching the phone off its cradle. Spike watched from where he was reclined against the bed, clearly curious but not saying anything, and for that she was grateful because she didn't want to explain. Now that she'd had the thought, she was all about doing.

Granted, making a long-distance call wasn't something she'd ever done, but she thought she knew the first step pretty well thanks to all those 1-800-COLLECT commercials. She punched in the number, then followed the prompts to complete the call. The only question was *who* to call. Her mother probably didn't want to hear from her, so that ruled out home. Willow was who she wanted to speak with most, but she was probably on campus and Buffy had never gotten around to committing her dorm room number to memory. Process of elimination made Giles the safest bet, and she hurried to complete the steps before the robot on the other end of the line decided she'd been idle too long.

There was a prompt to provide her name, which she did with a shaky voice. And then a familiar ring filled her ear, and Buffy's nerves started doing a jig, her body thrusting her into the awkward absence of physical sensation that she was still not used to. The hollow sensation in her chest in place of a thumping heart, the lack of sweat or clammy skin, and how she could feel the parts of her that were human responding anyway even if those responses ultimately had nothing to do but to fizzle out.

Then the line picked up and a low robo voice said, "Hello, you have a collect call from"—there was a pause, and her own voice filled her ear—"Buffy Summers"—before the robot voice picked up again. "Do you accept the charges?"

"Yes!" Giles practically yelled on the other end, and Buffy's eyes began to burn. "Yes, I accept the charges. Buffy? Buffy, are you there?"

She waited for a beat to be sure the robo voice didn't need anything else, then another to collect herself as her ass met the mattress, legs no longer interested in keeping her upright. And then Spike was behind her, wrapping an arm around her middle. She thought he might pull her against his chest but he didn't, rather propped himself along her back so she could lean into him if she wanted. For some reason, knowing that he knew to give her the choice intensified the burn, and she nearly dropped the receiver.

"Buffy?" Giles asked again, his heart beating wild and fast. God, it had only been a couple of weeks since Los Angeles, and she'd already forgotten how noisy humans could be simply by living. "Buffy, if you're there, please say something. Anything. Just let me know you're all right."

"I'm here," she managed, though it was a near thing. "I'm here."

"Good lord... Where... Do you have any idea... Where are you?"

Had he always breathed that loudly? Had *she*, when she'd been alive? "I'm safe. I'm with Spike."

Spike stroked a hand down her belly as though to reassure her of the fact.

"Yes," Giles replied. "I... I had that much gathered from a conversation I had with Cordelia a few days ago." His breathing and heartbeat were starting to regulate. "She said you were en route to Denver."

Well, so much for being sneaky in the event the army guys had wiretapped anything. "We're taking our time," Buffy replied. If anyone was listening, let them think she and Spike still had a ways to go before they hit their destination. "Did Cordelia tell you about the procedure, too?"

"Just that her associate had located someone who might be able to help with your...ah, predicament. Something about brain surgery?"

"The scientists put something in our heads. Something that makes it impossible for either of us to fight humans."

There was a pause. "Yes, and I suppose that is troubling."

"You *suppose*?" Though she'd known better than to get her hopes up, her hopes hadn't listened. Buffy tightened her grip on the receiver to

the point she knew if she pushed any harder, the thing would break altogether. At her back, Spike released a low grunt, probably too soft for Giles to hear but one she appreciated all the same. It let her know she wasn't alone in this feeling. "Giles, these men came to my home. They intended to drag me and Spike back into that lab we told you about, and the only thing that saved us was... I don't know. The pain when these things go off is like nothing I've ever felt before. I think I only got through that because I knew the alternative would be worse. So yes, you *suppose* right."

There was a beat, then another, then a long, weary sigh rang through the line. "Yes, of course. I didn't mean to dismiss the seriousness of your condition. I imagine you feel most helpless at the moment."

The words were right. The tone was not. He didn't believe what he was saying—or if he did, he didn't care. Not all the way, at least. Not without reservation.

Buffy wet her lips. It was nothing new, she reminded herself. More of the same of what she'd come to expect back home. One of the reasons she thought it likely that living in Sunnydale was no longer an option. As much as she didn't want to be alone, she wanted to be around people just pretending for her sake even less. That was no way to live. Or unlive.

"How is Mom?" she asked instead. "Or do you know? You guys don't have much to talk about these days, do you?" There was no reason why they would, Joyce Summers's daughter being dead and all, but hey, Giles had apparently spoken with Cordelia. The mother of the late Buffy Summers didn't seem too big a stretch.

"She is fine. The men who showed up at your house were not there to harm her."

No, of course not. Not the human. And no mention of Joyce being beside herself with worry, no lecture about how thoughtless she'd been to not keep her mother, at the very least, updated as to what was going on. The more Giles *didn't* say, the more Buffy regretted having made this call in the first place.

What the hell had she thought would happen? Absence makes the heart forget about the fangs?

"We have been able to uncover a bit of information about this organization," Giles was saying when Buffy tuned back in. "Joyce was quite upset following the ambush, as you can imagine. There is too much to discuss over the phone, but with Willow's help, we learned that they call themselves the Initiative and have been in operation for only a few months. The zoning permits needed to construct their base were approved by Mayor Wilkins early last year."

"Of course they were." Well, that answered at least one question. Buffy sniffed and tipped her head back so it was almost resting against Spike's shoulder. "So was I right in the school being in on it? Wilkins was tight with Snyder so it doesn't seem like too much of a leap to think the dean of UC Sunnydale might not have been in his pocket, too."

"Yes, we explored that possibility."

"You did?" She had been under the impression that Giles had considered the college's involvement too far-fetched to investigate.

"I don't know why you sound surprised. We had to start somewhere after the Initiative arrived on your mother's doorstep, particularly if we wanted to eliminate the possibility that you had been recaptured." There was a long pause. A sigh. "At her own insistence, Willow began dating one of the men who showed up at your home to glean more information. She—"

"Whoa, she's dating one of the soldier guys? What about Oz?"

"Oz..." Giles exhaled an *it's a long story* sigh. "There was an incident with another werewolf. I do not know all the specifics but the end result was a decision to leave Sunnydale in search of methods that might be more effective in keeping him safe when he transforms."

"Oz left?" God, Willow had to be devastated. Or maybe not, if she was dating someone else. Even if it was an undercover thing. Hell, maybe that was part of the draw. "Who is she dating?"

"Riley Finn."

Of course. "And she hasn't killed him yet?"

"Pardon?"

"Sorry. After what happened at our house, he strikes me as very killable."

Probably not the thing to say to someone who didn't believe in her

ability to refrain from killing even the most killable of individuals, but Buffy was dangerously close to not caring. Not that this wasn't all good stuff to know—it was—but it was reminding her, *again*, of how little she had of her old life to fight for once this stretch of her journey was over.

"Though he might not, ah, be to everyone's liking, Riley has thus far proven to be a very useful source of information," Giles said in his most uptight-British-man voice.

"How did that even happen? Like, did Riley just walk up to Willow and say, 'Hey, by the way, I'm in a secret organization that kidnaps and experiments on demons if you ever have any questions?'"

"Not as such, though he did approach her to caution her about letting you into her room."

"He did what now?"

"Well, after the incident at your mother's, he apparently thought it likely that you might reach out to your other earthly connections for help." Another pause, as though he were awaiting her thoughts on this development, but Buffy had none. "When he made contact with Willow, she informed him she was well aware of your transformation. This surprised him and, well, the depth of what he learned from her, her experience—combined with her aptitude tests—made her ideal recruitment material."

"Recruited?"

"It came as a surprise to us as well. Opportunities such as this are hardly likely to land in our laps often."

Buffy pressed her lips together, not trusting whatever might come out. Not sure how she felt about any of this. Willow coying up to the people who had done this to her, regardless of the motive or intent, sounded like disaster waiting to happen. "Anything in particular we should know?" she asked once she felt in control again.

"Nothing it sounds like you haven't already discerned on your own. You and Spike were both fitted with behavioral modification chips intended to deliver intense neurological pain in the event you harmed a living person in any way. Other demons naturally do not qualify." A beat. "Buffy, I understand why it's important to have this harness removed. As I said when you were first transformed, I was led by blind

optimism that you would remain more yourself than monster, and you have proved me right rather brilliantly. Your capacity for good is beyond anything I could have expected.”

Buffy waited. There was a *but* on the horizon.

“I understand that you must be disappointed, though. What happened with your mother was unfortunate—”

“She kicked me out of the house and told me her daughter was dead. That’s a bit more than unfortunate.”

“I don’t believe she meant it, if it’s of any consol—”

“Right now, it’s really not,” she replied, her voice suddenly tight, strained, and above all tired. “Actually, now that you mention it, right now it feels a lot like you guys were happy to pretend like nothing had changed so long as I acted exactly the same way I did before all things Sunday. It wasn’t enough that I didn’t go homicidal on any of you, I had to make like nothing was different. Sure, I’m not killing or maiming, but fuck my boyfriend too loud in the house and presto, Joyce Summers has no daughter.”

She could practically hear the wheels in Giles’s head grinding to a halt. “Your boyfriend? Is that what Spike is now?”

“Does it matter?” she shot back. Behind her, Spike pressed a kiss to the shell of her ear, soft and supportive, and that made her eyes fill with unwanted tears because they both knew the answer to the question was *no*, even if moments like this were enough to make her believe it might not always be. “You know I wouldn’t let anyone hurt any of you.”

“The chip doesn’t just prevent us from coming under harm, Buffy. I understand certain things must seem rather black and white at the moment, but going through with any such operation that removes that chip from Spike’s head will condemn untold others to death.”

And here they were, at last. At the heart of the issue. God, she felt like such an idiot to not have seen it coming from the moment he’d picked up the phone. Giles wasn’t worried about her. He was worried about what she was going to let happen. Removing the thing that kept an evil vampire from killing others was something soulful, human Buffy would never agree to, and soulful, human Buffy was, whatever Giles said, the Buffy he wanted. The Buffy he expected.

None of what she'd gone through over the last few weeks mattered at all.

"You want me to turn on him," she said baldly.

"I want you to consider the repercussions of what you are doing. I want you to consider the lives that having that chip intact will help save. You know he is not like you—he will not make the same choices."

No, he wouldn't. But that didn't mean she didn't love him.

It also didn't mean she wouldn't choose him, regardless of what happened next. Maybe that did make her a soulless creature in action as well as name, but goddammit, Buffy wasn't sure she cared anymore. Not if feeling like this was what she had to look forward to in a future of keeping Giles and her mom and her friends happy.

Maybe she finally had an answer to the question. Maybe she wasn't Buffy after all, and maybe it didn't matter.

Or maybe this was just who Buffy was now. No one stayed the same forever.

"I'll take that under advisement," she said in a tone Giles should know well. "Thank you very much for your concern."

"Buffy—"

Buffy slammed the phone back into place before he could get the rest of his sentence out, then launched off the bed. There was nowhere to go—still trapped, after all, dogs-in-a-cage style—but she needed to move. Needed to feel the wind against her face and the ground under her feet. Needed to sink her fangs into flesh and tendons and punch her fists through chests and just destroy and keep destroying until she ran out of steam or went up in a dust cloud herself.

She needed *out* but this was the most she could get. Up a strip of carpet and back again, the walls pushing inward and something hot and acidic pressing at her chest. The stupid room was growing smaller by the second and she couldn't run, couldn't break free, couldn't leave the radius of Giles's words, what they meant and what they kept meaning. His worry for her but not for her, because Buffy Summers was already dead. The bits of praise he'd fed her for not being like other vampires—as though everything she'd left behind hadn't been on life-support in the first place. As though life had been business as usual until Spike had shown up and blown it all apart.

It was mounting, whatever was inside her that needed out. It was mounting and not falling, not hitting that natural peak that had once been determined by her heart and hormones and everything else that had made her human. Like that day back at Cordelia's place—the tangle of anger and embarrassment that had kept her dangerously close to boiling until Spike had addressed it head-on. And even then, she didn't think she'd truly let go of it until after they'd left, and she'd climbed into his lap and fucked those feelings right out of her system.

That wouldn't work here. She didn't know how she knew, just that she did. Fucking would just amplify everything—make the noise louder. She needed something else.

She needed to fucking *kill*.

And the most she could do was yank the television free and send it hurtling into the wall.

Which she did. Not realizing she meant to until the clunky thing was soaring through the air and smashing with an explosion of breaking glass. Buffy watched it as though standing outside of herself, as though something else had seized control, and something had. Something dark that felt both amazing and terrifying in the same stroke.

And then Spike was there in front of her, seizing her by the shoulders, catching her eyes. He didn't look worried, rather somewhere between amused and bewildered, and his mouth fell open and she knew whatever he was about to say would either infuriate her or defuse her entirely. No in-between. One or the other.

Only he never got the chance. The next second, the door to the motel room burst inward with a shower of shattered aluminum. Buffy thought she'd done it at first—the television had somehow triggered the walls themselves to riot, but then the scent hit her, and a man filled the empty frame. A man holding a crossbow.

"Someone order a surgeon?" he drawled, aimed the crossbow at Spike, and fired.

BUT NOW THE SADDEST CUT OF
ALL, SOMEONE HAS TO TURN
YOU IN

SPIKE HAD TIME TO THINK ONE THING BEFORE THE SLAYER CRASHED into him, and that one thing was *bloody figures*. Because it did. Angel's faithful little lackey had sold the pair of them snake oil and this was their just desserts from having been thick enough to buy it. Outrage and indignation would come, and did just seconds later, but that first reaction was the one that followed him on the way down to the floor, a hundred and ten pounds of furious Buffy on top of him.

And a delicious scent in the air. One that had his demon roaring and shoving all else to the back of his mind. When Spike lifted his head, Buffy was sprawled over him, her head over his heart and an arrow sticking out of her side, blood pooling around the place of impact.

The wanker had shot her. No, he'd shot *him*. Spike. He'd gone for Spike first and Buffy had thrown herself in the path.

"Fuck, what did you do?" he hissed, sitting up. "You daft little—"

"I believe the words you're looking for are *thank you*," Buffy retorted, also sitting up, but Spike's attention had diverted toward their unwelcome wagon with the crossbow.

"Aww, that's almost sweet," the man drawled, resetting his crossbow without taking his eyes off either of them. There was twisted satisfac-

tion on his face, the kind exclusive to true sadists, and Spike should know. He'd seen it enough times not to mistake it for something else. "The way it thinks it's people," he said, reaiming at Buffy, who had a hand wrapped around the arrow's shaft. "But lady, I gotta tell you, *people* don't come with fangs."

"What the fuck is your problem?" Buffy snarled, rolling to glare at their attacker head-on.

"At the moment, you are. Thankfully, I'm a problem solver." The man flashed a grin—the sort that just begged to be ripped off.

Only there was no ripping. Not here—not for them. Not while their heads were still equipped with the shock collars. Or the *chips*, as the watcher had called them. It was a hell of a thing to realize in such a moment, Spike shoving Buffy aside, doing his best to ignore her little pained grunt at the effort, to make sure he stood between her and the man with the crossbow. Mind racing again, panic beginning to set in, for this bloke hadn't come here to wound.

Spike couldn't fight his way out. Not an option.

So what can you do, then?

"Money," he blurted before he could help himself, bringing up his hands in a gesture of surrender. Bloody hating himself for it and the hunter for making him and the scientists who had fixed it so he had no other choice. If it was grovel or dust, he'd grovel. He'd do whatever he could to get Buffy out of this room and to safety. "We've got money. Bloody buckets of it. Take every red penny if you like. All you gotta do is let us go."

"Nice, I don't normally get tipped for my work," the man retorted. "But if you think you're getting out of here, you have watched way too much bad television. Cash'll spend the same whether you hand it to me or if I have to wipe off your dust."

Bugger. Spike swallowed, as close to panic as he'd ever been. "Dunno where we keep it, do you?"

"You're living out of that girl's dufflebag. I like my odds." The man smirked—a maddening thing. He was late thirties, if Spike had to guess, with shaggy brown dark hair offset by a few wayward streaks of gray. His whiskered face had a weathered quality, giving him the look of a bloke who had been doing exactly what he was doing now for a good

long time. One of those career demon hunters, then. The sort done wrong at some point that had then made it their bloody life's mission to play slayer.

The most Spike could do was try to keep the man talking and hope that a better plan occurred to him in whatever time he managed to steal.

Or perhaps Buffy might throw caution to the bloody wind and fight through it the way she had back in her mum's house, for the next second, she was on the man with a fierce snarl, brassed and glorious. Her head twitched as the chip triggered but it barely slowed her down as she snapped her fangs and swiped her hands, and for the first time since he'd burst into their room, their visitor looked something other than certain.

"The fuck!" the hunter snapped, staggering and trying to shake her off, but Buffy was a bloody barnacle. Chomping her fangs into his forearm, digging hands she'd somehow fashioned into claws through the layers at his chest until warm, human blood fragranced the air along with her own, all the while her head jerked and spasmed and she fought through it because she was the most remarkable person on the sodding planet, and he loved her so fiercely that were love a weapon, they'd all be lost to it.

It only took seconds, Buffy's attack, but those seconds seemed to stretch for hours. At last, the hunter gave up the crossbow, let it clatter noisily to the floor to apply his focus more practically. He seized the bolt sticking out of the Slayer's side, twisted, then stabbed it deeper into her, and Buffy was strong enough to fight through one sort of pain but not more. She threw her head back, blood and flesh falling from her fangs, and let loose the most horrific sound ever to touch Spike's ears. Part howl and part whine, all pain, like the scream of a baby rabbit only harsher, more guttural, and choked. It was that sound, more than the fury or anguish on her face, more than the stink of her blood in the air, that released inside of him something that had only ever been released once before. Only there was no mob here, and he knew he didn't have a fraction of the strength Buffy had been blowing his mind with since they'd demolished that demon bar, but fuck if he'd let a little thing like pain hold him back.

Spike sprang forward and into that inferno, shocks setting his head ablaze, making his insides feel on fire, shot through with electricity and flame, and it was so awful his vision immediately blurred but that was all right. He didn't need his eyes for this—he had everything else. Had Buffy, that sound she was making, had the familiarity of her scent, her presence, to direct him where he needed to go. Then, *god*, the crossbow was in his arms, unwieldy and heavier than a sodding mountain, but he had it. *He* did. Which meant the hunter did not.

He whirled around on legs that felt miles away, gritting his fangs and pushing through the pain to bring the crossbow up. Aim it where instinct told him to aim it and forced out through trembling lips in a voice that didn't sound anything like his own, "Who the bloody hell told you to find us here?"

The hunter gave a short laugh—the dismissive sort, like Spike wasn't worth his time. And he might well be right, for it felt like the crossbow might slip from his arms at any bleeding moment, but there was something else there, too. An underlying bit of nerve that betrayed the plonker wasn't so thick as to think himself invincible.

And in the time it took the hunter to decide whether or not he would answer, Spike tuned into her. Focused on the space across the room that might as well have been on the other end of the world, where Buffy's whimpers abruptly ceased. He hoped to whatever looked out for unworthy creatures such as himself that it meant she wasn't feeling it anymore—the thing that had forced that godawful sound out of her throat. All he could do now was buy her time.

One of them had to get out of this.

She had to get out of this.

"I get you're a little slow," the hunter said, sounding—at least—like he hadn't moved much. "Most things with fangs are."

Spike snarled. He'd given up the pretense of even keeping his eyes open, the electricity like daggers piercing into his brain with such rapid-fire precision he was starting to wonder if he might just start cooking from the inside. "Just answer the sodding question."

"Well, let's just say that your friend who sent you out here? He's not really your friend. Sorry." The hunter's voice had a smile in it that made Spike hungry to pull the crossbow's trigger, sod whatever it did

to his head. "Not saying I'm the guy's biggest fan or anything, but he said you and the little lady were the fish, all I had to do was find the barrel, and I'd walk out of here with twenty grand and the satisfaction of having sent two bloodsuckers back to the hell that spawned them."

Then he'd been right—the whole thing had been one bloody long con. And Spike had seized it without questioning, without pausing to ask himself any of the questions that might have kept him from landing here.

Buffy had to get out—had to live. She owed it to him to make sure the Irish chap lost his head for this stunt. Angel, too. Hell, probably Angel was the driving force behind everything. It wouldn't take much if his people were loyal to him. Same as the watcher had been on the phone, arguing that to help Spike was to condemn others to death. That was the sort of righteous thinking that started wars, and Angel was self-important enough to feature himself as the only one around capable of making the hard choices.

Buffy would have to correct him. And she would. She'd correct the bleeding daylights out of him, but Spike wouldn't be there to see it. Spike and his lost vision and his shaking arms and legs and his stolen crossbow that was seconds from tumbling to the floor. Spike and the daggers stabbing into his brain, hot, electric, spreading through his veins and arteries, his limbs, until he'd become a self-contained live-wire. Baking from the inside and rattling and tasting blood in his mouth, feeling blood on his face, perhaps pouring from his eyes, spilling out of his nostrils, his ears, and still he held the crossbow. Knew he had to, that Buffy needed him to. That Buffy was somewhere close and still with him, still alive, and that would continue to be the case unless he let the weapon fall.

But he wouldn't do that. If he could manage, he'd pull the sodding trigger with the last of his strength and clear the path for her. And where he'd failed, she would succeed because she was fire and iron and life incarnate, and she wasn't through with the world just yet.

It was that thought that saw him out. Blood spilling over his lips, the weight of the crossbow dragging him to a floor he couldn't see. He fumbled with the switch and managed to loose a bolt, but god knows

where it went. By the time he hit his knees, he couldn't remember his own goddamn name.

He didn't need it, anyway.

He had hers.



BUFFY OPENED HER EYES.

The pain was still there, though not acute, rather echoes of the body remembering what had come before. She tasted something coppery but dead—her blood—and scented something else on the air. Something familiar and precious but too far away to reach from where she had fallen.

And where had she fallen? Her left side throbbed something awful, the pain there joining the pain in her head, making her feel all over like something that had been chewed up and then spat back out. She needed to get up, climb to her feet, but her feet felt miles away, and things that were miles away typically didn't listen all that well. But then more of her mind was coming online, despite the hurt there, the throbbing pulse of pain unlike any headache she'd ever had. More intense, more *physical*, like someone had been using her brain like a battering ram. Only she thought she remembered reading somewhere that the brain didn't actually feel pain itself and therefore couldn't feel beaten up, but if that was true, she wanted the person who had decided as much to experience just a few seconds of what was going on in her head.

She didn't have time to think about that, though. Spike needed her. She might not remember why exactly, but that didn't make the knowledge any less robust. He needed her *now*.

"Really is almost like fish in a barrel," someone—familiar but also not familiar—was muttering.

Somehow, she found the wherewithal to pull herself into a sitting position, doing her best to ignore the way moving made the world tip sideways. The scene came into focus over what felt like hours but couldn't have been more than a few seconds, and the motel room was there, the one she and Spike had made their home the past couple of

days. And Spike was close by, she could feel him, smell him, taste his blood on the air, but she couldn't hear him, and that, more than anything, was what prompted her to start moving in earnest.

Something was very wrong.

And then everything clicked into place, the fog dissipating and she saw it clearly. The man, the hunter, looming over Spike who had collapsed to the floor, blood spilling down his face from his eyes and nostrils, out of his mouth. She realized with a start that the air also held the stench of slightly cooked meat, and while she couldn't *know* what had happened, she somehow did.

The hunter, self-important asshole that he was, bent over to collect something off the floor. The crossbow. Spike had dropped it. And that was all the opening Buffy needed. No time to think, to consider, just fall back on instinct and action, and then she was in motion. Faster than the hunter could imagine because she'd bet every penny of the money she and Spike had scraped together that he had never encountered anything like her.

If he was very lucky, he never would again.

New pain hit the second she launched off the floor, but she was ready for it, knew to lean into it rather than flinch away. To channel her fury and anguish into the electric shocks that began running anew through her body, and it was with that force that she collided with the fucker. Her head pounding and her throat raw from the scream she let loose, but all of that hers—controlled—and the momentum of impact had the hunter staggering into the window in an explosion of shattering glass, Buffy clinging to him as she had before, snapping her fangs along his neck and tasting the salt of his skin and suddenly desperately hungrier than she had ever been. And it would be easy, she thought, even with the pain, to tear into his throat and take back all the blood he'd stolen from her and Spike tonight. Fill her stomach with something warm and fresh and human, and experience firsthand the satisfaction of devouring a hard-won kill.

Something else Spike had told her that she hadn't understood, much less accepted—blood tasted better when it came from a creature that had been conquered. A creature felled with her own two hands.

That was a reality she'd have to explore later. Sometime when Spike

was awake and not covered in his own blood, when she wasn't fighting against electric pulses lighting through her skull. The urge was there, the hunger, but she wouldn't be any good to Spike if she pushed herself to the point where she knocked herself out. That would just get them both killed.

Instead, Buffy leveraged her strength against the human wall that was the hunter and kicked off back toward the place where her vampire had fallen. The hunter went careening through the gap in the window and Buffy landed on the floor by the crossbow. She didn't have a ton of time but stole what she could, gathering the weapon in one arm while running her fingers over Spike's still, slack face with the other. Nothing. He didn't move, didn't grunt, didn't give her one of those breaths that she didn't understand. To look at him was to think he was dead, only she knew that wasn't true. She knew it, but her heart screamed anyway, fury and grief jolting her through with the need to rip apart the reason Spike's eyes weren't open.

Only it wasn't need, but something much deeper than that. More primal, inside of her, a part of her, raging beneath her skin, pressing against it as though to tear itself free. But it couldn't rip away from her, and so turned its attention to controlling her instead. Making her muscles seize, her fangs ache, and when she looked up and saw the hunter climbing to his feet, she understood exactly what would soothe the fire.

Somehow, though, she managed to keep her feet where they were, instead raised the crossbow and aimed it at his chest. Not meaning to do anything except keep the bastard on that side of the window.

"Angel asked you to do this?"

No response.

Buffy tipped the crossbow back and fired a bolt into the wall just above the now-sagging window frame, and to her surprise, the expected rush of pain didn't come. Interesting.

"Well, that was stupid," the hunter said. "You fired your only shot."

"And I did so without getting a migraine. What does that tell you?"

The man didn't reply. He didn't need to. The answer was in his eyes, and that answer was *I don't know*.

Good. She could work with ambiguity.

"Let's try this again from the top. Angel asked you to kill us."

"I already went over this with your boyfriend."

"Then you shouldn't have any trouble remembering what you said, seeing as it was two minutes ago."

The hunter considered her, his expression unreadable except for the eyes. There was a lot going on behind those eyes, and she doubted any of it was good. Buffy had managed to surprise him—this hadn't gone the way he'd thought it would, and if she could keep surprising him, she might be able to get from here to the car in one piece. Or at least muster the strength to hit him hard enough that he went down for the count without knocking herself out in the process.

The only reason she could see that she was standing and Spike wasn't was Spike didn't have the Slayer advantage. But she also didn't know how far that would carry her.

"Crossed paths with Angel a few years back," the hunter said at last. "Would've killed him, myself, but he had this friend with him. Didn't look like much and talked like he fell out of a Scorsese movie, but I tried to take out Angel, and damn if that little runt didn't have the firepower to make sure that didn't happen."

"Whistler." She had never seen much in the way of firepower in him, granted, but there were only so many people that fit that description. And Whistler had been all up in Angel's business—at least enough to be all up in hers as she'd prepared to permanently remove her ex from all potential equations.

"That mighta been the guy, yeah. Tells me I can't take out this vamp, that he's important. Got himself a soul and a purpose and a bunch of other shit."

"And, what, you guys exchanged numbers and became buddies?"

The hunter winced as though she'd insulted him. "What the hell do you take me for?"

"Do you really want me to answer that question?" Buffy hazarded a glance at Spike, knowing it was too much to hope she'd see him looking back at her but still disappointed when she didn't. "So how did you and Angel become close?"

"We ain't *close*, girl. That runt, whoever he was, he gets this brilliant idea that Angel and me oughta know how to get in touch in case we

can help each other. I tell him I don't help bloodsuckers. Your guy, Whistler? Whistler says Angel and me got that in common. So, sure, I decide to humor him. Figure if he's ever stupid enough to reach out, maybe I'll catch him without his bodyguard and that'll wipe the slate clean one more vamp." The hunter shrugged, flashing a wide, toothy grin. "Imagine my surprise when I check my messages and lo and behold, there's one from this vampire. He's got two bloodsuckers who can't fight back needin' to be taken off the map, and even better, he knows how to get them to come to me. Not one to turn down a gift horse, especially if its hooves are worth twenty grand. That enough for you, blood breath?"

Yeah. It was more than enough. Gave her a nice, concise to-do list after she shook this asshole and was on the road again.

Item one—find a real way to get these chips out of their heads.

Item two—kill Angel. And maybe kill his friend, Doyle, too, for having sent them on this goose chase. Cordelia could probably live. Somehow, Buffy didn't see her as being complicit. Not when she could have handled the situation herself.

No, it seemed much more likely that Angel had sent her and Spike away specifically so he could claim that they'd gotten themselves killed on the road. Too bad, so sad, but out of his hands and hey, at least he'd tried to help. That was if the subject of Buffy and Spike ever came up again, and odds were it wouldn't because, well, no reason to once they were out of sight.

Nice and tidy for Angel. He wouldn't have to think about it—wouldn't have to carry the weight of having killed her himself. No, he could staff it out.

God, she was going to burn everything to the ground. Starting with this clown.

"Thank you," Buffy said. "You've been very helpful."

The grin on his face was what she'd remember—how it stayed there even after the crossbow made contact with his forehead and he began folding in on himself. Fireworks went off behind her eyes as the thing in her head screamed its recrimination, but she still saw that grin and she knew what it meant. Would have even if she hadn't been a predator, for that grin had been on the face of another hunter who had

crossed her path once. A hunter who hadn't given a damn that the werewolves he shot had people attached to them. Out there to get his score no matter what.

There would be no reasoning with this man. There was only running—running and hoping he was smart enough not to push his luck more than he had already because Buffy's grip on her inner monster was as tenuous as it had ever been, and if pushed, she wouldn't hesitate to make him the inaugural human kill, fuck whatever it did to her head.

But the grinning idiot didn't get back up. Hell, she'd thrown the crossbow with such force, it was entirely possible it had snapped his neck on impact. Buffy didn't know and she wasn't going to slow down enough to investigate—not even to listen for a heartbeat. The ruckus they'd made in the fight would soon attract others, and she didn't want to have to battle her way through motel personnel or the other guests, and she would. The game had changed—everything had changed. And Spike still wasn't moving and she was on borrowed time.

So it came down to what was essential. The money was essential, so she flew to collect her travel bag. It was all in there, save for the bills scattered along the nightstand, but that was mostly change from the various delivery places they'd relied on over the last couple of days. Buffy fitted the strap criss-cross from her shoulder to her hip, then rushed back over the debris of the days spent living there to Spike's side.

He still wasn't awake. His face—his beautiful, stupid face—had started to swell in certain places, a mess of purple and blue and the blood that had leaked out. And Buffy choked a sob she didn't have time to let out, leaned over and collected him. Her vampire, her friend, the man she loved wholly—and stupidly, but loved all the same. She pulled in a breath, winced at the way it made her chest tighten, and looked around again. Good thing, too, for if she hadn't, she would have missed the duster that Spike had tossed onto the dresser where the TV had been.

Where had the TV gone? Oh, right. She'd wrecked it after her call with Giles, which now felt approximately a thousand years in the past.

Not that it mattered. Nothing mattered so much as getting out of

here. Buffy shifted and tossed Spike over her shoulder in a fireman's carry, darted toward the dresser to snatch up the duster, and that was it. She couldn't let herself dawdle any longer. There were voices in the near distance and sirens just a little farther out. Sirens attached to vehicles that were likely headed this way, and she had to be gone by then. Buffy bolted across the parking lot toward the DeSoto at speeds that scared even her. She wasn't sure how she managed to get the passenger door open, but she did, and in went Spike. Her travel bag crashed against the seat in the back, toppling over and spilling contents from the force of the roll, but in one place and that was all she could ask for so she didn't slow down or try to right it. Just kept in motion, slamming the door shut then running around to the driver's side and practically throwing herself behind the wheel.

That was as far as her brain carried her. The second she was in place, staring at the parking lot from the wrong side of the front seat, the panic she hadn't let herself feel earlier began to swell. It had been months, almost a year, since the band candy incident, also known as the last time Buffy Summers had operated a motor vehicle. This one was also nothing like her mom's SUV—it was much older for one thing. For another, well, maybe that was the only significant point of differentiation, but it was a pretty goddamn big one and if she let herself sit and think about it, she might just start sobbing and that would be precisely zero help to anyone, least of all Spike.

Spike. Spike. He still wasn't moving and she needed him to move. Needed him to wake up and take charge and help her decide where to go next. But when she glanced over at him, Buffy knew it was no good. Whatever had happened the last time the chip had gone off had knocked him out of commission. Maybe just for a while—*god, please just for a while*—or maybe for longer. Maybe this was it, and he would never open his eyes again. Never look at her, never smile, never run his tongue over his teeth, never grin or smirk or kiss her, or even have the chance to break her heart again, ever, because vampires might have a way to die without dusting after all. And it was too soon to be thinking things like that but here she was, thinking it anyway. Fearing it anyway. Waiting and watching and hoping he would do what he'd done ever since he'd barreled into her life and make mincemeat of her expecta-

tions, but then she couldn't wait anymore. The sirens were closer and she still didn't know how to drive this thing except now she had to learn.

The first step was easy enough—locating the keys. She seized the duster off the car floor where it had fallen and quickly rifled through the pockets. Then they were in hand and she switched to the next task of sticking them in the ignition. It took a few fumbling tries, her thoughts simultaneously scattered and racing, flooding her with images of every other time she'd been in this car and her preoccupation had been Spike's hands, mouth, and cock, or sleeping or worrying about a future that was even more distant now than it had been when they'd pulled into the parking lot of this stupid motel. And the flicker of police lights was visible and—

But the noise settled just long enough for her to remember what to do, and the car suddenly roared to life, and she wasted no more time before roaring the fuck out of that condemned parking lot. There was a mad swerve as she attempted to stay in the right lane, then an open road leading into the dark.

The *where* would come later. Right now, the most she could hope for was distance.

And for Spike to wake up. It didn't seem like too much to ask.

But somehow, she knew it was the world.

SO LET US STOP TALKIN' FALSELY NOW

IT SEEMED OBVIOUS, ONCE SHE HAD IT MASTERED, THAT THE REASON Buffy hadn't been the best driver in the world was that she was a learn-by-doing kinda person. Class was helpful, practice was better. While she would have preferred her practice to come without life-or-dust stakes, she was hardly in a position to be a choosey beggar. Plus, leveraging the skills she managed to learn against her continued existence was how she'd gotten as far as she had in the first place, so she supposed she should thank the authorities who had chased her and Spike out of Denver for inspiring her to become really good really fast.

In the end, losing them had been the harder challenge and one she still wasn't entirely sure how she'd pulled off. It had to have been a combination of her proficiency in seeing at night without the aid of headlights and that the skies decided to throw her a break by releasing a deluge of fat snowflakes. Still, she didn't start to relax until she had put three hours between herself and the motel with its maybe dead guy and the room she'd wrecked. Buffy knew the hunter was human, but she couldn't imagine him cooperating all that much if he came to while in police custody, so maybe he had survived after all and was, unwittingly or not, helping her out by splitting the authorities' attention.

Since she couldn't afford to think he was dead, Buffy decided that was the most likely scenario.

And Spike still hadn't stirred. She was trying not to dwell on that. Trying to convince herself it was a good thing because if he suddenly opened his eyes and sprang upright, she might start and accidentally launch the car over the edge of a mountain or into a rocky formation or some other catastrophe that would result in them going up in a fire-ball. Spike's persistent sleepiness was something she would have to wait to address. There would be another town up the way somewhere, and in it another motel. She'd have to stop to wait out the sun and when she did, she could worry more. Get him cleaned up, maybe slap him a little, throw water in his face, or any of the other things that happened in the movies. What she wouldn't do was panic, at least not any more than she was already. It wouldn't help the situation or Spike, and survival was what needed her attention now.

Even if she had no idea where to start.

There were questions, too. So many questions just loitering along the edges of her awareness, waiting for the other noise to settle into the background to force themselves to the front. Like how it was that Spike was knocked out and she wasn't. It had made a sort of patchwork sense while in the midst of the action, that blanket knowledge that Buffy was more than just a vampire and therefore stronger in most respects. But the brain wasn't *most respects*. The brain was...well, the brain. No muscle really involved there, so no obvious reason why she should be behind the wheel of the DeSoto rather than a pile of dust back in Denver.

The only answer she could find came down to nothing more than speculation. That being that when Spike had been holding the cross-bow, he had done so fully intending to fire an arrow, and somehow the hardware in his brain had known that. It was a scary thought, one she didn't really want to explore because *how* could any piece of machinery gauge intent? Did it read minds, or did the brain react differently when the goal was violence versus when the goal was survival? For Buffy *badn't* intended to fire a bolt. She'd just needed the hunter to know she was in charge, to think that she might if pressed. Her own chip hadn't gone off except those times she'd meant to cause harm—

responding to threats that had meat behind them rather than just playacting.

Buffy didn't know, and she didn't really want to be in a situation where she had to test that again anytime soon. She wanted to be somewhere safe and quiet, away from the sun and with Spike's arms around her because he'd woken up and was ready to discuss their next move. Figure out what options were left to them now that Angel and his demon friend had betrayed them. If there were even any options.

One thing was certain—Buffy couldn't live like this, dodging humans and gambling with her ability to defend herself should some other thrill-seeker decide to try their chances.

Eventually, her skin began to tingle with its telltale warning that the sun would soon make its daily debut, and she started looking for lodging markers along the highway. Earlier than Spike would have, had he been behind the wheel, but Buffy wasn't about to chance both their lives that she would be able to both secure a room and get him inside it without a hiccup. She knew how to apply the sunproofing, as she'd had enough foresight to ask *just in case* and Spike had shown her one evening before they'd set out, and that was all well and good but still not as safe, even after she factored in the possibility that their hunter friend had somehow eluded the cops and trailed after them. Yeah, it would suck being cornered, but a car was hardly better than a motel room, especially if their pursuer had the foresight to slash their tires. He hadn't before but he also hadn't expected a fight—Buffy might not know this guy, but he didn't strike her as the sort not to learn from his mistakes.

Neither scenario was great, but she preferred the one where she could tend to Spike. Even if she had no idea what to do or where to start.

Though it occurred to her that a hotel rather than a motel might give her more of a fighting chance if she needed one, and hey, they had extra cash they likely wouldn't be using for a bit, so why the hell not? She had just had the thought when the next mile marker appeared on the road, advertising that up ahead was a city large enough for her to recognize the name. Maybe one with a more modest selection of lodging options right off the exit ramp.

Buffy made a fast decision, which was how she found herself pulling into a parking spot at a Holiday Inn. It was a place nice enough to have rooms with interior access rather than exterior, but also not exactly a luxury chain. That hopefully meant whoever was manning the front desk would be easy enough to bribe. And if they weren't, well, Buffy guessed she wasn't above flashing some fang and putting her whole theory about intent to the test. She definitely wasn't about to leave Spike unconscious and unguarded in the car while she went inside to firm up their accommodations for the day.

It was risky as hell—the more memorable she was, the more danger they were in. But even knowing that, a hotel seemed safer than a motel or the car. Should anyone with a crossbow come knocking, they'd have to go through a lobby undetected, and they wouldn't be standing at a door with the sun at their back once they burst into the room. And Buffy was fairly certain she could carve a bloodless path to the sewer system, or at the very least give any pursuer a run for their money with the stairwells, elevators, closets, and other interior spaces. Hell, maybe that was the best-case scenario—she could try to engineer a fall down the stairs that resulted in the break of a fragile human neck through no fault of her own. Tricky, yes, but she was the Slayer. She excelled at tricky.

As it was, the guy behind the counter didn't seem more than exceptionally curious when Buffy strolled into the lobby, Spike thrown over her shoulder along with his duster and her travel bag secure in her free hand. His exceptional curiosity was easily satisfied with a wad of bills and the promise of more on the condition of discretion, and that would have to do because it was almost sunrise and Buffy needed to get to her room before the early risers of the world started appearing in hallways. Not being seen meant not being remembered and right now, that was all Buffy wanted for Christmas.

Well, not all, she thought as she heaved Spike onto what would be their bed for at least the next day.

He still hadn't moved. Not so much as a twitch of the eyes. Nothing to indicate he was still in there at all.

And without warning, it all came crashing down—everything she hadn't realized she had been holding back. Spike. The chip. The deadly

goose chase Angel had sent her on. How utterly and completely optionless she was at the moment, all her resources used up. Or not even used up, just nonexistent. Her friends didn't care. Her mom would claim to care, but she'd be lying. Giles would tell her to leave Spike for dead, that there was nothing to be done, and the world would be safer for it so no harm, no foul.

Except Spike was the only person who made her feel like her. The only person she could have ever gone on this journey with. The only person who knew or cared that Buffy Summers wasn't actually dead, just alive in a different form. Giles didn't know that. He would probably have a reason why it didn't matter if he did. Some argument he'd fashioned based on what he believed she would do in different circumstances.

But these weren't different circumstances. They were *these* circumstances, and goddammit, Buffy was done questioning herself. Done trying to guess what a soulful version of Buffy Summers might do in situations a soulful version of Buffy Summers would never be in. Trying to live up to that ideal—one she wasn't entirely sure had even existed in the first place—would only drive her crazy. Be Buffy, just this specific edition of Buffy. Other editions need not apply.

What everyone wanted from her was the reassurance of a soul when, from where Buffy was sitting, souls weren't worth a whole damn lot. Angel and his soul had come up with a plan that would have resulted in her and Spike being slaughtered like cornered animals. Not even a sporting chance to run for it—if the hunter hadn't been a complete dingus and had instead waited for morning, their story would have ended hours ago in two matching piles of dust. So Angel could take that sanctimonious soul of his and shove it up his ass for all the good it had done. The entire thing had been Jenny Calendar all over again—the staging, the hope, and the surprise ending. At least Giles had gotten to his punchline quickly.

Buffy sighed, winced and rubbed at her chest, then turned her attention back to Spike. Still nothing. She couldn't even fool herself into thinking he might have shifted while she hadn't been looking, though god, what she wouldn't give for even empty hope right about now. As devastating as it was sure to be once the balloon popped, the

time spent inside would still be a nice break from this overwhelming sense of helplessness.

"If you don't wake up, Spike, I promise I'm going to kick your ass," she muttered, legs carrying her toward the bed. She didn't know what she planned to do once there, her body feeling very much on autopilot, waiting for her brain to recharge. The options she'd considered on the road, ways she might get him to stop acting dead, flitted across her mind again. If splashing water on someone's face was supposed to wake them up, then certainly dumping them in a bath would yield the same result. She could also try feeding him without worrying about making a mess that would haunt her nose until it was time to leave or further staining his clothes in ways that would make them even more memorable to potential witnesses. If it wasn't already too late for that.

Well, that was a risk she would just have to take, for the next minute, Buffy was tugging his boots off his feet, followed by his socks. It was strange—before all this, she would never have considered things like Spike's socks, or other pieces of *ordinary* she might find on someone who wasn't ordinary in the slightest. She thought about the way he pulled those socks on every night, the cool slide of fabric over his toes and arch and heel. Just a vampire going about his business, and his business involved avoiding blisters. And then her stupid eyes were stinging and now would be the perfect time for Spike to wake up because he'd ask why she was crying and she'd tell him it was over his feet and he'd never let her live it down. He'd laugh and roll his eyes and call her a bunch of things that were allegedly English, but she'd only have his word for it, and he would perhaps even realize she was in love with him, and as humiliating as it would be to have it out, she'd even take heartbreak over the nothing of the present.

But Spike didn't wake up to find her crying over his feet. He didn't wake up when she unzipped his jeans, either. In fact, Buffy hadn't yet been in a rented room this long without Spike at least running his hands over his dick and suggesting they break in the bed. He'd leer and she'd roll her eyes, and sometimes that would be the end of it, but more often than not, they'd have the place christened within the first fifteen minutes.

She wasn't even sure she'd gotten a good look at Spike when he

wasn't erect before now. His penis lay against his inner thigh, and she understood why he looked so often like he was hard and ready to go. Her vampire was both a grower and show-er. Buffy bit the inside of her cheek and turned her attention to getting him the rest of the way naked. Jeans down his legs, then his shirt over his head. It wasn't easy to undress someone who was unconscious, all their extremities awkward and dead weight, and if you really cared about the person, you didn't want to use too much force or strength. Too easy to snap a bone or leave a bruise, and she definitely didn't need Spike in worse shape.

No, she needed him up and smirking. She needed him outraged over what had just happened and ready to discuss their next move. She needed him to hear her theory about intent, and how they might use intent to manipulate the chips into not triggering when they most needed them to not trigger. Mostly, she just needed him awake so she knew he was still with her because this *alone* shit was not all it was cracked up to be.

She just missed him, and he was right here so she shouldn't have to.

Buffy shoved that thought away, though. It wouldn't bring him back any faster and she needed to focus, first on this one last-ditch idea she had and then on what the next move should be. She didn't much like the thought of leaving Spike unattended even to start the water in the tub but dragging him with her would be a little on the cumbersome side, and she didn't like the idea of dumping him in the thing before it was full, either, for reasons she couldn't quite articulate. Just that the image in her mind of water pouring over his skin and making his arms and hands move as though he were nothing more than a corpse gave her fears teeth, and things with teeth could bite.

So she moved fast, first tucking the desk chair under the doorknob, then starting to fill the tub. She lingered near the bathroom doorway to keep an eye on its progress, alternating glances between it and Spike, who remained as steadfastly dead to the world as ever. Not opening his eyes and glancing around with a frown at the nicer-than-normal accommodations. Not finding her gaze with his and asking if he came so hard he passed out, and if so, could they do it again, please? Not doing anything but be dead, and maybe it would have been better

anyway if she'd just let the water fill in around him. At least then she wouldn't be standing here with these thoughts in her head.

No, just a host of different ones.

Once the tub was full, Buffy switched off the water and returned to the bed to gather Spike. One arm went under his legs at the knees, the other braced where his shoulders met his neck to keep his head from lolling too dramatically as she walked him to the bathroom. The bath she'd run was warm but not scalding, and even though Spike was slight of stature and build, he seemed to dwarf the dimensions of the tub. Sprawling and lanky and yes, somehow deader than he had been on the bed. Buffy swallowed whatever was in her throat—a sob or a scream or both—and set to do what she'd come here to do. Pressed her wrist to her mouth and let her fangs slide out, slice open her own skin to get the blood pouring, then pressing that wound to Spike's lips in the hope there was something there that his body would respond to. The part of her that was slayer and not vampire—if it could reach him. If anything could.

The water slowly turned red as ribbons of blood fell over his lips and down his chin. He didn't stir. Didn't twitch. Didn't so much as flick his eyes.

He was gone.

Buffy was trembling when she pulled back, her own eyes hot and burning, an awful pressure rising in her chest that she tried in vain to push back but knew was more powerful than she was. And for the first time since leaving that hellhole behind, driving endlessly through a blanket of snowy night, she was without distraction to keep the bad thoughts back. There was only Spike, lying there in bloody water, skin stained with her latest failed effort, and the hollow ache where he had lived mere hours ago, bright and vibrant and magnetic. Only he was gone and all she had was the Spike-shaped husk he'd left behind. If her blood couldn't bring him back...

She forced out a breath no matter how much it hurt. Okay. So she needed to find another answer. Maybe her blood was just too dead to do the trick. Maybe the Slayer blood had to be fresh, *alive*, and there was a ready source of that conveniently back in Sunnydale. Wasn't like Faith was using it at the moment. And unlike the time

she'd tried to capture Faith to save Angel, Buffy found she wasn't bothered by the thought of killing a human. Had it ever really bothered her, or had she been trying to be *Buffy* so hard that she'd managed to fool herself in the course of it? Had she saved the human couple from certain doom on Halloween out of a sense of rightness or because she'd known she'd get a hell of a fight out of the experience?

Right then, staring at Spike in that tub, Buffy didn't know. She felt she would slaughter the freaking pope if it would bring back the man she loved. Only she couldn't exactly slaughter anyone—she could point weapons and flash her fangs and make with the threats, but threats were all there could be. If Angel had any other human hunters up his sleeve to send her way, all they would need was to corner her, and that would be the end. She'd have no means of protecting herself, let alone Spike. She might be stronger than the average vamp, she might have figured out how to work around the chip in her head, but she was hardly invincible.

Buffy's mind stumbled, but she didn't know why. Not at first. It was something about that word, *invincible*. It stuck, it gnawed, it pulled on memories that were only a few days old but seemed much older. There was something important there. Something useful that she'd forgotten.

Then her eyes went wide.

"Oh, *shit*."

The gem. Spike's payment. His trophy at the end of this trip. God, how could she have forgotten about it?

And what the hell had happened to it?

Buffy's feet seemed to be ahead of her brain, for the next thing she knew, she was back in the main part of the hotel room, staring at the phone on the nightstand. It was late. Or early. Too early to call anyone. And she didn't really want to talk to Giles. Not after their last conversation.

But she also didn't think she could afford to wait, and Giles was the safest bet she could make right now. So, with a curse, she snatched up the phone and punched in the same numbers she had before. Barked her name into the receiver when prompted, as she had before. Waited as the call was put through, as she had before. All the while Spike lay in

the other room, submerged in a tub of bloody water, further from her than he ever had been.

Then the line picked up.

"Hello?"

Willow?

Buffy opened her mouth to say something—not sure what—but the robotic voice belonging to the automated 1-800-COLLECT system got there first, calmly asking the recipient if they would accept the charges. She would have sworn she heard Willow's heart somersault and *definitely* heard the sharp intake of breath that followed, as well as her friend's hurried explanation to someone in the room with her—"It's Buffy!"—before confirming that the charges were indeed not a problem.

"Buffy!" her friend started the second the line was solely theirs. "Are you—"

"What are you doing there?"

"Giles called me after he talked to you and we thought we'd try a location spell. It's, umm, gone long. Every time the spell seems to work, it shows you in a different place. We've been so worried."

Either regular Willow magic unpredictability or owing to the fact that Buffy had spent the bulk of the evening on the road. Good news, regardless, as far as Buffy was concerned. "I don't have a ton of time. I just need to get some things straight. You're in the military group, right? Along with your boyfriend?"

Maybe she should have done the whole conversation thing and built up to the point, but her patience was extinct, and she had no mileage to pretend otherwise.

"Umm, yeah." The confusion in her friend's voice was thick enough to choke on. "I guess Giles told you about that?"

Giles had told her a number of things. "He told me... I can't remember what it's called, but the group Riley is in, that you two hit it off and they recruited you. I need to know what you know about everything and I need to know it now. We're coming home."

"You are? And...we?" Willow echoed. "Meaning you and Spike?"

"Yes."

"That's... The same Spike? Bottle-in-face, league-of-assassins Spike? It's just... I didn't see that coming."

A low growl scratched at Buffy's throat, and she could feel the demon inside her, pushing at her skin, making her gums tingle. "Don't even start in on Spike if you're dating the guy who fitted my brain with a shock collar. You have no idea what I've been through."

"Buffy." Willow had lost a few octaves and now sounded wounded. "I'm not—"

"These things they put inside of us? They're coming out."

"Would you just calm down? You don't sound like you."

"I sound exactly like me. This is what I sound like when my ex-boyfriend sends me on a snipe hunt across the country with the intended result of me being a pile of dust," Buffy snapped, not even trying to keep the snarl out of her voice. "This is what I sound like after my mom has kicked me out of the house *again*. When my watcher tells me that the one person who hasn't treated me like a monster needs to be put down. When my best friend has the gall to pass judgment on who I'm in love with when—"

"Whoa! Hold on. You're in love with him?" There was a pause—mostly because Buffy couldn't think of anything to say that wouldn't be just another growl. Then, quieter, Willow returned to the line. "Look, I get why you're mad. After everything happened with Oz, it kinda hit me just how...not great I was after you became a vampire. I'm sorry for that, Buffy, truly. A-and that is one of the reasons I'm with Riley. I'm trying to learn as much as I can about those chips they gave you. How they work and what all the Initiative has learned. I get that your chip has to come out, and okay, if Spike's a part of the deal, then... It's weird, but that's me stuff. Not you stuff. Some of what I've seen in the Initiative makes it hard to sleep. I think about what would happen if they got their hands on Oz or if they learned I practice magic and I don't know if me being human or Oz being regular-person guy most days of the month would make a difference. For all I know, we might end up in one of those cells."

"How deep in are you?"

"Deeper than I thought I'd be at this stage." Undercover or not, Willow sounded proud of that fact—like she had accomplished some-

thing. “Not a soldier but when they learned I knew so much about monsters and put that together with my grades, especially in biology and chemistry, and then looked at my transcripts and found that I’d been singled out for academic excellence once before, they were eager to get me working. So I see what happens in the labs. What they do to other vampires, even. Like, remember Harmony?”

Buffy licked her lips, a new breed of dread pooling in her belly. “Yeah, Harmony was captured with us. With me and Spike. What about her?”

“Oh. She’s... She’s gone. They were playing with different intensity levels of the chip—how much pain could a vampire withstand. I guess... I guess because you were able to attack Riley and the others even with the chips going off and get away.” The last bit she said in a rush like she worried Buffy might take it as blame and start yelling again. “Riley was really worried about that, that it might mean you could still hurt other people even with the chip and that kinda made the entire thing moot. And like you said, Harmony was captured with you, which means she was fitted with the same model of chip. So, yeah, they played with the settings.”

God, Buffy wasn’t sure she wanted to know, even if she *was* sure that she had to. “What happened?”

“It was awful. The overload was so intense that she essentially went braindead. And she was screaming the entire time, that’s what makes it worse. Begging me to make it stop... I almost did. Or I wanted to ask Walsh to make it stop but I couldn’t. It would have just led to a lot of questions and maybe impacted my security clearance. But watching that... It was hard to remember Harmony was, you know, a vampire. She seemed just like regular Harmony.”

Buffy had been right. She definitely hadn’t wanted to know. For multiple reasons. “So this happened right in front of you? You watched them torture Harmony?”

“I... I’m the one who modified the chip. I needed to be there for the field test to see if it worked.”

She bit her tongue so hard her mouth filled with blood. “You modified the chip and watched it fry her to dust?”

“Not dust. Just braindead. They, umm, dusted her after.”

After Harmony had been all used up, in other words. No sense in keeping around a braindead vampire, except maybe to run a few more experiments just to make sure they consumed every bit of the resource they had destroyed. Buffy was suddenly glad she hadn't eaten, otherwise she'd be vomiting blood everywhere.

"That's not better, Will." It was soulless. Completely soulless. And something her best friend had willingly participated in. Something she had apparently consoled herself into thinking was less monstrous than it was because Harmony had been a vampire. "How did you modify the chip?"

"What?" Willow asked, her voice small.

"Can you adjust the settings remotely?"

Are you the reason he won't open his eyes? Did you find a way to fuck with the settings of the things in our heads? Am I going to have to kill you, too?

"Like on you guys? I can't. And I wouldn't!" she rushed to add. "I made some modifications to the hardware itself. Like, it's currently set up for remote activation. When you and Spike escaped, the chips had only just been implanted, not switched on. Your chips are prototypes that needed to be tested. They didn't want to add the enhanced features like settings and stuff until they were sure they were solid on the tech. Or...actually, I guess until they met me and I showed them how easy—"

"So no," Buffy interjected before the urge to kill the girl who she suspected would, from this point forward, be her *former* best friend rose any further. "You can't adjust the settings of the chips in mine and Spike's heads from Sunnydale. Or even once we're there and within range of whatever signal you put out to do it."

"No. And again, I wouldn't if I could."

"You wouldn't to me. You would to Spike."

"I would *not*. Not to someone you love."

I wish I could believe that.

But she couldn't. Not after Denver. She was never taking anything on faith again.

Except maybe Faith herself, though Buffy thought it best not to say that. The last thing she needed was for Willow or the others to suddenly grow a conscience where Faith was concerned, maybe move

her for her own protection before Buffy got around to deciding if she was ready to go full monster.

Though if Spike was still unconscious by the time she got to Sunnydale, if finding that gem of vampire invulnerability didn't wake him, if there was nothing in the Initiative that would bring him back, Buffy thought it likely that her last reservations would dry up.

"Okay, Will," Buffy said. "Give it to me straight. If I come home now, will you help me get into the Initiative?"

"What?"

"These chips are coming out, one way or another, but I need to get in there to do it."

"You found something that works?"

No. She had a crazy maybe-plan that was pretty much the only thing standing between her and a not-crazy homicidal plan. A plan that had so many variables and assumptions that a stiff breeze could knock it over, but if it worked, it would give her a tool that had suddenly become more than invaluable. But she didn't tell Willow that much.

From here on, she was only trusting people with the essentials. Nothing else.

"I just need to get in there," she said instead. "You help me, or you stay out of the way."

"I'm in, I'm in!" Willow said in a rush. "That's the entire point of this—why I got involved in the first place. I'm doing it for you."

How magnanimous, she wanted to say, but didn't. "Thank you," she didn't want to say, but did.

"When will you be home?"

"Soon. Three days if all goes well."

Tomorrow, if all went better than well, but she decided not to say that, either. Something told her it was smarter to keep Willow on her toes. Let her feel comfortable. Prevent her from being too prepared, or at least on a different timetable in the event Buffy was driving headfirst into another Denver.

"Okay," Willow said. "When you get here, call me at this number." She rattled off a string of digits. "That's a direct line to Riley's dorm at Lowell House. I stay there pretty much every night. Well, except tonight, obviously, but I should be there tomorrow—err, *tonight*—after

class. If he picks up, say you're Cordelia. She's called a few times just to see if we've heard from you. That'll give me time to get ready for us to meet up."

"Meet up where?"

"At Lowell House. The entire frat is in the Initiative. It's how we get in."

Either Willow wasn't as smart as everyone was always saying she was, or she truly was hooking the line for a trap. *Here's Riley's private number. Here's how you get into the Initiative. Here's when we're expecting you.*

It meant something that Buffy couldn't trust her. It meant she really was alone. That reality, that understanding, she'd been dodging since the night she'd opened her eyes as a vampire was true. Maybe everyone was done pretending now.

Buffy certainly was. Could be that was enough.

"All right," she said. "See you in a few days. I'll call when I'm in town."

"Oh, Buffy!"

"Yeah?"

"When this is over... I'm not in love with Riley or anything, but he's been...nice. Really understanding about Oz. I mean, he doesn't know the werewolf part, just that I was hurt and it's been good, having someone."

"I'm sure you're leading me to a point."

A pause. "Just...don't hurt him, okay?"

Buffy blinked, thinking about the other room. About Spike in a tub of bloody water, unresponsive. Braindead, maybe, as Harmony had been. Made that way because of something Riley had put in his head—something Willow was helping perfect. And she knew there was the way she should respond to Willow's request and the way that was the truth.

Then there was the middle ground. That territory seemed safest.

"Don't let him do anything that could get him hurt, and I'll my best," she said, and hung up before Willow could object.

SHE'S OUT THERE ON HER OWN,
AND SHE'S ALL RIGHT

ON A TYPICAL DAY, THEY WOULD TAKE THEIR TIME PACKING UP their room, happy to waste whole hours of perfectly drivable darkness just enjoying each other as they were not on anyone's schedule but their own. But the typical days were behind them, and Buffy was not about to let a single sunless minute go to waste. Even before her skin had stopped prickling its preternatural warning that outside conditions were fatal, she was hurrying down the hotel stairs as fast as she dared, her travel bag slung over her shoulder and Spike in her arms. Dressed in his duster now, at least, as she'd fitted that back where it belonged, both to make him look more like himself, if unconscious, and to give her one less item to carry.

The sun was thankfully angled in such a way that she didn't have to resort to creative maneuvering to close the gap between herself and the DeSoto, nor expend additional energy to get there any quicker. In seconds, she had her vampire as close to strapped in as she could manage—the car had apparently been commissioned before seat belts were a mandatory safety feature, and only had a lap belt as a result—and was sliding once more behind the wheel.

It was strange how quickly this had become natural for her. Not even twenty-four hours had passed since she'd fumbled her way

through the Denver escape and here she was, confidently steering a car that had been assembled more than double her lifetime ago onto the highway. Pointing it in the right direction, even, assuming she'd correctly read the atlas she'd swiped from the hotel's front desk clerk.

That atlas had occupied the bulk of her day—tracing the way from the hotel to Sunnydale, calculating the miles, trying to figure out just how quickly she could get there. It was dumb stupid luck that she'd fled Denver in the right direction, even dumber, stupider luck that she'd gone as far as she had before stopping. If her math was right—and god, there was every chance it wasn't—and the road conditions were clear, she could feasibly cross into Sunnydale before dawn.

Amazing how little it took to retrace a journey that had taken them a few weeks. Spike really had been dragging it out.

And if he woke up, he could tell her exactly why that was. Laugh at her when she suggested it was because he had feelings for her and had wanted to milk their time together. Don't be daft, he'd say, or something like it, right before reminding her that he was in love with nutso the vampire. And yeah, that would hurt like hell, but Buffy thought she could survive it. She could survive anything so long as he opened his eyes and looked at her as he said it.

But he wouldn't. Not without serious help, at least—the gem or draining a living slayer or whatever other alternative she could find between here and when decisions needed to be made. The conversation with Willow had killed what little hope she'd had left that time would have him waking on his own.

At the same time, though, Buffy was very much aware that she hadn't tried not-dead blood, and not only because her own stomach was on the verge of eating itself. While she thought it unlikely that the Initiative hadn't tried to feed Harmony back to life before dusting her, there was always a chance that they had not—that they'd just considered her a lost cause and thrown the baby out with the bathwater. But Buffy would need to eat before she stormed the Initiative, and that'd provide the perfect opportunity to see if blood spilled from a living creature made any difference in Spike's condition.

If nothing else, he still needed blood to live. He wasn't going to wither away on her watch. And if it happened to work, then *god*, thank

you. Her heartache aside, it would be a lot easier to storm the Initiative with Spike at her side rather than over her shoulder.

All that hinged upon making it to Sunnydale well ahead of the sun.

As it turned out, though, she needn't have worried. It was early enough in the month to avoid traffic for holiday travel and, as had been the case the entire trip, late enough that her only company on the road mostly came from semi-truck drivers. All in all, the trip spanned a solid nine hours from the hotel, and with the hour she'd earned after crossing from Mountain Time to Pacific, Buffy crashed into the *Welcome to Sunnydale* sign (it was tradition, he'd told her) with more than enough time to swing by the butcher shop before making her way toward campus.

Thankfully, the butcher had already been on the premises, preparing for the day ahead and all too happy to part with a healthy amount of pig's blood once he realized she was there to buy, not to destroy, maim, or kill. Not that Buffy wouldn't have helped herself to whatever was in his fridge anyway, but the butcher being there meant the product was as fresh as it could be, which was the best case scenario. Next to an empty stomach, the last thing she needed was to be sick after having consumed something that had been close to spoiling.

The delicious waft of pig's blood, cold or not, had the gurgling in her belly reaching dangerous proportions. She just barely managed to get back to the car before her fangs tore through the plastic, blood splashing along her cheeks and dribbling down her chin, and she would have been furious for wasting any if she hadn't practically been weighed down with bags of liquid red. Buffy drained three of those bags without slowing down, her stomach not registering it was getting full until she was halfway through her fourth. Just a couple of days had somehow convinced her stupid body that she was close to starving.

And Spike was probably worse. Buffy turned her attention to him once she trusted that she could pierce a blood pack without succumbing to the urge to start licking it all up herself. It took a moment to determine the best way to position him, his head tipped back and mouth open, and then how she should angle her own body. Ultimately, crawling onto his lap seemed the easiest, so that's what she

did, all the while trying not to think about how often she had been here before, grinning down at his laughing face, kissing smirks off his lips, freeing his cock from buttons and zippers. How those happy memories suddenly had bite.

Buffy watched ruby red drops hit his lips before the river began flowing into his mouth, and despite knowing she couldn't get her hopes up, found she was flicking her attention to his eyes every few seconds. Waiting for something she already knew was not going to happen no matter how much blood she poured or how earnestly she stroked his throat. Daring the Powers or the universe or fucking God to prove her wrong and give her her vampire back.

But by the time she'd emptied the second bag, she knew it was moot. there was no time to wallow. Not if she meant to bring pain to the people who had done this to him. To *them*. She still had the sun to beat.

One way or another, it would be over soon.



LOWELL HOUSE WAS quiet when she walked through the door but not as quiet as she would have liked. At least two people were already up—people who were familiar to her in a showed-up-at-her-house-and-tried-to-capture-her kind of way. Not the ones she was there to see, but she wasn't about to cry if either of the poor dears got hurt in what was coming.

In addition to being on her shit list, both men were also wearing sleep pants and no shoes, so it seemed at least this much of what Willow had told her was true. Lowell House was where to find the army guys.

The really stupid army guys, at that. Completely clueless in their confidence, wandering around the place without checking corners or flicking on lights, which made sneaking in with an unconscious vampire in tow a lot easier than it should have been. Never mind finding a place to lay said vampire while she stalked and, once he was off by himself, jumped on the back of one of the early risers. The chip in her head triggered its by-now familiar punishment, but Buffy

managed to grit her fangs and bear it, ride out the waves with a hand clapped over the guy's mouth, her other arm flush against his windpipe. His friend, the one he'd addressed as Graham before heading into the common area, was off brewing coffee and making enough noise as he shuffled around to both provide a clear picture of his location and mask the muted sounds and grunts of a not-insubstantial struggle. The guy she had her arms around might have succeeded in knocking her off him if he'd gotten anywhere near one of the walls, but Buffy didn't let him, kicking away anytime he wandered too close.

All in all, it was over in less than a minute, Buffy riding the guy's broad back all the way to the floor and staying there long enough to make sure he was truly out for the count before trusting that she could move without being ambushed.

"Forrest?" Graham called from the other room. Buffy scaled up the wall just before he crossed the threshold, not even sure she meant to do it until it was already done. Some switch had been flipped in her head, turning off thought in favor of instinct, fueling her with a hearty rush of something that wasn't adrenaline but close to it. She hadn't even known she could do that as a vampire but hey, handy thing to have in her arsenal.

She watched as Graham took in the scene—the slight disarray, the awkward positioning of one of the couches, the body of his friend on the floor. Give him credit where it was due, he didn't panic or overreact, just switched calmly into soldier mode. First going over to the other one—Forrest—squatting at his side and feeling for a pulse. Then, without giving anything away, shifting his weight on his legs so he was leaning toward a coffee table, his eyes not on what he was doing but on the space around him. Searching out the threat. He reached under the table, and when he pulled his hand back, his fingers were wrapped around a gun.

Thank you, Graham, for making my life a whole lot easier.

He looked up as though the thought had been broadcast, and their eyes met. Buffy took a measure of comfort in the fact that his flashed with something like surprise as she sprang off the wall—he might be a cool customer but he wasn't completely unflappable—and crashed into him with enough momentum to send him pinwheeling

back into the coffee table, which shattered the otherwise muffled sounds of struggle with harsh crack of splintering wood, chased by the thunder of Graham's body striking the floor. Buffy snarled and snapped, again fighting through the blinding pain, clawing wildly at his hands for control of the gun. Graham answered her by bucking like mad, trying to roll but not finding leverage, and Buffy seized a handful of his hair to slam his head back against the floor. Once, twice, and then finally he was out, too, and the gun was in her hand and she was rising to her feet, shaky and her head split and fried, but she was the one standing and that was what mattered. All that mattered.

She'd made enough noise in the struggle, though, not to be surprised when the floorboards overhead began to groan with the patter of footfalls. Hopefully, they'd be attached to the right feet, and she wouldn't have a pile of army guys to keep an eye on by the time the army guy she was here to confront found his way downstairs.

When the footfalls had made it to the stairs, she had her answer. She knew that scent. Both scents, actually. One of those things she'd managed to catalog without realizing it was happening. Benefit of being an apex predator—instinct was doing its thing whether she was aware of it or not.

Being a vampire was, at times, highly convenient.

Like now.

"Hi, guys," Buffy said, pointing the gun directly at Willow's head when she emerged on the staircase. "Sorry, I didn't bring donuts, but there's at least one blood bag in the car if you're hungry."

"Buffy!" Willow stopped so fast she nearly toppled the rest of the way down the stairs, her eyes going saucer-sized and her mouth ajar. "What are you... I thought..."

"Hostile Eighteen," Riley said, all business. "Decided to make this easy for us, after all this time?"

He'd at least allowed for this possibility, it looked like, if the gun he'd brought down with him was any indication. Not to mention—was that a set of cuffs sticking out of his pajama pocket? Kinky. He didn't seem like the type.

And he wasn't the type, Buffy told herself. Looks were

not *that* deceiving. More like he was a boy scout, or at least took that *always be prepared* thing way to heart.

"I was in the area," she replied. "Decided I want a refund."

"A refund," he repeated.

Buffy nodded, allowing a smirk to cross her lips that she so hoped looked like the infuriating one she missed seeing on Spike's face. "See, last time I was here, I got some hardware it turns out I neither want nor need. So here's what's going to happen. You're going to take me and Spike—"

"Spike's here too?" Willow blurted, and immediately started looking around as though he were about to jump out of the shadows. God, if only. "Buffy, that's—"

She didn't want to fire the gun—too loud, and she wasn't ready to test her theory about how intent impacted the chip—so she settled for cocking it instead. A gamble in itself as she'd never cocked a gun before in her life, but luckily the model Graham had been reaching for under the coffee table was comparable with whatever she'd seen in the movies, down to the loud click it made. And even if that wasn't what she'd just done, it had succeeded in shutting Willow up.

"I'm happy to answer all the questions you want answered, but we're going to do it over surgery."

Willow blinked at her, clearly horrified, then turned to Riley. "I didn't know," she said in a squeaky rush. "I didn't know, Riley, I swear."

"Of course you didn't know," he replied without taking his eyes off Buffy. "You wouldn't do that. And don't worry. She's not going anywhere."

Buffy let her grin widen just a tad. It was probably her evil instincts, those demonic tendencies, that were suddenly in a big hurry to blab exactly how much Willow had been prepared to let happen. Just to see the confidence on his face slip a degree or twenty, realizing the girl who was swimming in what Buffy could only assume was one of his T-shirts had, in fact, planned at least some casual espionage. There was just something about Riley that begged to be humbled.

"You really wanna chance that?" she asked instead, arching her eyebrows. "Cause your friends, Flotsam and Jetsam, they didn't just knock themselves out." She jerked the gun toward her little pile of

unconscious army guys in case he hadn't seen them. "Neither did the hunter back in Denver, for that matter. Add that to the bar I slaughtered on Halloween, and it seems really fucking careless to put your girlfriend's life on the line on a gamble." What they didn't know about that bar wouldn't hurt them.

Riley didn't move, but he did blink. He also worked his throat in a long, measured swallow. "You're bluffing."

"Are you willing to bet your girlfriend's head on it?" she asked, relieved when her voice came out measured and confident. If Riley didn't go for it, she wasn't sure where that left her, aside from pulling the trigger and letting the chips fall where they may. But there was enough uncertainty in his eyes that she thought he might play ball. Uncertainty and concern for Willow, whom he spent the next few seconds trying very obviously not to look at.

Finally, though, Riley arrived at his decision. The gun hit the floor, and his hands came up. "Just let her go," he said, all Teutonic hero man. "You can do what you want with me."

"Oh, I plan on it. But Will? She's part of the deal." Buffy offered a smile, then addressed her probably-former friend without taking her gaze off the soldier. "Those cuffs in his pocket. Take them out nice and slow."

Out of her periphery, she saw Willow shift, then felt the jump in her pulse. "Uhh, Riley? Why do you have handcuffs in your PJs?"

So not a kinky sex game. Poor Willow, but also, not all that surprising. Buffy had learned enough over the last few weeks to clock Riley as a basic missionary boy. No sense of adventure at all. "Yes, *Riley*," she echoed. "Why *do* you have handcuffs in your PJs? Is it because you knew I was coming?"

At that, Willow's pulse did more than jump. It started sprinting. "Buffy, I didn't—"

"I know," Buffy replied calmly. And she did. Maybe her faith was misplaced, but she didn't think so. Willow's mouth could lie but not her biology, and everything pouring off her now was genuine. That left everything else to speculation, and even if she wasn't right, Buffy trusted that her guesses would be close enough to the mark to count. "Military boys being military and all, it's not much of a stretch to think

they might have a wiretap on Giles's phone. Or maybe it was Giles himself? He knew we were coming home and decided to get in touch? You were at his house when I called."

Willow jerked. "You can't think—"

"That Giles believes I can keep from being a killer but not Spike? Yeah, that's exactly what I think. And maybe he doesn't trust me anymore, either."

"If this is your way to prove him wrong, I question your methodology," Riley said with a controlled sort of anger. "You break in here, incapacitate my men, threaten my girlfriend—your so-called best friend—and you think this, what, proves your humanity? Mr. Giles told me you were a different breed of vampire, and he's a pretty smart guy from what I've learned, so congrats on having him snowed. He believed in you a lot more than you deserve."

Just not enough. Buffy forced back the rising fury, the disappointment, the need to scream and rage or do anything that might cost her control. "The cuffs, Will. Take them out of his pants and put them around his wrists."

There was a pause, but a brief one before Willow shuffled to do as she was told. Riley dutifully thrust out his wrists, glaring stakes at Buffy all the while. After it was done, and Willow had tugged on the cuffs enough to demonstrate that she had indeed locked them all the way, Buffy instructed her to turn Riley's pockets inside out, then for both of them to be absolutely still as the nearly imperceptible impact of a small metal key hitting the carpet reached her ears.

Okay. That had gone smoother than she'd thought.

"Stand back," Buffy said, edging forward. Slowly, with measured steps, she closed the space between them, found and kicked the key somewhere behind her. "How do we get into the lab?"

"There's an elevator in the hall," Willow said immediately. "The door's accessed by a retinal scan. But Buffy—"

"Okay, you're going to take Riley there now. I'll join you in a minute. And if you go without me, Will, so help me—"

"She'll be there," Riley snapped. "Unlike you, she's *not* a monster who leaves people here to die."

"No, she just turns up the torture in their heads until they're

completely fried,” Buffy retorted. “But thank you, yes. You go anywhere without me, get any cute ideas or sound the alarm, and I’ll make sure to make use of the very handy human shields.”

If Willow was bothered by any of this, she didn’t let it show. But she and Buffy were good at keeping things from each other now, so that didn’t mean much of anything. “What are you going to do?” she asked.

Buffy sucked in her cheeks, her chest growing tight. “Grabbing your first patient.”



LATER, if any of this worked, Buffy thought she might actually thank Giles for giving Riley a heads-up. Those cuffs he’d brought down with him were super-strong. Like meant-to-hold-a-vampire strong. It wasn’t much but enough to tell her that the intent truly hadn’t been to shove a stake through her heart, which might have been a little comforting if she didn’t know what had happened to Harmony. However, insofar as keeping Riley off her immediate threat list, Buffy couldn’t say she was sorry the cuffs had been in the equation. Dealing with Willow was a lot easier, if more painful.

At least they were on even ground. Neither of them seemed to recognize the other.

“You really haven’t thought this through, have you?” Riley said as the excessively sterile elevator car plummeted. “You get the chips out, then what? We just let you go?”

“Got this far with the chip in,” Buffy retorted, shuffling a bit to resituate. While she would have rather had Spike in her arms than strewn over her shoulder, she needed to keep at least one hand free to wave the gun around. He wasn’t heavy at all, but the leather of his duster did slip a little along the material of her shirt. “Word to the wise—I’m not someone you want to underestimate.”

“Don’t worry. That’s not a mistake I’m going to make again.”

Buffy killed her smirk. “That’s what they all say.”

“We didn’t know that slayers existed before you,” he snapped. “We

had no idea there were conditions that could amplify a vampire's strength. If we had, we would have taken precautions."

"Precautions like making sure the chip in my head could fry my brain."

"You're damn right."

"It amazes me that you can hear yourself say that and still believe wholeheartedly that you're the good guys. What you're doing is inhumane."

"Good thing you're not human."

The elevator touched down as he spoke, which was for the best because her grip on her control was starting to go sideways. Every foul thing that he said made the case for why some people deserved to have their tongues ripped out.

"You're right," Buffy said as the doors slid open. "We're not human. That's something neither of us can control. I was chosen to fight the forces of darkness. I did that and it killed me, twice. The second time I woke up *inhuman*. But that wasn't my call."

"I'm sure you have a point."

"Just that the part of me that's inhuman was forced on me, not chosen. The part of you that's a monster—that likes torturing creatures until they can't function anymore? You *did* choose that. And you choose it again every day." The pressure inside was mounting to the point she would need to let it out—scream or cry or pounce or all the above—and the more she looked at Riley's face, the more she wanted to rip it off. The more she hoped she got the opportunity. "I kill monsters, you know. And I'm really good at it. Maybe I'll get to give you a demonstration."

There was a beat—a long stretch of nothing in which neither of them moved or looked away from each other. Then, finally, Willow cleared her throat and stepped off the elevator, turning to pull Riley along with her. Buffy waited until they were directly ahead of her, resituated Spike once more, and followed.

It was early enough still that it took a solid two minutes before Buffy stumbled across someone else. A lab-coated someone who was pushing a cart across the sleek gray floor and who looked up to say hello before clocking exactly what he was saying hello to—Riley in

cuffs, Willow at his side, Buffy right behind them, unconscious vampire over her shoulder and gun pointed at the back of Riley's head.

"Commander Finn," the scientist began, but that was the most he said before snapping his mouth shut. Staring down the business end of a firearm would do that.

"Just keep moving, Dixon," said the so-called commander. "I've got the situation under control."

"Actually, no, Dixon. Do not keep moving." Buffy smiled sweetly. "You can go get something for me."

Dixon, who was every bit the stereotypical scientist—right down to the glasses and receding hairline—worked his throat in a swallow that seemed to echo through the massive space the Initiative occupied. "I, umm, I don't know..."

Riley twisted and nearly got a face-full of gun barrel for the effort. "Leave him out of this," he snapped. "He's not a soldier, he's—"

"One of the people responsible for the hardware in my head? Strangely enough, I figured that out on my own."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Dixon's shoulders go a little slack. "She's equipped with the chip? Then, Commander, I don't—"

And this was it—the time had arrived. Buffy swung the gun back to the scientist, who quickly regained all the tension he'd dropped just a second ago, and squeezed the gun's trigger. Grateful, as she never had been, that her heart didn't beat, that she didn't rely on the flow of blood, on the unique chemistry that kept human bodies in motion. That she could hold a gun for the first time, point it and fire, without her nerves announcing themselves all over the place. Even more so for the instincts she'd been born with, the certainty that the bullet she'd unleashed wouldn't find its target, but sail close enough for the target to realize how close he had come to meeting death. Enough for him to taste acid in his mouth, for his heart—alive and not undead—to scream everything she needed to know about what he had just experienced. Everything she didn't learn in firing in the first place.

There was no pain. She'd pulled the trigger on a weapon uniquely designed to kill humans, but she'd done so without death as her objective. Without even harm. She'd meant to scare him, to scare everyone,

and the chorus of humanity dwarfing her senses let her know she had succeeded and then some.

Somehow, the chip did register intent. And these idiots had no idea.

Buffy grinned. "Are you ready to cooperate now?" she asked, confident that her voice would be heard over the yells and panic, the cries coming from deeper within the facility, the others she sensed were on their way, with their weapons and their protocols and there were more bullets to fire but she wasn't going to get trigger-happy until pressed. Let everyone stew in suspense. "Because I have an errand for you."

"I don't..." Mr. Scientist Man's lips trembled, his eyes impossibly round behind his glasses, and spilling tears down his cheeks she doubted he was even aware of. "This shouldn't be possible."

"I can show you again how possible it is. Or you can make yourself useful, and I won't have to kill you."

That was all it took to turn Dixon into a human bobblehead. "What do you need?" he asked. "Anything."

"You boys found an excavation in progress and decided to take it over a few weeks back. I want you to bring me whatever you dug up." Somehow, she forced her voice to remain calm, and the rest of her to ignore the awareness of new blood in the room. The reinforcements had arrived, but all at her back—none from the direction they had come. And not a lot. Five, maybe six heartbeats that hadn't been here a moment ago. The joys of working the graveyard shift.

That wouldn't remain the case for long. The older the day became, the more soldiers would flood the place. She had to act before she ran out of time.

"That's why you're here?" Dixon asked dumbly. "You're...looking for treasure?"

"I could answer, but you wouldn't like it. It comes with a bullet."

Dixon nodded again, stumbling back away from the cart as quickly as he could without losing balance. "I'll—I'll get it. I will."

"Good." Buffy affected her winningest smile. "Riley, tell the nice lab geek where he can find us."

There was nothing for a long beat. Then another.

"Riley, you don't know me very well, but Willow can tell you that I

hate having to repeat myself. Where can your friend find us once he has what I want?"

Silence still, before, finally, she heard his exhalation of breath, how it shook. How everything in his world had just been upended for now he was a believer. Or at least more so than he had been before she'd forced the party to move downstairs. Enough doubt existed where certainty had been just moments ago, and that doubt was what would see her through this. As long as he doubted, she had a chance.

"We'll be in the operating theater," he said hoarsely. "Getting ready to remove the chip from her boyfriend there."

Not accurate, but Buffy decided to let that much slide. She could correct his assumption once Spike had recovered.

Of course, nothing was ever going to be that easy. She still had to get to the operating theater with said not-boyfriend hanging over her shoulder, all the while presenting enough of a threat that none of the soldiers who had joined the party with their monster-grade weapons would feel empowered to play the hero. Buffy wasn't going to count her chickens just yet; she was, however, going to employ some of that top-notch blink-and-you-miss-it speed that came with being a slayer-turned-vampire to ensure the barrel of her gun wasn't without a target for more than half a breath. Too fast for anyone to get any funny ideas, and this time she decided to let it rest on Willow. Strategic gamble that Riley would value his girlfriend's life more than his own. And that Willow would sell whatever needed selling with her big, horrified eyes and expression that spoke of disbelief, fury, and betrayal.

They didn't know each other right now. Maybe they never would again.

"All right, soldier," Buffy said loudly, doing her best to force that thought and all other thoughts to the back of her mind where they belonged. "Lead the way."

Riley exchanged a glance with Willow, then swallowed and turned. "Guys, stand down," he told the backup soldiers. "Just do what the lady asks, and we'll all get to the other side of this in one piece."

"I think I'd feel better with their weapons on the floor," Buffy told Riley's back. "Wouldn't you, Commander Finn? Less chance for someone to decide to play the hero."

Another pause, this one not nearly as long or heavy. “You heard her,” he muttered. “Like I said, whatever the lady asks.”

She caught a few mutinous frowns and a couple more icy glares, but no one protested. And maybe no one would from this point out—maybe that was all it took. An order coming down from someone who outranked them, even if that someone was clearly compromised. Buffy didn’t know and didn’t care—all that mattered was that when she told them to kick their weapons a distance away, they did as they were instructed. That when she said, “And stay where the lady can see you. The lady’s having some trust issues, so don’t give the lady reason to fire the gun,” they fell in line.

And just how handy was that, having her order immediately obeyed? It was certainly a trick the Scoobies had never learned. No, her authority had always been up for debate. Questioned. Challenged. Doubted. A bunch of other things Buffy couldn’t let herself think now, but remained there on the periphery, along with the burgeoning knowledge that those days were gone. There was no going back to life the way she’d known it. Not from this. Not ever.

The operating theater turned out to be little more than a large room with a few scattered pieces of medical machinery and three narrow tables in the middle, all at least ten feet long—presumably to accommodate demons of all heights—and welded to the floor. In one corner was a rolling tray of various surgical instruments, in another a rolling cabinet, presumably filled with the same. Also, the place wasn’t empty. A woman Buffy recognized as the psych professor who had once intimidated her stood near the only other door in the room, looking a sort of composed that immediately put Buffy on alert.

“Professor Walsh,” Riley said with a sigh. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I was hoping to not run into you down here.”

“Nonsense, Agent Finn. The heart of the action is exactly where I want to be.” She shifted her attention to Buffy and offered an acidic sort of smile. “And here is Buffy Summers. It *is* Miss Summers, isn’t it? I’m afraid I didn’t have you in my class long enough for you to make much of an impression.”

“If only I could say the same, maybe we wouldn’t be here.”

Walsh didn’t respond immediately. She didn’t lose her smile, either.

Instead, she linked her hands behind her back and took a step forward. "It's unfortunate that we're meeting again this way. There's so much the Initiative could learn from you. For instance, Miss Rosenberg has been most informative on the nature of the vampire slayer. We thought you were a myth."

"You were mythinformed."

"Oh, she cracks jokes too." Walsh shook her head as though she couldn't comprehend such a thing. "Such a missed opportunity. Of course, if you would like to help us out now, I believe certain arrangements could be made for your friend there. Arrangements that are beneficial to everyone and will spare further bloodshed."

Buffy arched an eyebrow. "I'm a vampire. Bloodshed? Kinda my thing."

"See, that's what I thought, but Miss Rosenberg has been under the impression that you were resisting your innate urges. Determined, she said, to not become the monster you were destined to fight." Walsh's tone hadn't changed but her face had—the smile gone, faded back into an expression of innocent curiosity. "Fascinating from a psychological perspective. I would love to talk with you more. I'd even be willing to proceed with the removal of your companion's modification chip."

"Really? How magnanimous."

"I think you'll find, Miss Summers, that under the right circumstances, I am indeed most magnanimous," Walsh replied. "So far, you've managed to get farther into the Initiative than I believed possible. You incapacitated two of my best agents to do it, but you didn't kill them. You could have, as you have so clearly demonstrated, but you chose not to. That makes you different, and being different makes you valuable."

The other door to the room opened then, and Dixon rushed in along with two other goons, all steering large carts packed to the brim with what Buffy had to assume was the treasure Spike had told her about a lifetime ago. Assume, because each item looked to have been sealed in the sort of plastic bags that made her think of evidence rooms on procedural television shows. Collected, cleaned, cataloged, and put away.

Walsh didn't blink, didn't acknowledge them at all, just kept her

focus on Buffy. "What about this archaeological find interests you, Miss Summers?"

"Are you wearing a cross?"

"Pardon?"

"A crucifix."

At last, she seemed to catch Walsh off guard, for the woman frowned and glanced down as though surprised to find a small gold cross dangling from her neck. "Yes," she said at length, lifting her head again, her brow furrowed. "Not religious, just precaution."

"Sentimental value?"

"None whatsoever."

"Then you won't mind taking it off and handing it to Willow."

Walsh's mouth fell open, the certainty leaving her eyes. "And what would you have her do with it?"

"Put it on me."

"Put it...on you. This cross." The woman furrowed her brow. "Are you expecting something unusual to happen? Something other than the extreme allergic reaction common to your kind?"

"I'm actually counting on it working just fine." Buffy offered the same sweet smile she'd flashed at Dixon earlier. "And if I go up in smoke, I assume you have someone to sift through the ashes to return the cross to you. But please, I need to borrow it for the time being."

Walsh hesitated a second longer as though to sniff out a lie, then reached behind her neck to unclasp the chain. "You're a very unusual vampire," she noted, handing the necklace to Willow, who had rushed up to accommodate, without taking her eyes off Buffy. "I am most intrigued."

"Lucky me," Buffy retorted. She also didn't look away, rather shook her head as best she could to get her hair to fall to one shoulder. It was the most she could do to help Willow fasten the necklace without putting down Spike or the gun. As expected, her skin began sizzling the second the cross was in place. The pain was acute but intense, foul-smelling smoke wafting toward her nostrils from where it burned. "All right," she said. "I'm going to move now. Just me. Anyone else moves and, well, something something bullet, something something dead, you get the drift."

There was no response, but she wasn't expecting one, and when she did start forward, she was pleased to not have to bark out orders for the others to give her a wide berth. Not even Walsh. The woman kept her in her line of sight, hawk-like in her observations, but shifted away from the treasure-laden carts as soon as she clocked that they were Buffy's destination.

Then Buffy was there at last, standing in the middle of the hoard Spike had been so set on when he'd barreled back into her life. The Gem of Amara possibly just seconds from discovery. She patted his leg absently, not trusting herself to do more than that and risk losing the composure she'd fought so hard to maintain.

This was it. The Hail Mary. The coup de grâce. If it didn't work, they were both dead.

No pressure or anything.

A nervous laugh bubbled its way up her throat, but Buffy shoved it back as she seized the first of the plastic bags, this one holding a bejeweled tiara. Not a likely candidate but she had to cross it off the list entirely. It was a difficult thing to open, one hand still wrapped around the gun and Spike balanced on her shoulder, and Walsh's cross burning a hole in her chest, but Buffy wasn't about to leave herself unarmed or Spike more vulnerable than he was already, and so leaned on her natural grace and her fangs to do the tearing.

And ruled out the tiara. One touch was enough to confirm it wasn't the gem. So she threw it aside and moved to the next bag, this one filled with gaudy necklaces and other jewels.

"Are you trying to find something?" Walsh called from across the room.

"Don't know where you would've gotten that idea," Buffy replied, not bothering to look up. She sensed movement over on that side of the space but it was far enough away she wasn't worried yet, and the clock was ticking. After dismissing the contents of the second bag, she moved on. Aware of the time, aware of the scar she was branding into her skin, aware of the eyes on her and Spike's weight on her shoulder, and there was so much to go through and who knew if it was even here? If the gem even existed? And if it did, if it worked? Buffy had a

vague memory of someone saying it was a myth. Could be Spike had been chasing smoke this entire time.

Then there were footsteps behind her, assured and hurried, and Buffy knew her time was up. The scent that reached her nose above the stench of cooking meat was Riley. He must have circled around, come through the door at her back, and now she was tearing into the sixth bag, which contained nothing but a small ring with an ugly green jewel center.

It hit her palm just as the stake pierced through her shoulder blades and touched her heart, and Buffy gasped and threw her head back, ready and not ready, regret and sorrow and *Spike* and she'd gotten so far but still not far enough. Not enough to save them.

Only she didn't disintegrate. The seconds ticked by, the stake remained, but she was still here.

And the cross was no longer burning.

"What the—" Riley began, and that was as far as he got. Buffy dropped the gun, let Spike fall off her shoulder at last—not as gently as she would have preferred, but she knew he'd approve—then curled her hand around the ring and spun to face her would-be assassin.

For a moment, Riley stared at her. Gawking. Uncomprehending. Open-mouthed. Terrified. Buffy arched an eyebrow and waited, knowing what was coming, what would happen next, knowing that he knew it too, but still wanting to see it for herself.

She wasn't disappointed.

"Riley, no!" Willow cried from far away, but *no* was not a word Riley understood in this context. The stake came down again, arcing for her chest. She let it pierce her flesh and bone, let it find its way to her heart once more, endured the slight tickle of pressure, and then decided that was it. All chances gone. He'd shot his shot, and now it was her turn.

"Buffy!" Willow screamed, and Walsh was yelling too, and Dixon, and Buffy had her hand around Riley's throat, his skin almost sickly hot against her cold, his pulse thrumming along her fingers. And she did what she did best, what she'd always done best, and slayed the bad guy.

His neck had the resistance of a toothpick. If pressed, she thought

she might have been able to claim it an accident. But it hadn't been. Buffy had meant it. She'd meant to twist her wrist just so, hear the crack of bone snapping, and watch him crumble to the floor in an oversized lump. All of which she did while relishing the quiet in her head. The cooling air at her chest. The power she'd been severed from, the strength, everything the Initiative had taken from her, rushing through her with its own energy. Hot and alive and hers.

Then Willow started screaming, and Buffy looked up through eyes she knew were yellow and fangs she knew were hungry.

A monster at last.

THE RECORD SHOWS I TOOK ALL THE BLOWS

BUFFY BENT OVER TO TAKE SPIKE INTO HER ARMS, IGNORING THE screaming, the wail of the alarms, Walsh shouting for Riley as though a broken neck were something a person could just walk off. For the first time since Denver, she felt completely calm. Hell, better than calm—in control. Everything around her might be breaking but there was no pain in her head, and she had the Gem of Amara. She had reclaimed the power she had lost and could finally slow down. There was no need to rush anymore.

She laid Spike on one of the long operating tables as Walsh ran to the place where Agent Finn had fumbled his last gamble. If anyone thought the chips were staying in place just because some oversized human had kicked the bucket, they had another think coming. One she would personally deliver with fist and fang if it came down to it. The soldiers that had flanked her on entry were pouring into the room, though none seemed to know, exactly, what to do, and there were so few of them she could mow them down in seconds if need be. Walsh was sobbing over the (no longer) walking piece of cardboard that had been Riley Finn, and Willow was staring at Buffy through a mask of tears and anguish that might make her feel something other than annoyance had Riley's last action on this earth not been attempted

murder. The soldiers ended up on the sidelines, looking blankly for someone in a position of authority to answer to—a role Buffy would have happily assumed if Walsh hadn't started shrieking like a woman possessed.

"Kill her! Kill the bitch who killed Agent Finn. That's an order!"

Buffy snarled and ran her tongue down the length of one fang. "Oh, that's mature. Sentence more of your men to death." She rolled her eyes but spread her arms in invitation. "Please, take your best shot. But if *Agent Finn* couldn't get me to dust after staking me twice, I don't know why you guys think you'd do any better."

Walsh was on her feet now, no longer the picture of poise she'd been when Buffy had first entered the room. In fact, she looked like she had aged around twenty years, her eyes rimmed and red, her hair a mess, her hands shaking along with the rest of her. "You're no vampire. Vampires cannot survive what you survived."

"Maybe they can if they're also the Slayer, ever think of that?"

"It's preposterous."

Buffy reached up to the necklace she still wore, the gold chain that Walsh had given her oh so helpfully just a couple of minutes ago. She ran a finger lengthwise down the structure of the cross, then pushed it aside to expose the place where the relic had started eating into her skin. The wound on her chest from Riley's second murder attempt had healed almost instantly, but this wound—one she'd suffered in order to find the gem in the first place—had yet to repair itself, so she knew the soldiers wouldn't miss the red, cooked flesh that was in the very shape of the thing that had done the damage.

"I promise, I'm a vampire," she said. "I also promise I'm unlike any vampire you've ever seen. By all means, if you want to try to kill me, feel free, but you won't make it out of here alive. And if you piss me off enough, I'll make sure whatever's left of you is so ugly your own mother couldn't identify the remains. Is this old bitch really worth dying for?"

The soldiers exchanged a series of glances, but that was the most of it. None seemed all that eager to step up to the plate. That was until Walsh started screaming again, shrill enough to send a shock of pain

through Buffy's abused eardrums before the woman fell into a cold run, a stake in hand.

Maybe Buffy should have thought something more charitable as the crazed bitch approached—something sympathetic. *Soulful*, even. Maybe she should have considered that Willow was watching, that Willow was sobbing over the death of a man she hadn't loved but had liked perhaps more than even she'd known. Maybe she should have done something other than let Walsh stumble into her fangs, but she *did* let Walsh stumble into her fangs and chomped down the second the woman's flesh met her lips. Hell, she did more than chomp down—she bit, she ravaged, she tore; she let the monster inside of her out again and shoved her reservations far back where they belonged. After all, there was Spike to consider—Spike with his brain possibly fried from the hardware these men had forced into his skull at the behest of this woman. These men who had stood by while Harmony had been cooked from the inside, ignoring her screams and pleas for help, ignoring the parts of her that were still human in favor of the parts of her that weren't. The parts of her that deserved her horrible death simply because she had moved closer to the top of the food chain. It hadn't mattered to them, or even to Willow, that a few months ago, Harmony had fought with them to stop the Ascension. That she'd been kind of a lousy vampire and would likely never escalate to more than a local nuisance. All that had mattered to anyone was that she had fangs.

The people in this room might not go for the kill the way Buffy did, but what they would do, what they *had* done, was worse. Buffy didn't prolong Walsh's death, didn't torment her with awareness of her approaching fate, didn't stretch out her pain or her fear. No, she simply seized Walsh by the wrist, squeezed until the stake intended either for Buffy or Spike's hearts clattered noisily to the floor, and tore into the bitch's throat with eager fangs. For the first time swallowed mouthfuls of warm, heady human blood straight from the source as it flowed from pulsing arteries and veins and understood that just as the pig's blood had been richer because the animal it had come from was freshly slaughtered, so was the taste of a woman who was dying.

And maybe the answer was that simple. Buffy pulled away with a

gasp, then seized Walsh by the neck to drag her over Spike's still form. She pried her lover's mouth open and twisted the ragdoll that had once been a psychology professor until her blood poured freely down Spike's throat. All the while Buffy kept watching him, stroking her fingers over his Adam's apple to encourage him to swallow. Feeling as his body did what she wanted, and hoping—god, hoping like she'd never hoped for anything else in her life—that this was the answer. That she'd been right before in thinking what he needed was blood but had missed the mark with the swine she'd procured earlier.

If this didn't work, there was still Faith. And while Buffy wouldn't hesitate if it was the only way, she also realized something else about herself now that she hadn't before. Not a piece that was new, just newly understood.

She might not care about people the way she once had, thinking of their lives as more sacred than her own, worth protecting over the people she loved. She wouldn't stand in between them and death unless she thought she'd have fun doing it, and wouldn't sacrifice herself for people who would just as soon see her dust. But even so, she truly didn't want to hurt anyone who wasn't begging for it. She didn't want to use Faith like that, cold and in a coma, a living resource that couldn't think or act or defend herself. She didn't want to step over the bodies of people who had nothing to do with the reason Spike had been taken from her in order to get him back. She would if she needed to, if she didn't have any other choice, if necessity forced her hand, but she wouldn't enjoy it.

If ever the day came when she did claim Faith's life for good, Buffy wanted it to be because she'd won the privilege.

"Buffy?" Willow's voice snapped her out of her thoughts, back to the chaos of the present. The room had emptied but she didn't trust that it would stay that way, and she'd have to be ready when the army guys returned with reinforcements. Her friend—former, current, or otherwise—was approaching from behind, taking slow, methodical steps that betrayed a lot more than she realized. "Buffy... Oh my god, you killed them."

Buffy rolled her eyes and kept her gaze fixed on Spike. "You just now catching up?"

“Riley... You promised you wouldn’t hurt him.”

“I think if you check the minutes of our last conversation, you’ll find I promised to *try* not to hurt him.” Actually, she wasn’t sure what it was she’d said, but she was reasonably certain that she hadn’t been idiot enough to make an oath she’d known she might have to break. “And what would you have had me do? He staked me. Twice. If he hadn’t done that, I wouldn’t have killed him. You can’t expect me not to protect myself.” A pause. “So I’d advise you to put down the stake before I have to get seriously conflicted.”

There was a pause. “How do you know that I have a stake?”

“Because I’m not an idiot.”

She could elaborate but she chose not to. She just waited, her fingers keeping track of the slowing of Walsh’s blood flow, the heart-beat almost completely squashed out. Spike’s mouth and chin were spattered with messy red, but most of the good stuff had gone down his throat. And god, was she fooling herself, or had his throat started to work on its own? Keeping ahead of her, swallowing now without help?

Her chest tightened in that funny way she’d come to associate with the absence of a heartbeat. *God, please.*

“I want you to ask yourself a question,” she said slowly. “If it had been you, if it had been Oz, and you’d watched him seize up in pain, cornered after having been sold out by someone you were stupid enough to trust, unable to defend himself or do anything but stand there as his brain fried so hard he started bleeding from his eyes, how much patience would you have had with the people who did that to him? Especially if one of those people tried to kill you for trying to bring him back?”

Nothing for a long beat, then another, then the clink of a stake hitting the floor. “That’s what happened?” Willow sounded softer, however guarded. “You never told me.”

“Angel sold us out,” Buffy said thickly. “We traveled across the country to meet someone that we were told would remove the chips at a price. Only that was a lie. Instead, Angel led us to a human hunter who cornered us in a motel room—a guy who would have killed us both if we hadn’t fought back... If Spike hadn’t tried to save me.” Her

throat grew tight, but she forced herself to forge ahead, turning to look Willow in the eye. Needing to see her reaction as well as feel it in the rhythm of her human body. "You shared what happened to Harmony. Spike went through that to save me. He could have run for it, could have left me there to die. He didn't. So, yes, when the people who fried his brain tried to kill me, to kill *him* just because of what he is, gee, I guess I just wasn't in the mood to play nice."

Willow had paled damn near to the point she looked like a corpse. "You could've told me."

"Could I?" Buffy shot back, and was somewhat mollified when her friend flinched. "I have felt so alone, Will. Ever since that first night. You all had weapons out, pointed at me—"

"We didn't know!"

"I know you didn't know, but *neither did I*. All I knew was I was waking up in Giles's place and the people I love, who I considered better than family, who I have risked my life to protect again and again, were talking over me like I was someone else. I was scared and confused, and then I found out my worst nightmare had come true, and suddenly it was like I wasn't even there to you guys." Buffy snapped her mouth shut before she could say anything more, though she felt it there burning beneath the surface. All the anger, all the questions, all the resentment she hadn't even realized she was building. The culmination of everything that had gone sideways since her heart stopped beating, and how all of it felt like a personal indictment. "I've wondered more than once why you didn't just kill me anyway. Forget what Giles said then—things haven't been the same. And I know I changed. I *know* I did. But you did, too. You all did. You all had me thinking I was maybe not me after all, that there was some Buffy Summers test I was failing on the regular."

Willow ogled at her, horrorstruck. "Buffy!"

"And I think a lot of it was because I *didn't* wallow," she went on ruthlessly. "I *didn't* bemoan what had happened to me. I adjusted. Once I got used to the new hours and diet, I actually thought it was okay. But I couldn't think that in front of you guys. I couldn't let you see me enjoying myself or even talk to you about the things that I struggled with because I always knew that you were thinking about how soulless

I am. Those parties I went to? The one where I met Riley? Tell me you weren't worried about me losing control and draining someone."

"I didn't. Buffy, I think you're remembering some things wrong." The words belied the terrified look on her face, but Willow didn't back down or apologize, rather swelled up like she was preparing for a fight. "We thought you might have a soul at first. You were different. We knew that. Giles knew that. We talked about it."

"It being me, you mean."

"You were there, too!"

"As an object of study, not as a person. I felt like a problem you guys were trying to solve rather than me."

Willow furrowed her brow. "I... Then why didn't you say anything?"

"Because I thought you were right," Buffy replied, softening her tone. "That's the worst of it. I didn't realize how much it bothered me until that night at the frat party when I ran into Spike, and he still viewed me as me. I was still the Slayer, still his enemy, and even when we left here for LA, he was talking about how he would kill me after we stopped needing each other. And I *know* how that sounds to you because I know how it would've sounded to me, but it was... God, it was everything I needed. Spike treating me like nothing had changed. He let me be me, which made me *feel* like me and realize that I could still be Buffy, just this Buffy. I'm not about to start pigging out on human at the all-you-can-eat buffet, but to survive? To protect the man I love? Yeah. I'll do it then. Riley and Walsh tried to kill me, so I killed them first. And if you have a problem with that, you might as well pick up that stake so we can get this over with."

For a long beat, neither of them moved, just stared at one another. Only that wasn't true. Buffy wasn't just staring; she was listening. Taking measure of Willow's pulse, how its racing tempo seemed to hit a peak before finally starting to slow again, coinciding with the music her thumping heart made as it pulled back from the frenetic energy that had made it sound like thunder. It wasn't all at once, rather a slow de-escalation. A decision on the brink of being dropped amidst doubt and despair and any number of other things that must be tearing through her head at the moment.

The lines Buffy had crossed, once sacrosanct, and the bodies

Willow had stepped over as a result. One belonging to a guy she might not have loved but had liked. Had fucked, at the very least, and Buffy knew better than most what a big deal that was. There was every chance Willow had been more attached than she'd let on.

To someone whose neck Buffy had snapped on reflex, without thought or remorse. Someone she'd kill again and again and again if it meant protecting what was hers.

And like she'd heard the thought, Willow seemed to snap out of whatever inner battle she'd been waging. Enough, at least, to clear her throat. "You love him? Spike?"

"Yeah, I do. That's why I'm here."

Another pause, though this one not nearly as long. Just enough for several pieces to fall into place and for Willow to embrace the decision she'd landed on. "Okay," she said, suddenly all business. "We're going to need to act fast. It's going to be chaos with Walsh dead, and I'm guessing the other guys went off to get reinforcements. If we move now to a lab, I think I can do it. But we need to *hurry*. And then figure out a way to get you guys out of here."

"What are you talking about?"

"Your chips. I'm not talking brain surgery, but I can switch them off. Maybe even wipe them so they're completely harmless." Willow sucked in a deep breath and nodded again as though convincing herself of her own plan. "But like I said, it has to be fast. Like now, before anyone else—oh. Umm, Spike."

Before anyone else, Spike? Buffy frowned, opened her mouth to ask, then understood. More than understood—felt it, the slight shift in the air that betrayed movement at her back, that had everything in her world upending all over again. She was barely aware of herself as she turned, her body moving independently of her brain, for her brain, her *heart* couldn't believe until she saw him. Until she knew. Until Spike's eyes were open and on her, until he started talking in that low timbre of his, even if all he did was threaten to kill her. She'd take it all if only he were there when she stopped moving—that this stupid hope didn't go up in smoke and take her with it.

But then a hand she would have known anywhere closed around her wrist and squeezed, and she would have cried if her body hadn't

gone rigid. Instead, all she could do was stand perfectly still and pray her mind hadn't betrayed her at last.

"I hear that right?" came his voice, soft and rough, but *Spike*. "You love me?"

She didn't answer, didn't have the words. Couldn't bring herself to do more than meet his eyes, and god, Buffy hadn't realized just how certain she had become that she would never see those eyes open again until she was looking at him, falling into the blue, and Spike behind them. Her Spike. He knew her and knew himself, and after the utter shit show that had been the last few days, that was a minor miracle. A sound that might have been a sob or a sigh or a scream or just *Spike* tumbled off her lips, and Buffy threw herself into him, gripping the back of his head, and all the tension she'd carried with her from Denver poured out in waves. And he was there, closing his arms around her, burying his face in her neck, and murmuring what might have been words of encouragement—she didn't know. The din in her head drowned everything else out.

He was awake. He was back. He was okay. It was over. It was over, it was over, it was over...

"Mighty good thing I don't need to breathe, Slayer," he said, these words managing to fight above the internal fray. "Though you could still break a rib if you aimed to."

Buffy laughed harder than she intended, because if she didn't laugh she'd probably sob and they didn't have time for that. A point Willow didn't hesitate to drive home.

"Hey," her friend said at her back, "I know this is...with the wow. But if we want to depower your chips, we need to move now."

"Chips?" Spike's voice rang with confusion. "Just where the hell are we, love?"

Buffy pulled back and wiped her eyes on reflex. "The Initiative. I got us in."

"You did." He was still for a moment, blinking at her as though seeing her for the first time. Taking in the blood on her clothes, along her neck, and drying around her mouth as well as the rat's nest that used to be her hair. Hell, she wouldn't be surprised to hear there were rings under her eyes, if vampires were susceptible to that kind of thing.

Then he glanced down at Professor Walsh's corpse, hours away from rigor mortis. "Christ, love," Spike said softly, his voice shaking. "What *did* you do?"

"What I had to," she replied.

"And *really* with the moving now," Willow said again. "Seriously, they just switched on the emergency lighting system out there. It's about to be very crowded."

Right. Crowded. Buffy seized Spike by the wrist. "We gotta go."

"I'm gettin' that." He slid gracefully onto his booted feet and nodded. "But I need to know what I missed too."

"I tell you later."

"You're bloody right, you will." Spike shook his wrist free of her grip then wove their fingers together, palm to palm. "And more than that. Fella's not likely to forget hearing the Slayer loves him."

Buffy pressed her lips together. This time when she didn't reply, it was entirely by choice. They weren't out of danger yet, and though she was perfectly willing to risk both her life and her heart, she preferred not to do it at the same time. If later came, she'd deal with it then.

And even if he left her shattered, she would survive it.

He'd opened his eyes. That was all that mattered.

LET PEOPLE SAY WE'RE IN LOVE

SPIKE WAS STARTING TO WONDER IF THE THROBBING IN HIS HEAD would ever abate, or if he'd just have to get used to it—an echoing reminder of what he'd nearly lost in that bloody motel room.

Granted, if that was the price of freedom, he'd take it.

He was still a little uncertain about what all had happened in the time he'd missed since the lights had gone out. One second he was in Colorado, his brain threatening to leak out of his ears, and the next he was on a sterile table, human blood in his mouth and Buffy standing between him and her witch friend, laying down the law in a voice that had been all authority regardless of how much it shook. At the same time, though, giving him what he'd been longing for, the words so succinct and so clear it might as well have been plucked from a dream.

He'd been fuzzy, in and out of it as he'd fought toward consciousness, but he was certain he hadn't imagined that part, even if Buffy had started playing shy once she'd realized he was awake. The next bit had also been rushed, following the redhead he'd once abducted and sealed inside a burned-out factory into a dark lab as the surrounding halls filled with the thunder of heavily booted feet. More soldiers, he'd thought, wondering what the hell they were hoping to do in here but trusting Buffy hadn't led him astray.

And she hadn't. What they were doing in here was switching off the chips. For good.

"I think they'll assume you ran for it," Willow had explained as she busied herself switching on machines and the like snatched straight from an HG Wells novel. "Especially after they find Professor Walsh and...and Riley."

So that's who he'd stepped over on his way out of the operating theater—the soldier who had tried to nab them that day at Joyce's house and some middle-aged bint who had looked to be in charge. Dead because Buffy had broken her own cardinal rule.

He had yet to wrap his lobes around that one, and plenty to distract him in the meantime.

The lab had been on the smaller side—a place Willow claimed was reserved for product development and used only by junior science and technology recruits. Which, to hear her talk, meant her. The Initiative hadn't been looking to add to their ranks in that field when they'd set up shop in Sunnydale, assuming that anyone who was worth anything in the field would have to be imported into the area. Soldiers were a different matter—it was easy enough to train a bloke where and how to point a weapon, less so to master technology impacting whole species that, as far as humans were concerned, shouldn't exist. But Willow had been here, so bright and knowledgeable—a resource waiting to be tapped. They'd hurried to do just that.

And now, Willow had the means and the know-how needed to hack into the devices the government types had shoved up his and Buffy's heads. Not to remove them, she'd said, but to shut them down entirely after wiping their programming.

"This should prevent anyone from using the chips against you again," she'd explained as she worked. "They won't be accessible by any signal. And even if they find a way to make that not true, I'll wipe out the chips' commands so turning them on won't really accomplish anything."

That had sounded less than ideal to Spike. "You trust this, love?" he'd asked Buffy, who kept alternating between staring at him as though disbelieving that he was speaking at all to doing whatever she

could to avoid his gaze. “Guess it worked fine for you back there, but I’d rather get the sodding things out altogether.”

At that, she’d had no choice but to look at him, her brow furrowed. “Back there?”

Spike had frowned, confused by her confusion. Then understanding had brightened her face, and she’d slipped something off her finger. Something he hadn’t noticed until she drew his attention to it. An ugly ring with an emerald head wrapped in gold casing. Looked a mite showy for the Slayer, but then she’d placed it in his hand, still holding his gaze, and everything had clicked.

The gem. She’d found it.

And that knowledge put everything else in line. He still didn’t know how she’d managed to get as far as she had, but she had. Bugger, of course she had. She was the Slayer. Whatever she put her mind to do got done.

The surgery hadn’t mattered then. Spike had something better—something that would bloody well guarantee what had happened in Denver would never happen again. Hell, this was entire reason he’d come back to Sunnydale in the first place. The prize that would win him back Drusilla. That would set things to rights. Give him back the world he’d lost.

But he didn’t want that anymore. Somehow, amazingly, every single goal he’d set for himself had been turned on his head. And there he’d stood, sliding the ring onto his finger, holding Buffy’s gaze and hoping to fuck he hadn’t misheard earlier. That she did love him. Just a little would do. A scrap. A crumb. And hell, even if she didn’t, it wasn’t like he could leave her now. She was all he could see. All he wanted in the whole sodding world.

And if she did love him, if she let him stay in her life—at her side—he’d need to get the chip switched off anyway, ring or no. Hopefully, she’d let him use it here and there, but if this was it between them, he was going to leave bloody well sure nothing could touch her again.

Thankfully, the procedure had been on the fast side. The lights had gone out, and when they were on again, everything that had been wrong was miraculously fixed. Even getting back out of the Initiative after Willow had done her thing hadn’t proven all that difficult, with

the might of the place focused on the more conspicuous exit points. Willow had snagged a couple of lab coats and clipboards, as well as a surgical cap to fit over Spike's shock of blond hair, and led them both calmly through the fray and straight into the sun.

"I'm sorry," Willow had hissed, hurriedly throwing herself in front of the would-be fatal rays and stretching out her arms as though to hold them back. "This is the only way out. I forgot what time it was."

Spike still wasn't sure how much he believed that but had decided not to give his doubts voice. Instead, he'd flashed Willow a bright smile and purposefully stepped around her, out into the open sunlight. "Can't wait to see if I freckle," he'd said, turning to wink at Buffy before sliding off his duster. "Slayer?"

A small smirk had tugged on her lips when Willow started sputtering her horror and confusion, but Buffy hadn't turned around or addressed it. Instead, she'd stepped forward and under the canopy of his coat, unhurried even as the rays above began their assault. Conveying so much with so little, filling him with hope that whatever came next was something they would face side-by-side. They might have their fair share of questions to answer, never mind a load of conversations they'd mutually decided to put off until they reached the end of their journey, but Buffy spoke with action far more fluently than she did with words. And everything her actions told him reinforced what he'd sworn he'd heard as he'd battled his way back to consciousness.

For the moment, they'd decided the safest place to wait out the sun was the ruins of the old school. Plenty of shade for her—or him, depending on who was wearing the gem—and a decent ways away from anyone who might come searching. Odds were even her friends wouldn't give this place a second thought, and that was just fine, for Spike didn't fancy being interrupted. There was too much ground to cover. Too much to learn and more to say.

After all, if a man was going to bare his non-soul, it was preferable to do it in private.

"Think here's good," Spike said, coming to a stop under a large section of collapsed roof. Slivers of daylight might spear their way through the occasional gap as the sun made its journey to the other

end of the sky, but there was far more shaded ground, and he didn't wager they'd linger here beyond nightfall, or whenever they decided it was safe enough to try to reclaim the car.

Because she'd driven all the way here—that much he'd gotten from her back at the lab before the witch had hooked his head up to the equipment. Spike had lost consciousness back in Denver, and Buffy had leaped into action, saving his dust and more than that. If he lived another thousand years, he doubted he'd understand what he'd done to deserve any of what she'd given him over these last few weeks, and especially the last three days. The sheer miracle that was Buffy's place in his life.

Buffy crossed her arms and turned to him after giving their surroundings a much more thorough inspection than they warranted, surprising him by how wary she looked. Like she was standing on the edge of a canyon, anticipating the moment her body would shatter against the rocks. But when she spoke, she was his Slayer. The one he was almost positive loved him.

"How's your head?"

He grinned somewhat shyly and felt along his brow. "Smarts just a tad still. Kind of a kick. Would've thought the gem would clear that up."

"I think it might just take care of what happens while it's being worn, not insta-heal past battle wounds." Buffy gestured at a spot just above her breasts where it looked like a cross had been branded into her skin. He'd noticed it before now—how could he not?—but she hadn't made mention and neither had he, always one to follow his lady's lead. "Like this didn't magically get better when I put it on."

Spike nodded, moving toward her. Needing closeness, needing to feel Buffy along with taking in the sight and scent of her. "How'd you get that?"

"There was a bunch of stuff to get through to find the gem. I had no idea which antique it was and wearing a cross seemed like a good way to test it while keeping hold of the gun."

"Clever."

"I have my moments." Buffy wet her lips, then looked down and tucked a lock of her golden tresses behind her ear. And he realized

with a start that she wasn't just wary—she was nervous. His brave warrior, the army-of-sodding-one that had stormed a government complex, was fidgeting like she wanted to run, like she thought he might break her, and he had no idea why.

Then she swallowed and met his eyes again. “So,” she said, again in that calm voice that belied whatever was going on between her ears. “What’s next for you?”

“What do you mean?”

She shrugged. “I know you’ve been kind of out of commission, so we didn’t get a chance to talk about how things would go when we actually got to the end of this, but you have what you came here for.” Buffy dipped her chin and eyed the ring she’d given him. “There was the whole *fight to the death* thing, so you could tell Drusilla that you beat me at last, but—”

“You think I want to fight you?” The girl was driving him dizzy.

“Well...no. Not anymore. But you’re going, right? To go find her?”

There was a beat, then another. He was starting to wonder if the chip hadn’t fried off some valuable neurons or what all before the clouds fogging up his head parted, and he understood. Spike worked his throat and drew a step closer. “That what you think I should do, Slayer?”

“I think you got everything you told me you wanted.”

“I did, at that.” He stretched out his hand to admire the way the ring sat on it. “And you did what you said you would.”

“Yeah. So...after it’s dark, we’ll go get your car, and—”

“I don’t care about the sodding car.”

Buffy whipped her head up and found his eyes, her own gaze suddenly firm. “You don’t care about the car,” she repeated. “How will you get to Drusilla, then?”

“Who says I’m going to Drusilla?”

“Umm, you did. About a million times.”

Spike arched his brows and closed another space between them. God, she was so lovely. Her eyes, the curve of her nose, the way she regarded him, somehow both vulnerable and guarded at the same time. And he’d been in love with her so long he could barely remember a time before it—before his every thought and impulse and desire hadn’t

been somehow wrapped up in Buffy Summers. Why it was the second Drusilla had kicked him to the curb, his first and only instinct had been to get to Sunnydale. Kill the girl, sure, maybe even believe that was what he wanted. He could crawl back to Dru and show her his blood-stained hands, and she would still know, still see beyond that his heart had been compromised in the doing. That part of him, the best and largest part, had died with her.

"Don't think Dru would be all that glad to see me," he told her. "When it comes to the dollies she thinks are hers, she wants them all to herself. Sure, she'll lend 'em out whenever she pleases, but if they start to fancy someone else more than her, there's bloody hell to pay."

Buffy stared at him for a long moment before wrinkling her lovely brow and frowning. "I don't know what you're saying."

"Don't you?"

"It'd help if you actually said it."

Fine, if she insisted. Spike took her cheeks between his hands. "I'm saying I'm in love with you, Buffy. I'm saying that even if I wanted to go back to Dru, which I don't, she'd see it the second she laid eyes on me. She'd look at me and know I'm yours and if she *didn't* toss me out on my arse for a third time, she'd probably just stake me to have it done with. Bitch has to be cross at havin' the same argument over and over."

He watched the words wash over her, as her gemstone eyes widened with surprise and then filled with shock and wonder, uncertainty and joy, as she reflected back at him every wobbly thought or sensation he'd ever entertained. He'd never met anyone who loved the way Buffy did, who threw her whole self into it, wild and free and vulnerable and terrified, knowing she was doing something reckless and brash but embracing it anyway. Understanding how easy it was for others to hurt her, who *had* been hurt deeply, who had pieced herself together again after being shattered and somehow hadn't let that define the person she was now.

It was everything he'd always seen inside himself—that fierce devotion that had seemed such an anomaly to others but was simply natural for him. He hadn't been like Angel, who had loved Darla fiercely but would betray her to save his own skin if push came to shove. He hadn't

been like Darla, either, who had been able to walk away from the person she'd loved when the situation became inconvenient. And as much as he had tried, he hadn't been like Dru, either. Happy to share and be shared, to regard jealousy as just another form of foreplay so long as it never went further than the bedroom. Willing to break hearts to prove a point.

No, Spike had always been like the Slayer. Like Buffy, and it was so obvious he could cackle with it. The reason he'd reacted as he had the first night he'd seen her after the change, why he'd been so angry, so certain something was wrong. Why he'd sped to sodding Los Angeles to thump Angel for turning the girl, for nothing else, in his mind, could explain why he hadn't glimpsed the face of the monster he would have expected.

It was because monstrosity, the sort that Angel valued, wasn't always something a man was born with. Hell, maybe it never was. Maybe Spike had always needed to learn how to be a monster. Looking at her sometimes was like looking at what might have been, and that thought was both painful and heady.

Not that he could complain too much. The path that had been chosen for him had, after all, eventually led him here.

"You love me?" she asked, her voice shaking like she couldn't believe it, and Christ, that was something. Just like the rest of her. To know Buffy Summers was to be humbled by her, either because she'd kicked his arse so thoroughly the minions snickered behind his back nonstop or because she reacted with this—this look, this tremor, this surprise to be given something that had been hers in the first place. "But...but what about Dru?"

"Dru knew, darling. She knew the way I felt about you. Bloody hell, that's why she tossed me out in the first place."

Her wide eyes just went wider. "I thought..."

She didn't get out what she'd thought, though. She didn't need to.

"Yeah, so did I. Was a bit slow to realize it, myself, but she was right. She usually is." Spike cupped the back of her neck. "Part of me knew, though. Just took a while for the rest to catch up."

"How long is a while?"

"How long what?"

She inhaled, her gaze intent on his. "How long have you known you love me?"

"Is that important?"

"Yes, it's super important," she said, an edge to her voice now, her eyes going wide the way they always did when she was worked up about something. It was all he could do to keep from grinning. "Because... God, Spike, do you hear yourself? It's been about getting Dru back—everything from the moment you got to town. It's all been about that. And, what, suddenly you're in love with me, and it just happens to be after I helped save your life and got the chip switched off and, and, and if you're grateful to me, be grateful. Don't fuck with my heart and think you're doing me a favor."

Spike jerked his head back, amusement gone. "You think that's what this is?"

"I think you heard me say something back there that I didn't mean for you to hear and it's really convenient if it turns out you love me back after weeks of having your love for Drusilla thrown in my face." Those wide eyes grew darker with anger the more she talked, and while her cheeks remained as creamy and pale as ever, the overall effect was almost a perfect mimicry of life. "And if that's what you're doing, Spike, then fuck you. I don't need your pity and I don't need you staying with me because you think you owe me. I did what I did because of how *I* feel."

"Mhmm. And how do you feel?"

"You know it! I just said it!"

"First time you said it, you were talkin' to someone else. Just now was in a rant. I wanna hear it from *you*. Just you to me."

Buffy stared at him for a moment, then groaned loudly and rolled her eyes, which didn't help to cover the hurt on her face. "You can be such an ass sometimes."

"Not arguing that."

"Why?"

"Just bloody say it, Slayer. What's it gonna hurt?"

"Fine. It's not like I have any pride to spare." She inhaled one of those breaths that sometimes made her wince, but she didn't wince

this time, too focused on him. “I love you. I fell in stupid love with you, and you know it.”

She was right. He did know it. But there was knowing it, and there was having it confirmed—hearing it with his own two ears, seeing it in her eyes as the words fell off her lips, watching her as she said those words, and feeling how much she meant it. Even if she didn’t want to, even if it caused her pain, even if it was against her better judgment—but she was Buffy Summers and Buffy Summers was as much a fool for love as he was. Ruled by it, desperate for it, and a fierce protector of anyone fortunate enough to have a place in her heart.

“Halloween,” he said, caressing her hair away from her face. “To answer your question.”

Buffy furrowed her brow. “What?”

“You asked how long I’ve known I’m in love with you. Answer is Halloween. Watching you tear up that bar... The way you looked. How you...” Bugger, just thinking about it had his throat going tight. The vision she’d been, all guts and glory, the fire in her eyes. How she’d thrown herself into the fight without hesitating, the way she’d moved and how she’d seamlessly embodied all parts of Buffy within the same space. The warrior. The girl. The Slayer. The monster. Someone who knew who she was, who wanted to be good when she had nothing but a laundry list of reasons to be bad. The world had spat her out again, and she was still exactly who she had always been. It had been glorious—*she* had been glorious. She still was. “I knew I loved you then, and there was no going back for me.”

She was staring at him again, though different this time. “Halloween. You knew at Halloween.”

He nodded. “Halloween.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

“You didn’t tell me, either.”

“I didn’t think there was any point in telling,” she replied, shaking her head. And to his utter bewilderment, her face started to crumble. “I thought you were in love with Drusilla. When did you stop being in love with Drusilla? Or are you still in love with her? Because I’m not built for that. I’m not someone who can just be with someone and be

happy when they're in love with someone else, even if they love me, too. Maybe that makes me a bad vampire but I'm not—"

"Buffy." Spike cupped her cheeks again, pulling her close enough that she had nowhere to look but into his eyes. "I'm not in love with Dru. I'm in love with *you*. Just you. It's just you for me."

She pressed her lips together the way she did whenever she was thinking hard. "And you've known this since Halloween."

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

He lifted a shoulder. "Wasn't sure how you felt."

"How could you *not* be sure how I felt? It was so obvious!"

"Thought the way I felt about you was obvious too. Aren't we a bloody pair." Spike cracked a small smile and felt his heart sing when she mirrored it back at him. "It's just you, love. You're what I came back for. Just took me a minute to suss it out."

"It would've been nice to know. I've been going crazy."

"Crazy, eh?"

"It's lonely, Spike. I thought..." Buffy sighed and dropped her head, but only for a moment. Then she pulled back and looked at him directly with the candor he'd come to expect from her. "I thought I was going to be alone. Really alone. I'm not the right kind of vampire or the Slayer my friends want, and I thought once we got the situation with our heads figured out and you had the gem, you were going to leave too. And the only time I've felt even a little like myself since I died has been with you, because you treat me like me. I was sure I was going to lose that when everything was over."

Christ. Spike closed his eyes and released a slow breath. "I'm sorry. I didn't—"

"You don't have to be sorry. It's not like you knew."

"No, but I bloody well should have. Just managed to convince myself I was seeing what I wanted to see."

"What? What does that mean?"

"Back in LA, before we left, when you snapped at the cheerleader." He tensed when she tensed, remembering all too well how cool she'd been to him after that incident until he'd convinced her to talk it out. Remembering also what he'd told Cordelia when she'd confronted him

with the possibility that Buffy had feelings for him, how he'd accepted it but rejected it, deciding that he knew better because the prospect had been too sweet to entertain. "I knew you fancied me. Just didn't reckon it was anything lasting. I've been a fledgling before, know a bit what it's like when someone starts showing you this new world you've been given. Just thought it was that for you."

"And when I nearly clawed Cordelia's eyes out?"

"Bit of the same, actually. There was a time I would've done in anyone who took Angelus's attention off me."

Buffy frowned, and he didn't blame her. Just add his sordid history with Angel and Darla and their years in the Whirlwind to the list of things he needed to share. No, more than needed—*wanted*. He wanted Buffy to know him as thoroughly as he knew himself, the good and the awful, the pieces that comprised the person he was now. The man he'd become in the aftermath of terrific highs and unfathomable lows. And he wanted to know more about her—everything that had happened to make her into the woman he loved. The light to his dark, for that was what she was. Pure bloody sunshine, and no ring needed to bask.

"And," he added a moment later, because pride was for other people, "I wasn't sure you weren't still moony over Angel."

Buffy did more than blanch at this suggestion—she made a face like she'd tasted something foul. Like the idea was so preposterous she had no idea from where it might have originated. And something in his chest loosened at the sight. A part of him that had been coiled tight, trapped forever in competition with the one person he could never best, relaxed at long last.

"Angel?" Buffy spat as though the name were poison. "You thought... You thought I still wanted him?"

"Well, you were weepy about him not too long ago, weren't you?"

"When?"

"What do you mean, when? In my bloody car, right when we were outside of—"

"Oh my god." Buffy threw her head back, giving him a glorious view of her pale, perfect throat, his bite marks proud and distinct against the porcelain of her skin. "I wasn't crying about Angel, you doof. I was crying because... Oh god, this is so embarrassing."

But he'd already put the pieces together. "Fuck, Slayer, you were crying about..."

"Yes."

"Bugger."

"We've been stupid." A slightly hysterical laugh bubbled off Buffy's lips. "Very, very stupid."

That seemed a bloody generous understatement. The entire sodding time. And if he were a different sort of bloke, he might take a moment to reflect on how it was he'd let himself be so blind, perhaps contemplate whether his century and some change of experience had conspired against him to keep him from seeing the obvious. If it had cemented in him the only unchanging truth of his world, the knowledge that he was perennially second choice—that he was the one considered reliable at best, convenient at worst, when Angel was aloof, even cruel, but still always on top. For that had always been the way of things. No matter what his grandsire did, no matter what mental or physical punishments he could mete out, that loyalty remained. So it was and so it should forever be, amen.

But Spike wasn't a different sort of bloke—at the very least, he didn't want to be. So when Buffy tugged him close and whispered, "You know what would be even stupider than us?" he didn't miss a sodding beat.

No sense wallowing in what couldn't be changed. He'd take this—take the world he'd been given. The one with her at the center.

"What's that, love?"

"If you spent even one more second without kissing me."

And hell, a man couldn't argue with that. Spike captured her face between his hands once more and pulled her to his mouth, groaning at her familiar taste, her familiar scent, the familiar way she grabbed and pulled and pushed and devoured. Feeling in the strokes of her lips and tongue everything he'd denied himself these last few weeks. The desperation, the need, all there in her little nibbles and gasps. In the fingers that combed their way through his hair and gripped his shoulders, in how she seemed to anchor herself to him, all of Buffy flooding his senses until there was no telling where he ended and she began, for they were each other.

Then the weight of everything they had been through over the last few days—everything *she* had been through—crashed down on him again, and he couldn't touch her enough. There was more he needed to know, things he wanted to ask and others he had to acknowledge, but they could wait. Buffy seemed to be of the same mind, and he was not one to deny a lady, especially when the lady shoved him against one of the walls that was still standing and pushed his duster off his shoulders before raking her nails down his chest.

"I think I want to know what parts of you love me," she murmured against his lips, hands settling at his belt. She grinned up at him coyly, her sparkling eyes full of mischief and life, full of love he knew was his. And it was a good thing, then, that he had a wall at his back, for the awesome weight of the gift he'd been given, that he'd somehow stumbled into winning for himself, crashed onto him with enough force to send him to his knees.

"All of me," Spike swore, then swallowed. "All of me loves you. All of me is yours."

"Really?" Buffy nipped at his mouth as she drew a circle around his belly button with the tip of one lethal finger. "Your tummy loves me?"

"Fuck yes."

"I haven't spent much time there."

"Doesn't matter. It loves you."

She brushed her lips against his chin, then lower, trailing biting kisses down his throat, making his knees shake like a sodding ninny. "I think it needs to know," she replied. "Like your neck. I really love your neck. It is a good neck to have. Does it love me?" This she punctuated by sucking on her last bite mark, and Spike moaned loud, couldn't help it, banding one arm around her waist, the other at the back of her head, her hair spilling like ribbons between his fingers.

"Yes," he gasped, nodding fiercely. "Yes, it loves you. God, how it loves you."

"Good."

She growled, a hot rumbling sound that went straight to his cock—as all things Buffy did—and dragged her teeth along his jugular as she made her way south. Stopping every now and then to inquire about various parts. His collarbone—did it love her too? Fuck yes, it did, and

she rewarded him by nipping at his skin through the fabric of his tee. Then she was at his chest, treating his nipples to playful little love bites as he swore they had her allegiance as well, only now his voice was rougher, thicker, and he was starting to think she might just tease him to dust before she got where he needed her the most.

"Here we are," she said, shifted further, lower, and then she was on her knees and her mouth was at his stomach, her hands working loose his belt. "You promise your tummy loves me?"

"Bloody hell, yes." He rolled his head back against the wall, breathing so hard he thought he might understand those funny chest pains she often complained about. In so many ways, it felt like drowning, but god help him if he ever surfaced. "All of me loves you. Fuck, all of me worships you. All of me is yours."

He glanced down just in time to watch her run her hand over the bulge in his jeans, to meet her eyes and catch her smile. Her bloody radiant smile—not a grin or a smirk, but everything that made Buffy the sunshine she was, made her light itself, made her glow, and she was giving that to him. Bringing him into her warmth, and somehow being happy because he'd made her so. And then he felt like he was more than drowning—he was going to fucking sob. Or shoot off before she touched him. Or just explode, the ring unable to withstand the awesome power of her love, her joy, but then she was unbuttoning his jeans and grounding him in the bliss that was her touch. Tugging him back from the cerebral and into the physical, pulling out his cock, pumping it, squeezing it with her lethal grip, rolling the foreskin over the head and asking him with her eyes *does this love me?* and even though she knew, he had to give her the answer. Leave no room for doubt. *Yours, Buffy, yours. For god's sake, never let me go.* Then her tongue, *fuck yes*, her tongue. Swiping along the head, lapping up the precum, and then running the length of his shaft from tip to root and back again, tracing veins, pausing here and there so her lips could come into play, and he was close to begging by the time she granted mercy and took him into her mouth. Her eyes on him, watching him watch her as she pulled him deeper, her cheeks hollowing and the pressure exquisite and Spike knowing it couldn't last—not with her looking at him and sucking him, not with the velvet of her tongue against his

skin, not with the sight of his cock slipping back between those lips in slow, agonizing inches. His skin wet with her saliva. Then the head again, popping out briefly so she could slide it along her mouth, grin at him when he whimpered, when he begged, when he asked her *please* and she said *please what* and he said *you know what* and she said *yeah, but I like hearing it* so he gave it to her the way he would give anything, everything. Panted out *god, Buffy, suck me*, and then about wept when she did just that. When she took him back in, inch by decadent inch, tonguing along the underside, rolling his foreskin back to caress the head, explore the dip and the ridges, and then closing her hand around the base. Applied that bloody exquisite strength to squeezing his cock, almost painful, entirely blissful, and then all over again. All of it from the top. Buffy's lips tight around him, pulling back, then forward at a rhythm. She tugged and sucked and licked and stroked and murmured wordless nothings while her eyes stayed on his, while she watched him watch her swallow his cock, not looking or pulling away even when the emerald of her gaze turned yellow. When he felt her fangs take shape, the razor edges whispering *danger* along the side of his shaft, and that was it. He couldn't hold on any longer. His balls tightening, the base of his spine tingling, that euphoric rush determined to ride him through, and it couldn't get any better than right now.

Except it did. At the last second, as though sensing he was about to shoot off, Buffy let his cock plop free of her mouth and sank her fangs deep into his inner thigh. And Spike bloody screamed—head thrown back, stars exploding behind his eyes, full-on throaty howl, his cock pulsing as he released jets of cum into her hair, across her back, and she kept her fangs in place, kept pulling his blood into her, flooding him with such exquisite pleasure he could barely stand it. Felt his legs threatening to give out, the whole sodding world close to up-ending, and it didn't matter because she was there with him at the last. Drinking him down, first his blood then pulling back to catch the last few threads of semen on her face, on her blood-stained lips, and that was all it took to get his softening cock to swell again. Buffy looking at him, punch-drunk as though she was the one who had just been shot into the stratosphere, her ridges gone and her eyes again that earthy

green, and then he was tugging her to her feet. Uncertain as he was on his own, he somehow found the strength. Licked up the strands he'd left on her cheeks before claiming her mouth and sucking that in as well. And when he reached between them, her hand was already there, wrestling down her sweats until one or both of them gave up and the fabric ripped and then, *god yes*, he had her pussy against his palm. Soft and soaked and grinding into him, or him into her, and it didn't matter because they were moving in tandem. Fucking the same way they fought—with that natural harmony. Buffy ripped away the ruined scraps of her clothes while Spike bunched the crotch of her knickers to the side, ran his fingers through the wet silk of her cunt before spreading her apart and sinking those fingers inside of her to make sure she was ready. And *fuck*, she was ready. Clamping and squeezing and making his mouth water, his head swim, and he wanted her on his tongue desperately but needed her on his cock more.

He had her in his arms, then, hiked up against him, and flipped her around so it was her back at the wall, Buffy against his lips, her tongue sliding along his, her teeth scraping, her mouth in constant motion, and his hands were under her thighs, her legs around his waist, crossed at the ankles just under his arse, and then, *fuck finally*, his cock was sliding along the seam of her pussy. Soaking in the juice she gave him, wet still from her mouth, and she was the most perfect thing he'd ever felt—here, against him, over him, her clit caressing the head of his cock in a delicious tease, making them whimper into each other, before he slipped lower, notched at her opening, and pulled back in time to catch her eyes.

"Buffy," he choked out. There was so much she needed to hear, so many bloody verses flashing through his head, all awful and insufficient but raw and honest. He had a feeling they would come tumbling out of his mouth one of these days, probably soon, and the thought didn't frighten him, for it was her. It was Buffy. His Buffy. The woman who had redefined him when he'd thought it impossible. The woman he loved.

And maybe he'd said that, or maybe she'd just seen it in his eyes, for she smiled at him, said, "I love you, too," and pressed her mouth to his just as he began pushing inside of the vise that was her cunt, soft and

slick and so bloody snug around him. He whimpered against her lips, pulled his hips back to recapture the experience, felt a telling pulse that warned that popping off in her mouth hadn't dulled his need at all, and he had to be quick.

He could handle quick.

Spike pulled back just enough to catch her eyes. He loved watching her as they fucked, loved how she held nothing back, every sensation and thought flickering across her face in a spectacular living mosaic. The rounding of her lips, the way she always looked a little startled, as though she'd forgotten what it felt like when he was inside of her and was falling into the experience all over again. The hurried breaths she took, the way her nostrils flared, the crease of her brow, she was a work of art beyond his comprehension.

And she loved him. Somehow, amid a lifetime of failures, he'd done something right. Something that had brought him to her—had led him exactly where he was supposed to be. Holding Buffy to him, stealing kisses between thrusts, her pussy clenching around his cock at a rhythm every time he speared back inside. Enjoying the cadence of her grunts, her gasps, how they seemed to harmonize with his own, amplified by the jostle of his belt and the wet sounds their bodies made. How when he looked down, he got an eyeful of his juice-slick cock as it worked in and out of her, her folds molding around him, the hungry way her cunt seemed to suck him back inside, how his balls slapped forward with every thrust.

"Say it again, baby," Spike murmured, digging his fingers into her skin. "It's my turn now. Wanna know what parts of you love me."

"All of it," Buffy rasped, smashing her hips against him, her eyes dark and wild. "All of my parts."

"Like this neck?" He lowered his mouth to her throat much the way she had him, nibbled lightly over the last bite mark he'd given her. "This neck loves me?"

"Yes. Yes."

"Mhmm..." He dropped a kiss there, then another with just the barest hint of teeth. Grinned when she moaned and moaned himself when she clenched so hard the corners of his vision started to fold in. But Christ, that was good, and he needed more—needed to hear what

other parts loved him. Found the reassurance when he nuzzled her cheek (“Yes, it loves you.”) and her mouth (“It really loves you.”) and her earlobe, which he captured between his teeth and earned a whimper and an affirmation (“Spike! Oh god!”) and then lower. Teasing her breasts through her shirt, and still, her words ringing in his ears between the sighs and the gasps and the hisses and she loved him. Buffy loved him. She was here, under his hands, against his mouth, around his cock, loving him all the while.

Loving him. *Loving him*. This goddess among men. His savior. His bloody hero. That would never stop humbling him. Never be anything other than a miracle he’d stumbled into, too thick at the start to realize what he’d thought he’d lost in Dru had never been his to begin with. What was his was right here. Loving him, kissing him, fucking him with animal ferocity, the start of the rest of his eternity.

“Wanna feel you come,” he whispered. “Strangle my cock like a good girl. Make it hurt. Make me beg. You want that?”

She nodded hard enough to give herself whiplash, another choked sound tumbling from her lips before she planted her hands on his chest and shoved so hard his feet had no choice but to stumble backward until gravity got involved and did the rest. He landed on his tailbone with enough force to hurt, and he would have screamed, would have cursed, would have done something other than bloody melt if she hadn’t leaped over him. Hands on his shoulders, pussy hovering over his aching shaft, and then—*fuck yes*—slamming home.

“Then beg,” Buffy said hoarsely.

“Oh god, yes,” Spike gasped, his spine meeting the ground, hands going to her hips, pulling with her when she began to writhe. One long, decadent pump, then another, providing him another glorious eyeful of Buffy stuffed full of him, of his cock, then she was moving in earnest. Working herself up and down with increasing frenzy, her eyes flickering as though she were trying to keep hold of her demon and losing the battle, and fuck, he needed to feel her. Needed all that strength to tremble because he’d made it happen—because the strongest person in the sodding world trusted him with her body and her heart, that he could make her tremble into bliss right now and later and tomorrow and the next day and all the days that followed.

“Spike,” she whispered, neither question nor statement, rather like she wanted his name in her mouth. And he pulled himself upward as his fangs descended, shifted so she was in his lap—rolling her hips with utter abandon, making the sort of sounds he doubted she was even aware of. He caught her mouth one last time, nipped at her with enough bite that her blood hit his tongue, and she mewled a sound of pure need, and he knew the time was now. Dragged his lips down the column of her throat, and then he was inside her there too. Fangs slicing her open, blood gushing into his mouth, and Buffy let loose a roar that could level whole sodding mountains. Spasming and pulsing and drawing him in deeper, it seemed, wet and perfect and squeezing so hard he experienced a shock of pain, but the best kind of pain. Dangerous and addictive, and she did it again, again, and then, yes, he was begging. For what, he had no idea—the words rumbled into her skin, around his fangs, and she was clutching him so tight he felt in his bones. Her arms around him, one hand at the back of his head, clutching him to her as though she feared he might float away without her anchor. And fuck, maybe he would. Her blood and her pussy and a singular sort of ecstasy he hadn’t known existed before her. Buffy made another sound, a sigh when he finally released inside of her, like she was as hungry for it as he was desperate, her muscles still working around him, squeeze and release, squeeze and release, until the roaring in his ears went quiet, the pounding of blood that had no pulse but still managed to scream, and Spike tumbled onto his back, taking her with him. Buffy collapsing against his chest, panting and holding on, still his anchor. His *everything* redefined.

Spike had no idea how long they lay there, entangled in one another. Could have been minutes or hours whole sodding days, and it wouldn’t have mattered to him a lick. Just Buffy nuzzling him with her head making contented sleepy noises would have been enough. Knowing that she wasn’t going anywhere—that the deadline that had loomed in his mind for so long no longer existed. There were things to suss out, he knew. Questions he had about what all had happened between Denver and this moment, including the ones he’d been awake enough to experience firsthand. But there was no rush—that could wait. Everything could wait as far as he was concerned.

After a time, Buffy shifted, raised her head to favor him with a sweet, almost bashful grin that would have stolen his heart had she not already stolen it. "So," she said.

"So," he replied, grinning back at her.

"You love me."

"And you love me. Think we worked that out nicely." Though god, if she wanted to take another tour to really drive the point home, he'd hardly stand in her way.

"And...you want this?" Buffy pressed her lips together. "Just...you do? Want us? To be together?"

Spike arched an eyebrow. "Do I need to do more convincing?"

"I just want you to be sure. Because what I did back there..." She paused again, let out a slow breath. "The past few days have been the worst of my life, Spike. You were gone, and I couldn't get you to wake up no matter what I tried. I thought I'd been alone before—like after I killed Angel—but I wasn't really. My friends wouldn't have known what I was going through, but they were *there*, and I knew... Even a part of me knew my mom was there too. But no one was there for me with this. I know I need to go see Giles and stuff, and probably my mom, but...it was just me. And I killed people. Riley. Professor Walsh. I would've killed more, and that scares me."

"Buffy—"

"I don't regret what I did. It saved your life, and I'd do it again." Buffy hesitated. "But I don't want them to have been right about me, that I *am* just a monster waiting to happen. I don't want to be *that*. Maybe I don't care about people the way I used to, but I care about what kind of person *I* am. I care about being me. So...you need to know that. I will kill when I need to, but not...not the way you're used to. Not for sport. Just when I have no other choice."

"You think I don't know that?" Spike ran his fingers over her head, rested his palm against her cheek. "I know exactly what it meant, doin' what you did. Never thought different."

"But—"

"I want *us*, love. Whatever that means."

"Even if it means *you* don't kill people either?" Buffy was staring at his chest now, absently running her fingers over the threads of his tee.

"We can get blood other ways. Human blood, even, 'cause you're right, it's so much better. But just not from killing."

Spike leaned forward and brushed his lips against her cheek, taking the chance to breathe her in. The story he got from scent alone—the hours she'd spent in the car, the faint reek of pig's blood that she'd admitted to pouring down his throat, the fear and the fatigue, the resolve and everything else. It honestly hadn't occurred to him that a switch could have been flipped as far as she was concerned. That she would be fine going out on the town and ripping out throats for their evening meal. That simply wasn't Buffy, wasn't the woman he'd fallen in love with. The woman he loved was the woman who was with him here. The one who had bent her principles when absent any other path forward, but only as far as she'd needed. Who would when called upon, understood some lines were meant to be crossed but still valued those lines regardless.

"You'll want to get in a good kill, love," Spike murmured. "It's part of who you are."

"But—"

"But we can do it the way we have. Like Halloween, yeah? Laid the bloody place to waste because the wankers were asking for it." He grinned and dropped his hand when she looked up, her eyes sparking with interest. "That's how we'll do it."

"And that'll be enough for you?"

"*You're* enough for me," he said. "Everything else is negotiable. You wanna fight baddies, that's who we'll fight. Wanna nick blood from blood banks or find us some willing donors, we can do that too. Long as I'm with you, I don't care. You're it. The only part of any of it I care about. I'm yours to command."

She nodded, a smile tugging at her lips but one she fought down just as fast. "Okay, well, just so you know, umm, I'm not a vampire who shares."

That got his attention. As well as a scowl. "Yeah?"

"Just figured I should get it out there, since you mentioned willing donors. Now that you know I love you and I know that you love me. Your last serious relationship wasn't so much with the fidelity thing. Dru liked to share?"

“Yeah, and I seem to recall tellin’ you that was her, not me.”

“I just wanted to make it clear that *boyfriend of Buffy* belongs exclusively to Buffy and will have his lickable ass kicked if he decides he’s community property.” She held his gaze for a moment, then looked away as though self-conscious. “Sorry. It’s just a thing I... One of the things I’ve been thinking. The reasons we wouldn’t work.”

“Because I don’t fancy something you also don’t fancy? I’m not following.”

“But you lived like that for a long time. What happens if you decide you miss it?”

Spike stared at her, trying to catch her eyes again, but she remained intently focused anywhere but at him. “Buffy,” he said, half-amused, half-exasperated. “Slayer, will you just sodding look at me?”

Buffy stilled and licked her lips, then slowly did as he’d asked, her jaw set and her expression the sort she wore when she was trying to be nonchalant and failing miserably because her poker face was about as convincing as his.

“Is there anything else?” he asked, not trying to keep his mood out of his voice. “Any other adorable insecurities we need to address so you can accept—”

“Excuse me, adorable what now?”

“I’ve been alive a long bloody time. Damn well enough to know what I want and what I don’t. Every time I saw someone else touching Dru, it drove me mad. Imagining *you* with anyone...” Christ, if he didn’t watch himself, he might start shaking over a sodding hypothetical. “I only wanted her then. Now I only want you. That’s never gonna change. I know myself well enough to know that.”

She let out a breath. “And if it *does* change?”

“It won’t.”

“But—”

“We talk. If it changes, we talk. Wager that’s how we’ll work anyhow.” He paused and searched for the right words. Knew they were there, that it was important she hear them. Probably important he say them, too, if only to hear her agree. “This thing with you is different from anything I’ve had before, love. I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you happy, even if it’s not what I want. But I don’t think—”

"I wouldn't want that," she said in a rush.

Spike grinned, at once feeling drunk and slap-happy. "I know. That's what makes us different. I know the way I love, and I've seen the way you love, and neither of us are the types to let go without a fight. I reckon we *will* fight." He edged his face closer. "And we'll shag. And we'll love each other till it makes us quiver—"

"But we'll also be friends?"

"Best I ever had," he agreed, nodding in such a way his nose bumped hers. "What do you say, Slayer?"

To his utter delight, Buffy seemed on the verge of breathlessness. Quite the feat for a creature who didn't need to breathe. "That's... I can live with that."

"Of course you can," Spike said, cupping the back of her head and lifting his own to capture her lips. She trembled slightly into his kiss, like she still wasn't certain, or still needed some convincing, and though he hated that any misgiving survived, he supposed he understood it too. The same way he understood that the Gem of Amara could keep whoever was wearing it from being killed but not destroyed. Loving someone was entrusting them with the ultimate power, and she'd been hurt before. Hurt and then betrayed by that plonker in ways she might not realize would stay with her for a time.

Love had done for Buffy what fangs alone could not. And Christ, he knew what that was like. He couldn't fault her for traversing the very same concerns that would be nagging at him were she the one with a spotty history in nonexclusive relationships—never mind how Spike had defined exclusive.

"Anything else?" Spike asked when he broke from her mouth, taking in her glossy eyes and the wet shine along her lips. "Better to get it all out now."

"Why?"

"Because I aim to eat my spend out of that delectable cunt of yours. After all..." He dragged his hand over her pussy, growled at just how wet she was. "Gotta make sure it loves me, too."

"Oh, it does. I promise."

"Mmm." He rolled until she was under him, regarding him with a mixture of love and excitement, of trust and happiness, and a sort of

fear he knew quite well—the belief that it might not be real after all, that he might wake up and find the world had shifted while he'd slept. That he had to fight to win it all back. And that was all right, too. He'd just have to reassure her every day. "Think I need to verify it for myself. If you'll pardon me..."

As it turned out, Buffy was more than willing to oblige.

BUT IF YOU TRY SOMETIMES,
WELL, YOU MIGHT FIND

THE LAST THING THEY TALKED ABOUT BEFORE LEAVING SUNNYDALE was what to do about Angel.

Granted, for a few days, the temptation had been there to not leave at all—stick around until Buffy was certain the Initiative was closed for business, make sure the threat was officially neutralized. The only problem with that was that a decision of whether to shutter the thing wasn't likely to come quickly, and sticking around while demon-smart government types flooded the Sunnydale hospitality scene was asking for trouble. Particularly if anyone watched the security feed and identified Buffy as the HST—what the Initiative called demons, according to Willow—who had stormed the place and killed two of its top people. Buffy wasn't worried about what might happen if she were identified or recaptured but also wasn't in a hurry to add to her body count. Somewhat haunted, in fact, by the thought that she might get a taste for it if she did it too much.

Spike didn't think so, though, as he'd told her one of their last nights on the Hellmouth—one they'd spent at Revello Drive after an awkward sorta makeup with her mom and a promise, cross her heart and hope to be staked, not to bang her boyfriend so loud the walls shook. Buffy had, of course, banged her boyfriend, but they'd made a

game of keeping quiet. It had been kinda fun, actually, driving her incredibly verbose vampire crazy while he was trying to make as little noise as possible. And yeah, Buffy might have been a little relentless, but it was his fault for telling her to embrace her inner evilness with more regularity. She'd decided to take that to heart. Like she'd made him watch from the opposite end of the bed as she spread her legs and played with her clit, whimpering all the while that he could do it so much better and how much she loved it when he shoved his tongue up her cunt. Writhing under her own hand until her orgasm had been upon her, and then sinking her fangs into her forearm to stifle the cry that wanted to come out—and again when Spike snarled and dove forward, dragging his nose down her soaked slit, filling her with his fingers and sucking her clit into his mouth. And sure, she'd whimpered and mewled and strained, closed her thighs around his face and bucked hard against the strokes of his tongue, but she'd done so without waking the household. At least she believed so, considering her mother had been in a pleasant mood the next morning and even deigned to make the pair of them breakfast.

It had been after their lovemaking, spent and exhausted, Buffy tucked up against Spike's chest and drifting toward sleep, that he'd told her she had nothing to worry about. That he'd been with her long enough to see that the decisions she made, the lines she drew were for herself and not performative. Bloodlust could be persuasive as fuck, he'd said, but she'd already been there. Already experienced the worst of it after what had happened in Denver. The fact that she'd maintained her rage the way she had while only using lethal force when given no other choice meant she wasn't a slave to her instincts. She wouldn't just snap one day and start killing indiscriminately—she was her own master. More aware and in control of herself than vampires who had been alive for centuries. Remarkable. A bloody wonder.

He'd meant it, too, Buffy knew. His admiration was a thing with shape and texture. Something that she experienced in more than just words, but deep inside herself as well, all the way down to her bones. And knowing she had that, that he believed in her that much, was almost enough to convince her that he was right and she had nothing to worry about.

Maybe she would believe it as wholeheartedly as he did someday. Right now, though, Buffy didn't want to leave it to chance.

The decision to leave Sunnydale was bolstered by the fact that, while not nearly as bad as they could be, things at home remained strained enough that it made more sense to remove herself from the equation. For now, at least. Buffy was hopeful that sometime down the line, she might be able to call her mother and have her mother react as though she were actually Buffy and not just an interloper wearing her skin. That, however, would take more time than she'd given it. It was enough right now that her mother had opened the door for her. Had hugged her and told her she'd worried, that she was glad she was okay. That she'd let her and Spike stay for a few nights, determined to keep them as far from possible Initiative run-ins as possible.

But that was just her mom, and there were the others to consider. Like Xander, who hadn't been nearly as sympathetic about Riley or Walsh's deaths, regardless of how long Willow had argued that it had been in self-defense. As far as he was concerned, self-defense wasn't applicable to vampires, and Giles's lukewarm devil's advocating certainly hadn't been enough to dissuade him. Buffy had left that Scooby meeting agreeing to stay in touch but also thinking it might be a good thing for everyone if they didn't see each other for a while. No matter how understanding Willow was about Riley, and no matter how invested she had or hadn't been in that relationship, it didn't change the fact that she'd had to watch her best friend kill her boyfriend. And Giles... While he hadn't condemned her, something had definitely shifted behind his eyes—something she doubted could ever shift back. With Xander ready to go Van Helsing on her and Spike at the slightest provocation, the Initiative crawling all over town, and things tenuous with Willow and wishy-washy with Joyce, leaving had seemed the safest bet.

So Buffy and Spike set out again. No clear destination in mind—none besides Los Angeles, at least, and they weren't planning on staying long. Just long enough to settle the score with Angel and leave him with plenty to consider should he decide to throw any other hunters in their path.

"You sure you don't want to just stake the bastard and have it over

with?" Spike asked as they crossed into Los Angeles County. "Not sayin' his little mates won't complain, but they'd have a time doing anything about it if they didn't want to lose their heads."

Buffy sat in silence for a moment, tucked under Spike's arm, breathing in the scent of cigarettes and leather. Enjoying now the lack of pain in her chest when she thought about the fact that her lungs were working, needlessly or not. She didn't know why breathing had stopped hurting, any more than she understood why it had hurt in the first place, only that it probably had to do with accepting herself or some other psychobabble. Or maybe it was less in accepting herself and more in accepting that the life she'd been so desperately clinging to no longer existed, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Either way, she got to breathe now when she wanted, and she found she wanted a lot. Lungs were quite handy. Like then in the car, helping her draw in air that grounded her in all things *them* while she considered for the thousandth time her jackass of an ex and everything he'd done to earn a dusty ending.

It came down to the same thing, though. Killing Angel would feel good, yes, but proving that she was better than him would feel amazing. And Buffy was all about feeling amazing these days. So she stroked her hand over Spike's tummy, grinned when he answered with a low growl, and told him she was sure.

For now, at least, she'd let Angel and his giant forehead live to see another day.

Just on her terms.



EVEN WITH EVERYTHING DECIDED, Buffy wasn't sure how she would react when finally in front of Angel again. Lucky her, when the moment came, she didn't have long to dwell. Just enough time to enjoy the look on his face before she shoved Doyle aside and made the mad leap onto the Beacon.

"Buffy?" Cordelia screamed behind her. "Was that Buffy—*hey!*"

That *hey* was punctuated by the beefy smack of fist against cheek and a thunderous *plonk* as something heavy landed on the upper deck-

ing, letting her know that Spike had made his entrance. He'd said he'd keep Angel distracted so she could do the hard bit, and Buffy hadn't asked how because, well, she'd figured she'd known, which meant she needed to do the hero stuff fast so she could toss the Gem of Amara back to him before anyone got stake happy.

Until then, though, she had a weapon of mass destruction to disarm.

"All right," Buffy said to herself, grimacing at the radiant brightness assaulting her eyeballs. The power of the thing blazed hot against her skin, like touching the sun and feeling the burn, the heat, the searing, all of it vying to liquefy her insides, vaporize her particles beyond even dust.

But it wouldn't dust her. She knew that. And not just because Lorne had assured her it wouldn't—rather because before leaving Sunnydale, she and Spike had put the ring through its paces trying to discern where it was vulnerable. She hadn't been prepared to trust that the thing was impervious just because it was old and mythical. After all, a certain now-annihilated being called the Judge had once been rumored to be unkillable, and look how that had turned out for him.

From what Buffy could tell, though, the gem had just two likely weaknesses. One was being smashed like any other piece of jewelry, and the other was being stolen, so they decided to not advertise that they had it, even when performing feats that should have been impossible. The less that people knew, the better.

Something they would have to make sure Lorne understood on threat of death and dismemberment, as being a mind-read-y type demon apparently meant no one had a chance of keeping any secrets from him. Buffy wasn't sure how that worked, but some combination of the people he'd read had evidently given him enough insight to greet her with a clipped, "I sure hope you packed your magic piece of jewelry, kids, or a lot of folks are gonna be downright fucked," when she and Spike had shouldered their way into Caritas earlier that night.

And she hadn't had time to ask, for he'd started yammering fast. It seemed the fortunes of everyone he'd read recently had been big on the nonexistent thanks to something called the Scourge. Bad news bears on a normal day—pretty much apocalyptic now. Lorne hadn't

known everything but enough. The future was always shifting, he'd said, depending on actions taken or not taken. But recently, he'd seen nothing but a big ball of death at the end of every tunnel and only a handful of ways to stop it.

"The only reason you've found me all calm and collected is I also keep seeing your broody-licious ex in the mix," he'd said. "I'm guessing he's the reason you're here?"

Buffy had turned to Spike. Of course they were looking for Angel. While sending a demon hunter after them had been inconsiderate, not being home when they came to pay him back was just plain rude. But Buffy had noted something else as they'd prowled through her ex's empty office, a sense or scent in the air that she hadn't been able to shake, something calling to her inner predator, and that had encouraged her to come to Caritas rather than hit Cordelia's place. If something was going on, something big, then a clairvoyant demon was a better bet for info than a former cheerleader.

"Well, if you hurry, you might get to him before he does something both brave and stupid," Lorne had said in a rush. "Just wear your little doo-dad and you should be right as rain."

There had been no questioning what he'd meant by *doo-dad*. Instead, Buffy had jumped right to the *where are we going* and *how long do we have to get there?* If ugly death was coming for them, she needed to stop it. And preferably before Angel got himself killed. It wouldn't be nearly as cathartic saying her piece to a pile of dust, especially if she hadn't been the one to make him said pile.

The answer to the *where* had been a freighter called *The Quintessa*. The answer to *how long*—probably *not long enough*.

Only it had been enough, if barely. She and Spike had made it just as the glowy thing, which Lorne had called The Beacon, started pulsing its deadly warning. And even though she hadn't had a good view of Angel's face, she hadn't needed Lorne or anyone else to tell her what would happen next. She knew her ex too well, knew how happy he'd be to sacrifice himself for the greater good, and, well, that wasn't going to fly. Not until Buffy got her pound of flesh.

Also, she couldn't say she hated the idea of reminding Angel that

souls were not a prerequisite for saving the world. Just because he was an evil prick when unharnessed didn't mean everyone was.

So here she was, dragging her tongue down the length of her fang as her fingers looped around the big cord connected to the side of the Scourge's doomsday device. This was it, she was certain, and she didn't have a lot of time to fuck around. She gritted her teeth and tightened her hand into a fist, allowed herself a second to consider the sea of demons below—all watching her with a mixture of awe and terror—then applied every ounce of her strength to jerk the plug from the side of the weapon, feeling the sudden expulsion of energy as she crashed against glass and metal, panting hard and blinking spots out of her eyes. The Beacon managed one last burst of pure, retina-frying light before winking out entirely, and everything stopped. The wail of it in her ears, the screams of the terrified bystanders, everything except the enthusiastic, hearty thunks that she was sure meant Spike was still in the middle of his conversation with her ex, completely unconcerned. Trusting she had it handled.

And she did. She always did. Maybe someday, everyone would see it.

Right now, though, it seemed all anyone saw was the crazy vampire lady who had swooped in from out of nowhere to save the day.

"What the hell just happened?" Cordelia asked. Buffy turned just in time to catch the stupor on her former classmate's face right before it melted into ire. "Hey, jackoff!" She rushed to Spike, who barely flinched in her direction, too busy thrusting another kick to Angel's gut. "Stop beating up my boss!"

"Your bloody *boss* tried to have me and the lady offed like the sniveling, filthy coward he is, so no," Spike snarled as he kicked Angel again. "Not gonna stop until he's nice and bruised."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Cordelia tried in vain to seize Spike around the wrist, but he shifted before she could firm up a grip, somehow keeping in motion while standing in the same place. "Doyle!" she screamed. "Dammit, you could lend a hand, you know!"

If Doyle heard, he made no indication. Instead, he remained focused on the terrified demons the Beacon had been poised to vaporize, so much so he broke off the next second, running to the middle of

the chaos and the questions, shouting names—Rieff being the only one Buffy heard—and she was glad because she was so not in the mood to politick. That she and Spike were here at all was one of those happy accidents. She certainly hadn't come to Los Angeles thinking they would have to vie with demon Nazis for Angel's attention but, well, a day in the life. Why *wouldn't* there be a bunch of extremists obsessed with blood purity in the middle of her showdown?

Though she supposed it was good, having a ready and waiting outlet for the rage she was almost positive was to come, especially since she'd decided to *not* stake Angel and everything.

A decision she reserved the right to rescind at any moment, but hell, Buffy had a point to make. That didn't mean she was above letting her partner vent his feelings by beating Angel into a collage of pretty colors. Still, when she caught the dismay on Cordelia's face, she figured it might be better to intervene while Angel still had some teeth. It'd make understanding what he said less of a chore.

Buffy leaped back to the landing and wasted no time seizing a fistful of duster at Spike's nape and bodily dragging him off the oversized lump that was her ex-boyfriend. "That's enough," she said when he turned his glare on her. "For one thing, you gotta leave something for me to beat up. I might not be staking him, but I'd at least like my punch to hurt."

"Excuse me, did you two fall and hit your heads on something sharp?" Cordelia had collected herself and was back to looking seriously pissed off. "What the *fuck*?"

Buffy glanced at Spike, who was still fuming all sexily—hair mussed, eyes blazing, nostrils flared, cheekbones extra pointy—but seemed to have gotten a decent enough hold on himself to nod in answer to her unspoken question. "I'll tell you exactly what the fuck," she said to Cordelia. "Happily. Just somewhere more else than here."

"In case you haven't noticed, we're kinda trapped in here." Cordelia paused, then frowned. "And how exactly did you get in? The Scourge blocked the exits."

"Well, I unblocked them."

"And they let you?"

"Wasn't anyone out there to stop me. My guess is they plan on

coming back once the deed is done.” And Buffy’s plan was to be here when that happened, but she opted not to say that just yet. There were more pressing matters. “So again, care to take this little reunion somewhere else? I think these guys”—she gestured at the demons Doyle had rushed to tend to—“are ready to not be in Los Angeles anymore.”

As if in answer, Doyle reappeared, trudging heavily up the stairs to the landing. “All right, I think I got ’em sorted,” he said. “They’re all well and freaked, though, so it’s probably a good idea to see them off before the Scourge figures out their big bomb didn’t go boom.” He paused and turned his attention to Buffy. “Thanks for that. By the way, where the flying hell did you come from?”

“We were in the neighborhood,” Buffy said wryly. “Thought we’d lend a hand when we learned some assholes were planning a holocaust.”

“And, what, you just decided you got to beat Angel up for funsies?” Cordelia demanded. “Fun fact, I *do* have a limit to how much bullshit I put up with before I pull out the stakes.”

Spike scoffed and, for a second, Buffy worried he might do something, well, *Spike* of him to make the situation worse. Either she underestimated him, or he read her mind, though, for he met her eyes in a way that communicated loudly he was following her lead.

“Angel had it coming,” she told Cordelia. “And a lot more than that. Just be happy we’re not dusting him.”

“I don’t—”

“Cordy, trust me on this.”

As though in answer, Angel grunted and pulled himself to his feet, his expression stony and defiant under the bruises that were forming, but he didn’t try to argue the point. And that seemed to be all Cordelia needed—the visual reassurance that he was all right. Some of the tension left her shoulders, and she offered a very clipped, very you’re-on-thin-ice nod.

“Fine,” she snapped. “Outside. And good luck if you need a place to stay tonight because I do not put up people who beat up my friends.”

Buffy sighed and rolled her head back. “Cordelia, if I’m right in thinking you knew nothing about Denver, then you’re going to want to beat up on him, yourself.”

“Denver? What about Denver? Angel, What are they talking about?”

But Angel didn’t respond. Of course, he didn’t respond. Nor did he take aim at Spike or do more than flash a slightly wounded glance in Buffy’s direction—one that had each of her instincts screaming at her to wipe off his bruised face with her fists or her fangs or both. He looked away before she could decide which would be more cathartic, shaking his head and gesturing vaguely at the door. “Not here,” he said. “This boat needs to—”

“Oh my god, Angel.” Give Cordelia credit, she didn’t dig in and double down. No overture, no huge gasp, just a sudden and complete reversal of hostilities. Whatever she’d seen on Angel’s face had been enough. “What did you do?”

“Not here,” he snapped, then shouldered his way past all four of them without another word.

“Not here?” Cordelia called after him. “What does that mean? What happened in Denver?” She stared at the space he’d vacated for long seconds before she glanced back to Buffy. “How badly am I going to want to kill him?”

“Depends on where you stand when it comes to telling two people who came to you in desperation that the solution to their problems is half the country away and costs twenty grand. So they spend the next few weeks traveling to said destination while scraping up the cash, and it turns out the entire time they’ve been heading to their own executioner with the payment for services rendered.”

Cordelia was gaping at her by the time she stopped talking—actually gaping, her mouth hanging open, her eyes almost cartoonishly wide. It took a handful of seconds before she appeared to find her voice, and even then, it was a croaky imitation of the real thing. “Nuh uh.”

“Either that or the hunter made up a hell of a convincing story in which he knew all the players.” Buffy turned her attention to Doyle, who had likewise gone pale. “I decided to give you the benefit of the doubt. Was your contact really *your* contact? And if you’re going to lie to me, please remember that I just made something that should have leveled this entire boat go kerplow without so much as a scratch.”

"He wasn't," Doyle said quickly. "Angel told me he knew a guy and that you two wouldn't buy it if you knew it came from him."

"And you didn't think to double-check this?"

"Why would I? I trust the man, don't I?"

"A mistake we all make from time to time," Spike muttered, though without much venom.

"And can we please go back to *how the hell* did you switch that thing off?" Cordelia demanded, waving at the Beacon. "And how did you know where to find us? What is going on here?"

"Seriously, let's get off this boat, and I'll tell you everything." Buffy linked her fingers through Spike's. Felt the way he jostled the Gem of Amara as though trying to reassure himself it was still there. One of these days, when she was on better terms with Willow, she wanted to ask if it was possible to split the gem's energies so that they didn't have to keep tossing it between them. But for now, sharing was an effective solution.

"You better deliver," Cordelia said, spinning on her heel abruptly and starting toward the door through which Angel had disappeared. "After the day I've had, I am not in the mood to play nice with demons." She paused just long enough to glare at Doyle as he hurried to take his place at her side. "Even ones I'm thinking about dating."

Buffy would have scoffed had the little half-demon not favored Cordelia with a look of wide-eyed awe. "Still?" he asked croakily.

"Maybe. You're on thin ice, mister."

"Like I haven't been there before."

The two walked out, bickering quietly in the fashion of old married couples everywhere. And despite everything that had happened today—the unexpected turns that had landed her and Spike in this place when all they'd meant to do was swing through town to nail Angel's ass into the wall—Buffy felt something in her chest loosening. She thought again of the way Doyle had looked at Angel right before she had burst onto the scene, what might have happened in the moments that followed had an invulnerable badass bitch not been in the neighborhood, and felt something inside of her calm.

She liked Doyle. If being minorly inconvenienced had saved his life, she was glad for the detour.

"How you reckon it's going so far?" Spike asked, squeezing her hand. "Everything you thought it'd be?"

Buffy snickered and shook her head. "Let's just say I've changed my mind. Death is definitely on the table and *I* get to be the one who kills him if it comes to that."

He leaned into her, chuckling and raising her hand to his mouth. "You'd be too soft on him, love. Quick and done, nothing to savor. I could drag it out for weeks."

"Weeks? Really?"

"Learned from the bloody best. Wouldn't mind the chance to show him what a good student I was."

She huffed again. The thought didn't *not* appeal to her—god knows she'd spent plenty of time dreaming up worse fates for Angel during the mad rush from Colorado to California, and some of them pretty darn creative. But then she recalled again the talk she and Spike had had, the decision she'd arrived at, the reasons behind it. Those things remained unchanged, even in the face of temptation.

Buffy had a point to make—not to herself, but to the world. And she was determined to see it through.

"Ahh, there you are," Cordelia said when Buffy and Spike finally joined them on the dock. "Now will you tell me what the hell is going on? I'm tired of the vague runaround."

"And how you pulled off that bit of rescue," Doyle said before barking a nervous laugh and running a hand through his hair. "I thought I was done for till you lot showed up. What's your secret?"

"Magic," Buffy replied, tightening her grip on Spike's hand. "And that's beside the point. We came here to settle the score with Angel. Just had to save his ass first."

"Not just his," Doyle said, laughing still, though there was a strain to it—like he was nearing hysterics. "God, are you gonna kill him now? I don't know if I can take another dip in this rollercoaster."

"They said you sent them to a demon hunter," Cordelia told Angel, direct as ever. "So here's the part where you tell me that's not true, or I'm going to be very, very cranky."

"Me too," Doyle added. "Considering I was the bloody messenger."

There was a pregnant pause during which everyone looked at Angel

—Buffy squeezing Spike’s hand hard enough that the ring was sure to leave an imprint on his skin, though not because she was worried. She wasn’t. Somehow, she trusted that Angel wouldn’t deny it. He wouldn’t feel like he needed to. After all, in the world according to her ex, his choice had been the necessary but difficult one. The one only he had the strength to make. If there was a sword to fall on within range, he would be the one to lose to gravity. For the greater good. The burden his and his alone to bear.

And bless him, he didn’t disappoint. Not now, at least.

“I did what I thought was best,” Angel said.

“Which was...?” Doyle asked. “Come on, man, you told me your guy was on the up and up. I believed you.” He shifted his weight between his feet, staring with increasing agitation at the taciturn vampire who seemed to be making an effort to not meet his gaze. Finally, he huffed and whipped back to Buffy, his eyes wide and earnest. “Look, I said it in there but just for the record, yeah? The bloke I sent you after, I’ve never met him. Angel fixed up the entire thing. Told me to share the good news because you two would be a hard sell if you knew where the lead came from. I thought he was being a bit of an idiot but considering your boy went feral on him outside of Caritas, I didn’t argue. All that to say, whatever happened there, I thought you were going to get the hardware removed, I swear it.”

“Don’t worry. I believe you.”

“You do?”

“Yeah.”

“More she knows Angel,” Spike said with a snicker, releasing her hand so he could throw his arm around her shoulders. Buffy, not missing a beat, promptly stuck that hand and its flashy Amara gem into his duster pocket. Not that anyone was interested in her bling, but just in case.

“It also helped that the hunter didn’t say your name at all,” she told Doyle. “But like my guy said, I know Angel. Know him well enough to know that he’s just the kind of jackass that would talk himself into thinking he’s the one who lost something by sending us to be slaughtered, fish-in-a-barrel style.”

Cordelia covered her mouth, her eyes wide. “Oh my god.”

"Looks like you both made it out just fine," Angel observed coolly. "More than I can say for John."

"Who's John?" Cordelia barked.

"I'm guessing the hunter," Buffy answered, proud of herself when her voice didn't shake. It didn't come as naturally for her, but she could do aloof pretty damn well if she put her mind to it. "I knocked him down on my way out. Didn't bother to see if he got up."

"He didn't. You broke his neck."

"Pity."

"You broke his neck?" Cordelia echoed, furrowing her brow. "How did you manage that if you had those chips?"

"Not easily. Let's just say the assholes who gave us these chips did not account for a slayer-turned-vampire. And the chips are gone now." Or at the very least defunct, and that would have to be good enough until she and Spike found a solution they both felt they could trust enough to open up their heads. "That was priority one. Dealing with Angel, priority two."

At that, Cordelia and Doyle exchanged one of those glances in which entire conversations were held—one packed with conflict and uncertainty, and every one of the counterarguments Buffy would have also made once upon a time. Angel had a soul. Angel had his reasons. Angel had just tried to save the city. Angel was an agent for good in the struggle against darkness. Angel might have made a mistake, but did that mean he deserved to die?

All this going on silently while Angel himself just stared at Buffy with more of that infuriating impassivity. For the life of her, she had no idea how she had managed as long as she had. Or ever, actually, considering she hadn't been the one who had walked away. That she had been prepared to spend her short, fragile human existence on the receiving end of those nothing stares. Maybe she'd needed to die to see how much that would have killed her, or maybe she'd just needed to be with someone who rarely entertained an unexpressed thought. Whatever the case, she saw clearly from where she was standing now—both what she had thought she'd seen and what was actually there, and the contrast was startling.

"Buffy," Cordelia said in a tone of extreme caution. "What Angel

did was very wrong.” She paused, then threw Angel a glare of her own, her voice sharpening. “*Vêry*. But that doesn’t mean we’re going to just stand by and let you kill him.”

Spike snickered. “Cute of you to think you have a choice.”

“You don’t,” Buffy said shortly before Cordelia or Doyle could object, for she could see they were about to. Whatever they thought, however angry they were, they were both prepared to stand beside Angel, perhaps in front of him, and that wasn’t the sort of thing that she took lightly. “Neither of you have a choice in what happens to him. The only person who does is Angel.”

Cordelia snapped her mouth shut, and Doyle glanced at Angel as though expecting something more than stony silence. He’d learn in time.

For that was exactly what Buffy had decided to give him.

“I actually didn’t come here to kill anyone,” she went on. “Though to say I wanted to is an understatement. The people who did this to us did this to others. Did it to Harmony, actually. You remember your friend Harmony?”

She’d been counting on Cordelia’s shock and wasn’t disappointed. “Harmony? How—”

“She was a vampire,” Buffy replied bluntly. “Got turned during the fight with the mayor. Got captured with me and Spike. Got a chip in her head, then got tortured to literal death as soul-having humans tried to figure out the bugs in their hardware. They fried her brain to the point where it was crueler to let her live and thankfully exercised a modicum of decency and staked her instead of putting her through more. They put that in her head. In *our* heads. They made it so we either die without a fight or we fight until the pain makes it so we can’t anymore, and the best we can hope for is that it’ll be quick. And Angel came down on the side of the people doing this. He nearly got us worse than killed. And yeah, Cordelia, while I was trying to bring Spike back from the coma your boss put him in, I wanted to take a page out of his book. Maybe ask Drusilla for torture tips. She’d know better than most. But like I said, I am not here to kill anyone. And don’t believe for a second it’s because I can’t.” She paused, settling her glare once again on her ex. “It’s to give you what you and your

goddamned useless soul didn't give me. A chance. You come after me again, after Spike, and I will not be Miss Nice Slayer. I will be the monster that people like you want me to be."

That got Angel to crack, though not all the way. "I don't want you to—"

"Bullshit. I called you because I needed help. I *came* to you because I needed help, and you sent me into a trap that would've had me dying on my knees. Everyone has just been waiting for me to turn evil, and you know what makes me actually do it? People trying to tell me what I am." Buffy swallowed, took a step forward. "You got your hunter friend killed thinking you knew what I was. But you don't know what I am, Angel. You never did. And if you ever need a reminder, just think back to that boat. To the doohickey that should've been your dust and my dust and everyone's dust for a quarter mile. Remember what I can do. Because if I have to tell you again, it'll be a lesson you won't live long enough to forget a second time."

She held his gaze for a long, unblinking moment, waiting for something that never came. Not that she was expecting more than what she got, but it would have been nice to have been proven wrong just this once. But that wasn't Angel, and she knew that now. Just as she knew, or felt, that someday, she'd have to come back and put action behind her threat. Maybe not immediately, maybe not for years, but Angel wasn't a guy who left things unfinished forever. And that was just fine because neither was she. She just hoped that when the day came, she didn't have to hurt anyone in the process.

"Take care of yourself, Cordy," Buffy said as she stepped back a moment later, not stopping until she felt Spike's hand just above her ass. "You too, Doyle. We would stick around, but we have some bad guys to kill before they leave town."

"Bad guys?" Doyle asked, his voice pitched an octave higher.

"Slayer doesn't fancy these Scourge wankers," Spike replied casually.

Buffy nodded her agreement. "Demons with weapons of mass destruction? Not on my watch."

"So we reckoned while we're in the neighborhood, we'd take 'em out."

"Take out...the Scourge," Doyle repeated. It wasn't a question. "You think you're gonna take out the Scourge?"

"No *think* about it," Buffy said, taking another step back so she could link her fingers with Spike's. "But hey, if we die, you don't have to worry about us ever coming back for Angel."

"You can't just take out the Scourge. That's insanity, is what that is."

"Maybe for you lot. For her?" Spike shook his head and grinned. "Nothin' more than a bit of exercise."

"You're nutters, the both of you."

Buffy sucked in a breath, relishing the way it filled her lungs, lit up her senses, brought the parts of her that should be dead to life. Then she turned and caught Spike's eye, the ready smirk on his face and the thrill of challenge for the fight ahead. Sure, it would be over a lot sooner than he would have liked, but he'd enjoy watching her, at least, and she'd enjoy being watched. Almost as much as she'd enjoy proving everyone wrong. Everyone, every day, for the rest of her eternity.

Everyone but him. When it came to Spike, she'd have to think of other ways to keep him on his toes. And god help her, she couldn't wait.

"Maybe I am a nutter," she said, "but I'm also the Slayer. Doing the impossible is kind of my thing."

"That and looking hot doing it," Spike added, then blew her a kiss.

And Buffy couldn't help but swell with warmth, with belonging, for it could have so easily gone any other way. A few different decisions and she might have been anywhere but where she was now, standing beside her friend, her lover, her best enemy. Her partner through eternity. Someone who saw her exactly as she was and loved her for the same.

The road ahead wasn't decided, but that was okay. She wasn't traveling it alone.

And she never would.

CAVALARY



CAVALRY

“WE NEED HELP.”

Buffy drew in a breath, glancing at Spike to see if he’d heard. He had and was already sitting up on the bed, having switched the television onto mute. “What’s up?” she asked, all nonchalance. Just because this was exactly what she’d been waiting for didn’t mean she was prepared.

It helped, though, that Willow seemed just as uncomfortable. “I don’t know the full story. My security clearance isn’t what it was before... Well, before.”

“I don’t need the full story. You can skip to the highlights.”

“It’s not that easy.”

And it wasn’t—not for Willow and not for Buffy, either, though she would love for it to be. The whole being undead thing had been massively oversold to her in some ways. Like, before she’d become one, she wouldn’t have believed it possible that a vampire could become as nervous as she was each time she called someone in Sunnydale. She’d thought she’d at least be blessed with the gift of not caring. Alas.

“Okay, so start from the beginning, I guess.”

There was a breath. A beat. Then Willow started talking.



“LAST CHANCE, PET,” Spike said after slamming the DeSoto’s trunk closed. “Not one little bit of that is your problem.”

No, it wasn’t, but leaving her former friends and her former mom (her former watcher had evidently absconded back to England, so no worrying about him) to deal with the fallout of a failed army experiment in her former town just wasn’t in her wiring. She knew that, and she knew Spike knew it too, the same way she knew that he would keep reminding her of this each mile they closed between themselves and Sunnydale. It was a big deal, going home. A bigger deal being *asked* to go home—for the others to admit they needed more than whatever they’d been doing to fight the forces of darkness on their own.

And call her curious, but Buffy wanted to see what happened when she did show up. If anything had changed since her last visit.

“Blood supply is good,” she said. “We should be able to drive through the night.”

“As my lady commands.” Spike moved toward her, and then he was there, against her, his hands on her face and his lips on her lips in a soft kiss. “Was lying before, about it being the last chance.”

“I know.”

“Say the word and I’ll forget the way to sodding California.”

Buffy grinned but shook her head. “It’s not like we were doing anything all that exciting anyway.”

“I beg to bloody differ.”

She rolled her eyes, still grinning. The past month or so had been a lot like the time they’d spent on the road during their ill-fated rush to Denver for the chip removal services that didn’t exist. Except with no real destination in mind this time, just a sprawling cross-country journey containing plenty of theft, fighting, and fun. Pure, unadulterated fun the likes of which Buffy hadn’t truly believed was in the cards for her until she’d died.

It wasn’t hard to find, either. Her enhanced abilities owing to her slayer lineage just meant that any brawl she got into needed more than one opponent to be a challenge. Or at least someone bigger and beefier

than the average vampire. Most days, she didn't even wear the gem. As they had discovered when they had taken on the Scourge, she was too fast for anyone to catch and way too strong for anyone to hold. That fight hadn't been easy, but it hadn't been hard either. At no point had she doubted who was going to walk away. Spike having the gem just ensured she wouldn't walk away alone.

Whatever was happening in Sunnydale sounded on par with the fight with the Scourge. A town overrun by mutant demons, courtesy of the impressive mishandling of the fallout of Buffy's attack on the Initiative. The ensuing heavy military presence had been over-zealous in making up for the losses they'd suffered—all two of them—and involved a lot of bagging and tagging of any demon they came across until the holding facility was full to bursting.

Then, rather predictably, it had burst, hence the SOS from the people on the ground.

And she and Spike *hadn't* been doing anything all that exciting when the call had come. They hadn't had time, having just settled into another hotel in a long string of hotels. The demon hotspot they'd planned to hit would have to wait.

"All right," Spike said, gripping her by the shoulders. "Not talkin' you outta this, am I?"

"Do you want to?"

"No. Reckon if you got word all your mates were slaughtered and you weren't there to stop it, you'd find a way to make it my fault." A smile tugged at the side of his mouth. "Might be worth it, at that. Sure you'd punish me real good."

"Spike."

"Right, right. Into the bloody car I go."

He didn't, though, until she had climbed into the passenger seat so he could close her door like a gentleman. One of the more baffling things about Spike—the dualities that made him her bad rude Victorian dandy vampire. Buffy waited for him to circle the hood of the vehicle and climb in behind the driver's seat, then assumed her customary position cuddled up against him as he started the engine.

"Could be worse," Spike said, steering one-handed out of the motel

parking lot, his right arm around Buffy's shoulders. "Last time we were there, I was too unconscious to mow down the welcome sign."

"I did it for you."

He gave her a fond look. "Did you really?"

"You told me it was tradition."

"It is. Just didn't figure you were listening."

Buffy snuggled deeper into him, sinking into the familiarity of worn leather, and let her eyes drift closed. Tried not to think about how, in just a handful of hours, she'd be back in the town she'd left behind and all its related baggage.

It was the right thing to do, returning to Sunnydale.

She just hoped she still felt that way when it was time to leave again.



THEY BEAT the sunrise into Sunnydale, but only just. Close enough that all the creature features that had reportedly been plaguing the streets had scurried back to their respective holes, though Willow had warned her that some were becoming braver as they adjusted to the paradigm shift. Still, no one was around to witness the epic defeat of yet another welcome sign, and the streets between the edge of town and 1630 Revello Drive were likewise vacant. And even though this wasn't all that surprising considering the hour, something about the tableau had Buffy's nerves on edge.

"Do you feel that?" she asked Spike, staring at the scenery outside the passenger window. She didn't expect an answer—not really—as she wasn't entirely sure what she was asking, but he gave her one anyway.

"Smell it, more like."

"What is it?"

"Fear."

Buffy frowned and sat back. "Is that really a thing? Smelling fear?"

His mouth twitched the way it did whenever she asked a question he thought she should already have the answer to. Like she was adorable.

"What?" she demanded before he could provide a response. "It just seemed like a bad guy line."

"Tellin' me you haven't noticed?"

"I don't make a point to hunt down humans." Not intentionally, at least. She had killed two people in pursuit of freedom from the chip the Initiative had shoved into their heads, but that had been out of necessity rather than desire...though Buffy would be lying if she said she hadn't enjoyed it a little. The monster had been desperate for its pound of flesh, and she hadn't hesitated to claim it when provoked. If either Riley Finn or Maggie Walsh had excreted a fear scent, she hadn't clocked it at the time.

"Well, this is what it smells like," Spike said, gesturing at the window. "Bit pungent. Good way to tell if someone's bluffing or not. Whatever's goin' on here has your townies by the short hairs."

"Which means Willow wasn't kidding." In Sunnydale, the existence of monsters was a bit of an open secret, even if people routinely went out of their way to rationalize anything not normal. If suddenly the entire town was legitimately afraid of what went bump in the night, the situation was indeed of the dire.

And if she needed further proof, it was there waiting for her when Spike pulled up to the house she used to call home. Or tried.

"Didn't take a wrong turn, did I?" Spike asked, leaning across her lap to peer at what appeared to be a vacant lot. The trees were there where they had always been—the one in the front and the one Buffy had made such consistent use of during high school—but the walkway to the front porch was gone, as was the front porch itself and the house that had been attached to it.

"Willow told me they put a glamour on the house, whatever that means."

"Better check fast. Sun'll be up in a blink."

Buffy nodded and made to open her door. "All right, I'll be quick."

He seized her by the wrist before she could negotiate her way out of the car. "Take the ring, yeah?"

"I'll be back before I'll need it."

"Slayer, if the place is crawling like you were told, could be there are things waitin' for you to step outside." Spike pressed the Gem of

Amara into her hand before she could come up with a reply. "You get yourself killed because you get into a scuffle in the daylight without protection, and I swear I'll follow you to hell itself just so I can kill you again for bein' so thick."

She rolled her eyes but slid the ring onto her finger without complaint. "I love you too, honey."

Spike huffed, cupped the back of her neck and pulled her in for a kiss, and it felt very silly and dramatic, but she couldn't deny that every one of her instincts was on full alert by the time she did step outside of the DeSoto. The funky smell she'd previously only caught through the window was almost a tangible thing without the barrier of glass, something that shifted against her skin as she moved. Fear so dense it was soupy.

Yeah, whatever was going on here needed to be handled, and swiftly. While the part of Buffy that was all apex predator felt right at home, the rest of her just felt watched, and she didn't like it.

She made it to the porch just fine, though—the porch that bloomed into being exactly where it should be the second the toe of her boot hit the steps. It was like a flicker in one of those old timey movies when the pieces of film were edited together. Now you *don't* see it, now you do—the house that had been her home plopped back exactly where she had left it. Buffy drew in a ragged breath and drew back. The second she pulled away from the step, the house vanished once more, camouflaged as a slightly overgrown vacant space between the neighbors.

"Glamour works great, Will," Buffy muttered before turning and hurrying back to the car to collect her vampire.

And then it was a race, Spike with his duster pulled over his head, his always creative curses filling her ears as the sun began to crawl its way across the lawn. Once again, the house materialized the second her feet touched the porch, and Buffy didn't slow down, didn't hesitate before bursting through the front door and spilling into the foyer of her former home with Spike thundering behind her.

"Buffy!"

Buffy whirled around, kicking the door closed as she went. When

she stopped, she found herself facing Willow, who stood in the living room, staring at her with blatant surprise.

"Oh, hi, Will," Buffy said, taking in the scene—the rumpled mix of pillows and blankets on the couch, the flannel PJs—and winced. "I... Umm, I guess you were waiting up for us?"

Willow wiggled as though self-conscious and tugged on the hem of her pajama top. "You said you'd be here right around sunrise so I thought I should probably sleep down here to make sure you had a way in." She pulled a face and glanced at the now slightly warped shape of the front door. "My mistake."

"The disappearing act outside threw me off a little," Buffy replied somewhat defensively. She hadn't meant to kick it *that* hard.

"I said there'd be a glamour."

"You didn't say the glamour would vanish the whole house."

"Oh, well. It does. Only the people who know absolutely that there is a house here can even get to the porch." At that, she straightened her shoulders with unmistakable pride. "We wiped it completely off official town records, too, so no one can look it up. A precaution, since your mom was living here by herself and most everyone knew about you."

Buffy frowned and glanced at Spike to see if he shared her surprise. If he did, he was doing a good job hiding it. "*What* about me?" she asked as he came around to stand at her side.

"That you're a massively strong vampire who goes to extreme lengths to protect the people she loves?" Willow replied. "They also knew from Riley's reports that you were living here as a vampire and didn't hurt your mom. And from everything I've heard, Adam is obsessed with finding you. It didn't seem far-fetched that he would try to use your mom as bait."

"And Adam is...?"

"One of the many things I couldn't tell you on the phone."

Yeah, that didn't narrow it down. Though she had indeed started the story from the beginning, Willow had also been sparse on the details out of an excess of caution, as there was no telling if the call was being traced or recorded. Buffy had insisted on a race back to

Sunnydale based on the bare bones of the problem—a problem she could clearly see was real but had no idea as to the size or extent.

But for as many questions as she had, Buffy figured the answer part would come after she and Spike had crashed for a little while, and the other members of the household had woken up. She wasn't sure who all was here—there were five individual heartbeats echoing throughout the house, and only three familiar scents—but it seemed more prudent to wait until everyone was alert and in the same room to avoid having multiple versions of the same conversation. Plus, the nerves she'd been riding ever since Willow had asked her to come home needed a chance to calm. The last thing anyone needed was to be on the receiving end of a cranky sleep-deprived slayer-turned-vampire. It wasn't pretty.

"There are some things to grab in the car," Buffy said after a beat. "We didn't have much blood left, but it's enough to get us through another meal or two, and I'd like to get that in the fridge before the cooler becomes completely useless. And my favorite weapons are in the trunk. Will, can you show Spike the basement? Or wherever you're putting us? We don't need to sleep long, just a couple of hours. That should give everyone else a chance to wake up and us a chance to charge our batteries."

"You don't need me to get the car stuff?" Willow asked with a pointed look at the window beside the front door, where sunlight was burning its way through the curtain.

Buffy bit back a grin, knowing it would only wig her friend out more than she already was. She also decided against reminding Willow that she had seen the gem in action with her own two eyes not all that long ago. The fewer people who knew about the ring, the better. Even people who were more or less trusted. "I'll be fine," she said instead. "I've gotten good at getting around during the day. And if things out there are as hairy as you say they are, better me than someone else, right?"

"I guess," Willow replied, unconvinced.

That was as good as she was going to get, so Buffy didn't press for more, rather shifted her attention to Spike, who regarded her with a mixture of amusement and caution—a silent *watch it, you're not bloody invincible, no matter what you think* reflected in his eyes. She fought the

urge to hold up her gem-wearing hand in response—*I am while I'm wearing this, dummy*—but decided against that, too. They'd made an agreement early on not to be overconfident just because they had an ace in the hole, as people who went around bragging about what made them untouchable somehow always ended up tempting fate. They did not need to go down in history as another cautionary tale.

Though Buffy maintained Spike was more conscientious of this agreement of theirs when she was the one wearing the ring. When it was his turn, he was as brazen as always—perhaps even more so just to get a rise out of her.

In any event, the run to the car took under a minute. She collected her travel bag from the boot—as she'd taken to calling the trunk, much to Spike's delight—along with the weapons they were partial to on those occasions they decided to use weapons, and rescued the remaining packets of blood that were in the cooler in the back seat. Once inside, she dumped the weapons in the living room and took the blood to the fridge. Someone would need to run to the butcher's day after tomorrow at the latest; otherwise the fanged members of the household were apt to become very grumpy very quickly. That, however, was a conversation that could wait until everyone was up.

She traipsed down to the basement just as Willow dumped fresh linens on a cot that Buffy had never seen before.

"Is there, ah, a time I should come and get you?" Willow asked as she made her way toward the stairs. "You said just a couple of hours?"

"Once everyone's up is fine," Buffy replied, stifling a yawn and stripping her shirt over her head without thought. Vampires weren't the most modest of creatures by nature, and while it had taken her a while to truly acclimate to this part of being undead, it was the sort of thing that was hard to stuff back into the bag once it was outside. She didn't even realize she'd done anything unusual until it registered that Willow's heart was beating a little harder than it had been a moment ago, indicating surprise or discomfort or both.

Spike, for his part, just gave her an appreciative smirk and tugged her onto the cot once she was close enough to grab. "Lucky she wore her knickers today," he told Willow. "Hell, lucky she has any knickers to wear."

"He *is* hell on my underwear," Buffy confirmed with a short laugh, exhaustion creeping in. The combination of having completed the journey to Sunnydale and entering a dark basement had worked its magic, and within seconds, she was struggling to keep her eyes open. "Sorry, Will. Didn't mean to flash you."

"No, it's...it's okay. I was just..." Willow trailed off, either because she couldn't find the words or because Buffy was now pushing down her pants. "I'll just get out of your hair. Let you sleep. And if you promise you won't bite me, I'll wake you up when everyone's ready."

"Have some blood warmed up," Spike advised, pulling Buffy to his chest. "The smell will be different, and purer, so we'll know not to snap our fangs."

"That is not the confidence-instilling sentiment I was hoping for, but okay."

If Spike replied, though, Buffy didn't hear it. Her eyes were closed and everything else was far away. Everything but the chest she lay against, the sensation of falling into her true home as the world tipped away, of lips against her brow, a whisper of words that ran together but didn't need to be repeated, for she knew what they were.

And for the first time in what already felt like a long time, she drifted into the comfort of nothing.



IT WAS late morning by the time everyone had awakened and congregated in the living room—everyone being *everyone*, including her mom, Willow, Xander, and the two other heartbeats she'd heard when she'd entered the house. One belonged to Xander's prom date, of all weirdness, and the other to a pretty blonde who smelled enough like Willow to identify her as Willow's lover. Buffy sank into the cushions of the sofa next to Spike, handed him a warmed mug of blood, and did her best not to guzzle down the one she'd brought for herself. Not because she wasn't hungry, or even that she wanted it to last, but rather because no one in the room seemed very comfortable with the idea of there being vampires in the house and she didn't need to make things worse by giving herself a blood mustache.

"All right," Buffy said, placing her mug on the coffee table. "So... who's gonna go first?"

"Go first with what?" asked Anya. At least Buffy thought that was the name of the former vengeance demon who was now, at minimum, sleeping with Xander. Probably more than that, given she'd earned herself a corner on Revello Drive. If it was serious enough that Anya was Xander's girlfriend, well, Buffy would just have to find time to point out to her former friend what a fucking hypocrite he was. It had just been last year when Anya had recruited a group of vampires to turn the Bronze into a crime scene.

But pointing out Xander's definitive lack of standable legs could wait. They had bigger demons to fry.

"Willow said when we got here that there were a bunch of things she couldn't tell us on the phone," Buffy began.

"Right, like who the bloody hell this Adam wanker is and why he's got this sodding town by the shorthairs," Spike added, leaning forward to place his mug beside hers. "See what a difference there is when you don't have the Slayer standing between you and creatures like me."

"He's not," Willow replied.

"Not what?"

"Anything like you."

"Considering he has this town in the palm of his hand, dunno if I ought to be flattered or offended by that," Spike drawled.

Xander snorted. "Nice boyfriend you have, Buff."

Oh, he *so* did not want to go there. Buffy narrowed her eyes. "I'm sorry he doesn't meet your standards, but all the ex-vengeance demons were taken."

"Buffy," her mother said in what was unmistakably her *be nice* voice, which was so rich Buffy could choke on it.

"I meant Adam's not a vampire," Willow said quickly as though to recenter the conversation. "He's not like anything we've seen before. He's not a demon or a human or any kind of monster we can look up. He's lab created."

Buffy stiffened. "Lab? You mean the Initiative made him?"

"Not the Initiative. Not really. It was more just Professor Walsh. A project of hers that she was working on under the radar."

“And continued working on as a ghost?”

Willow glanced at the blonde at her side, who didn't say anything but offered a soft, encouraging smile. The sort that said *go on, you've got this*, and alluded to intimacies that Buffy couldn't help but find surprising. She hadn't expected to come home and find her friend in a relationship of any kind a mere six months after Riley's death, let alone one where they had already progressed to gentle encouragement and unspoken conversations. So more than a lover, then. A girlfriend. Moral support.

And honestly, given that, Buffy should have expected what came next.

“They asked *me* to finish him,” Willow muttered, flushing. “I mean, not at first. It wasn't like, ‘Hey you, over there, wrap this up.’ But once they found the schematics, the plans, saw that she was thinking, like, *big*—like super-soldier big—I guess they saw the potential. They started talking about how we'd be unbeatable in war and it'd save a bunch of lives if we could find out how to finish him. Like, no more soldiers dying in combat, maybe, once they understood how to make more Adams. So they looked at their personnel, and I guess they wanted to keep it off the books, too, because I can't figure out why else they would come to me.”

“Maybe because you're a genius,” Xander replied, rubbing his hands together, his gaze on the floor. “And you'd been working up close and personal with Walsh before Buffy decided to go full vampire.”

Buffy rolled her eyes. “Oh, that's right. I keep forgetting that in the world according to Xander, I should've let her stake me.”

“I never said that. I just said you could've found another way. One that didn't involve leaving a corpse behind.”

Joyce let out a deep breath like she was about to hop in, but Buffy beat her to the punch. She had not come all this way so that all the formers in her life could make her feel bad for what she'd done to survive.

“Okay, well, I'll keep that under advisement the next time I'm in a situation where someone is running at me with a stake and I'm standing between her and someone I love with seconds to decide what to do.” Buffy glanced at Anya and offered a flat smile. “At least you

know that if you're ever in that position, Xander doesn't want you using lethal force to protect him. He'd rather let the bad guy win."

Xander bolted to his feet, his eyes blazing. "You got something to say to me?"

"Yeah, I do, actually," Buffy replied, pointedly *not* bolting to her feet. Rather, she placed a hand on Spike's thigh, felt the rush of his strength beneath her fingers—strength he shared with her. The reason she'd been able to come back here at all, even knowing this was going to be a part of the welcome committee. "I understand that you have had a hard time getting on the whole pulseless wagon where I'm concerned. I did, too. Becoming a vampire wasn't anything I asked for and definitely not what I wanted, but I tried, Xander. I tried when I was here, and no one ever understood or appreciated how hard that was. Every time I was with you"—she turned her gaze to Willow and her mom, because this was hardly a Xander-only observation—"with *any* of you, I felt like I was on display. Like you were just waiting for me to slip up and do something monstrous, and that even having the thoughts I had—which I can't control, by the way—was a sign that I was failing. That I wasn't Buffy. Do you have any idea how hard it is to live like that? This huge thing happened to me, and instead of having my friends to help me through it, I had my friends treating me like I had done something wrong. So since we're here and we're letting it all out, maybe you can tell me what it is I did to deserve that. Was it getting killed? If that's the case, I'm sorry to have inconvenienced you. I can't imagine how difficult that transition must have been."

"It was difficult, Buff," Xander said, though his tone had gentled a little. Not a ton but enough that hearing the words didn't make her feel like throwing him head-first out of the window. "It was... It was the worst thing I've ever been through."

"Yeah. Me, too." She swallowed, and realized with a start that she was shaking. "But I'm not going to apologize for what I am, or what I did to survive. I'm not going to apologize for not staying in that place where I didn't know how to act, and I'm not going to apologize for not hating that I am a vampire now, because I don't. It's not what I wanted but I am happy. Really, finally. And I will kill to protect myself or the

people I love and I will *not* feel bad about it. That's the Buffy Summers you have now. If you can't handle that, then maybe we made this trip for nothing."

Xander blinked at that, so taken aback she might have laughed had the sight not made her want to scream. Or better yet, roar, fangs out and everything. Instead, Buffy did what she did best around her friends these days—she waited. Either for the fight or the fury or the accusations or the acceptance. Not surprised when Xander opted not to respond but disappointed all the same. Perhaps where he was concerned, she truly never could go home again.

"For what it's worth, sweetie," Joyce said, breaking the silence, "I think you're right."

Buffy blinked, stunned right out of her tension. "You do?"

"Yes. I've had a lot of time to think since you left, since all this started happening and... I was unfair to you. More than unfair, actually. It was a miracle, you coming home. Being as much you as you were."

"You said you worried I'd tear your throat out at night," Buffy reminded her. She hadn't intended to bring it up; while her feelings on the subject remained bitter, things had been better with her mom the last time they'd been in the same room. Still, what Joyce had thrown at her the day Riley had shown up had stayed with Buffy long after they'd made their escape. Made her question herself, whether Buffy could still be alive if she was dead, if all her efforts were for naught. In retrospect, it was the first time since she'd been killed that she'd truly felt dead to anyone. That was a hard thing to come back from.

"I know what I said," Joyce told her now. "And I did worry. But I was wrong to worry. And, while I don't love that you and Spike were clearly being...*friendly*, especially at the volume you were being *friendly*, it didn't take long to realize that if the most that had changed when you changed was you were slightly less considerate, then I was fool to count myself anything other than fortunate to still have my daughter. And you *are* my daughter, Buffy. After what Willow told me you did... You defended yourself and the person you love. I wish it hadn't involved death but I certainly can't fault you for doing what you needed to do to survive. Cordelia's phone call helped as well."

"Cordelia?" Buffy croaked.

"Yes. She called to tell me you showed up and rescued them from some sort of doomsday device."

"Bloody right, she did," Spike agreed, stretching his arm along the couch at Buffy's back. "She was magnificent."

"And even though Angel tried to have you killed, you didn't kill him in cold blood. You were honorable. You were the daughter I raised." Joyce swallowed. "I was so proud of you when I heard that. And realized then just how horribly wrong I'd been. So yes, I think you're right. And I think everyone in this room who made you think anything else owes you a big apology." She was still a beat, then glanced at Xander out of her periphery. "I won't *demand* that anyone apologize, but I will require that you and Spike be respected while you're under my roof. Anyone who has a problem with that is more than welcome to leave."

Xander shifted visibly, his cheeks flaming red. Then, without a word, he walked himself back to his seat and plopped down hard enough the frame whined under his weight. Anya patted him on the back, looking somewhat pleased, as though this was exactly what she had hoped.

And while that wasn't much, it was also everything. More than Buffy could have ever asked for, let alone expected. She pressed her lips together in an effort to keep from crying, and managed out a hoarse, "Thank you," that left her feeling very much the center of attention, but also lighter than she'd ever thought she'd be in this house again. Vindicated in ways she'd only dreamed about.

"This is all with the good," Willow said after a beat. "Really, really good. But...Adam? We should get back to Adam. It is the reason why you're here."

Buffy nodded and resituated. Right. Monsters first. Touching mother-daughter reconciliation later. "Sure. Tell me about my bad guy. You said they asked you to finish him?"

"Yes. I was less enthused but I agreed to do it. I was thinking that I could figure out how he was supposed to work, at least, and how many people knew about him and where they kept the records on how he was made. All that stuff." A pause. "It didn't get that far, though. *I* didn't get that far. I was poking around, trying to make sense of the schematics and he kinda...woke up."

Spike snorted. "Coulda seen that one coming."

"Well, I didn't," Willow replied defensively. "Not even a little bit. Suddenly there's this massive...*thing* sitting up on this lab table and calling me *mommy*—"

"Mommy?" Buffy echoed, wrinkling her nose. "Okay, eww."

"Way eww. And he tried to kill me—he has this skewer on his arm from a Polgara demon and it was all with the extended, and he was coming at me and I don't even know what spell I did, I swear." She was babbling a mile a minute now. "It was just the first thing that came to me and I said it and whatever it was, it worked, because there was this flash and then I was running and I don't know what happened after that, except a few days later, the scientist who had taken over for Walsh was gone and then *his* replacement was gone and the higher-ups kept telling us not to panic and, well, that has never once made people not panic. Then some of the demons in the Initiative's containment facilities went missing, and the next thing we knew, there were other hybrid things running around. Part-human, part-monster creatures that Adam made. He had control of the entire facility before anyone could stop him—before anyone realized how much knowledge he'd been programmed with, and how much more he could get just by plugging himself into the network. Then his creations would go out and get more demons and he'd make more hybrids with them, all the while controlling military communications so the Pentagon kept sending more men, giving him an endless supply. Some of the military guys we think were just implanted with chips and not transformed into anything, just made into people puppets." At last, Willow broke off, breathing hard. "Adam is...so far unkillable. The Initiative has these guns that are like... They shoot electricity? Energy? Whatever it is, Adam absorbs it like a power-up. Bullets are useless too. Everything we've tried on him is useless."

"He rarely leaves the lab he created at the Initiative," said Willow's girlfriend. It was the first time she'd spoken at all, and she seemed to realize it mid-sentence. Like she heard her voice in the air, recognized it as her own, and felt the accompanying shift of attention. Something she clearly did not want, for she promptly ducked her head. "I-I just th-thought that was worth n-noting. We think—*Willow* thinks h-he

might control everything from there? Like...maybe all the monsters he's made could be switched off?"

"Switched off?" Spike asked, leaning forward. "How you reckon?"

But the blonde wasn't talking anymore. She shook her head instead and tried to fold in on herself, jolting slightly when Willow placed a hand on her shoulder as though she'd expected something else.

"Adam loves chaos," Willow said. "I think his early experiments were done just to see how things worked. Some of his first victims were pulled apart like they had been dissected, like he was trying to figure out how to engineer a person. But not *just* people, because we found demons like that too. Just like he had a certain vision in mind and was doing his research to make sure he got it right before setting it loose. And now the town *is* his, and we're worried he's thinking bigger—the more he learns, the more he conquers, the more ambitious he becomes. But it's all by *his* design. No one else's. *His* vision for the future. I don't think he's human enough to be paranoid but definitely to think about what would happen if he created another, well, Adam. I think there has to be a kill switch in his lab so that if his experiment gets out of control, he can nuke it and start from scratch."

Well, that certainly made sense, but it was still way too speculative for Buffy's taste. Fighting her way into a lab with a walking, talking and so far impervious Frankenstein thing was a taller order than any other Big Bad she'd put into the ground since becoming a vampire. Not to the point of being intimidating, but Buffy would feel a lot better about the prospect if she knew for sure there was a button she could press to ensure it was just one Frankenstein creature and not legions.

They wouldn't know until they looked, though.

"Okay," Buffy said, leaning forward. "We need to get into this lab, then. See if this kill switch exists."

"And what do you do if you run into Adam?" Anya asked, surprising her because she hadn't thought the former demon was paying attention. "I think Willow mentioned the whole 'he's obsessed with you' thing, being that you're stronger than the average vampire. Add to the fact he might know you're coming since he controls pretty much all communication going in and out of the town."

It was a decent point. Buffy sighed and shifted. "Willow, is

there *anything* of use you can tell us about Adam that might indicate a weakness of some kind? Like, is he decapitable? You said guns and stuff don't work on him, but it sounds like you also know more about him than anyone else. Get a peek at his insides, anything?"

"Yeah, there's actually the only weakness I know. But it's not a great weakness. In fact, insofar as weaknesses go, it kinda sucks."

"Try me."

Willow pulled a face like what she was about to say would hurt. "It's a uranium power core. Without it, he's just a lump of machine and demon parts. But you'd have to hack at him for a good long time before you got to it, *without* him pulling you apart limb from limb. As long as it's in place, he essentially can't be killed."

Buffy frowned and rolled her shoulders back. "I'm stronger than I was before. Could just punch my way to a solved problem."

"I took that into account, and I don't think so," Willow said. "Giles... Before he left, he requested research from the Council on everything that's known about the slayers that have been turned. There aren't many, granted, since most vamps are afraid to do it, thinking the turned slayer will do exactly what you did to Sunday. But there have been enough that the Council has a formula to calculate the added strength a slayer gets once sired and even though it's considerable, it's still not punch-through-Adam's-chestable."

"Still, that seems like the best way, doesn't it? Getting to that uranium core? Maybe I can't do it by myself but with some added strength..." She glanced at Spike. "So not just me. But the two of us?"

"And how do you expect to get close enough for that to work?" Xander asked, for once without a sneer in his voice. "We've seen him dust vamps by tearing off their heads. Like they were dolls and he was a kid throwing a tantrum. Even if you two together is enough, you're going to need to do the punching without ending up dead in the process."

Another good point, unfortunately. Buffy slumped, dragging her teeth over her lower lip. For everything else it did for them, she had no idea if the Gem of Amara would provide protection against excessive force like that. It had been designed to prevent death from the sun, stakes, and holy relics, and while beheading was another tried and true

method of vampire slayage, it was also hardly vampire exclusive. Whoever had made the gem would have had to have thought of every possible eventuality, and Buffy wasn't sure how much she liked those odds.

Even less sure how she'd feel about attacking Adam in tandem if there was just one ring between them. They would fight over who wore it and likely be so distracted with worry for the other that it would ultimately provide no protection at all.

What they needed, at minimum, was two gems.

And that was it. Buffy's chest lurched with the phantom echo of a heartbeat. The dip, the rush, the realization, all of it there except not, her vampire body remembering what it was like to be human. To be a human who had experienced an *aha* moment and the euphoric explosion of hormones that came in its wake. She sprang to her feet without meaning to, was already on the verge of reaching into her pocket and pulling out the gem before reason caught up with her, screaming its reminder that this wasn't only her ring, and therefore only her choice. And then she was whirling around, looking at Spike and hoping he was there with her, that he'd read her mind without needing her to haul him away and debate the pros and cons of revealing their greatest weakness to a bunch of people they hadn't exactly shown up here expecting to trust. She'd understand if the answer was no—if he thought she was *daft* or *barmy* or one of those things she often caught him mumbling after she'd made a suggestion he didn't like—but she was also ready to argue the point until she emerged the victor.

Spike was on his feet too, though, his eyes fixed on hers. No fight there, just understanding. And an answer.

"Uhh, don't take this the wrong way," Xander said, his voice having grown very tense. "But you two are kind of scaring the shit out of me. What's with the dramatic standing?"

Buffy turned back the others, worked her throat and slid her hand into her pocket. "Will," she said, "this might be the tallest of tall orders, but could you make another one of these?" She pulled her hand back out and unfurled her fingers. "This is...a really valuable tool."

"A ring?" Willow asked, furrowing her brow. Then the penny dropped. "Wait, wait, I remember this. It was with the stuff at the

Initiative, right? Is this what you were looking for when..." Her eyes went wide. "Riley staked you. And then Spike went into the sun. And you, with the sun just earlier today. All with the non-burny. Is this how you did it?"

"You found the Gem of Amara?" Anya asked, sounding seriously impressed. "It's been lost for... Well, I remember the crusades. The vampire crusades, I mean. Or, both crusades, actually, but specifically the vampire crusades. When no one found it then, I figured it was just gone."

"Or gone just until the right vampire came along and figured out what the valley of the sun meant," Buffy said, and regarded Spike with a proud grin.

Xander leaned forward, glaring at the ring. "So it's a piece of jewelry that turns you into super vamp?"

"Essentially, yes. Whichever one of us is wearing it becomes un stake- or flambé-able. Maybe even unbeheadable, but we haven't put that one to the test yet."

"Seems like the sort of thing we ought to know, too," Spike observed. "If this git they're on about is tearing off heads left and right."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Buffy said, once more looking at Willow. "I might not be able to punch my way through Adam's chest by myself, but I was already strong before I was turned and even stronger now. Add in Spike's strength and the Occam's Razor answer to 'how do you solve a problem like Adam' might actually be in play. But that only works if you can make us another one of these."

"Another...famed piece of antiquity?" Willow replied, her voice light. "Buffy, even for a really skilled witch, that's... Like I don't even know where we would start."

At that, the blonde who was Willow's girlfriend slid closer, studying the ring with a soft frown. "I... I could have a look. I-if that's okay. M-my mother and I used to..." Once again, she seemed to realize she was speaking in real-time, for she whipped her head up and looked around with wide eyes. "Sorry, I shouldn't have—"

"No, Tara, it's good." Willow favored her with a warm, loving grin. "It's really good. What about your mom?"

There was a beat. Tara glanced down, a blush staining her cheeks and Buffy had a feeling this would take a while to get out. So, apparently, did Spike, for she could feel him starting to get antsy and resisted the urge to throw him a warning look. Her vampire was a lot of things, but patient very much did not make the list.

"M-my mom did magic. It r-runs in the girls in our family. Before she—when she was still here, one of the things we'd do was look at old magic. Old spells. N-nothing big like..." Tara gestured at the ring. "But if we found something that was s-supposed to have magical properties, we'd try to figure out how it worked. How all the magic just—"

"You reverse-engineered spells for fun?" Willow asked breathlessly, all heart eyes and swoony. "Tara, that's... That is so cool. *You* are so cool. You're amazing. And you think you can do this with the ring?"

Tara's blush spread, turning her roughly the shade of a ripe tomato. "I can try," she said, her voice still shaking but somehow firmer at the same time. Willow's confidence in her, it seemed, had given her confidence in herself. "But the ingredients aren't enough for a spell like this. We would need to cross-reference them with texts. Old texts, I think. See how the ingredients are supposed to work in concert with the magic."

Buffy's heart sank. With their number one book guy living the good life in England, that put them back at square one. "I don't suppose anyone knows how to get ahold of Giles?" Or if Giles would even help with something like this. The terms they'd left on hadn't been bad, but not necessarily 'help create a ring that makes vampires unkillable' good. "Or have another stuffy British guy with more books than friends hiding somewhere?"

"Well, I am neither stuffy nor British, but I can help," Anya said, now springing to her feet. "Being that I was around when a lot of the old texts were written, there's a lot about them that I might know that you don't. Like, which ones are about ensuring a bountiful harvest and which ones contain secrets of the darkest arts."

Buffy didn't bother hiding her surprise. Gone for a few months and suddenly both her former best friends had partnered up with people who were more than just potential cannon fodder. Which, she knew, not all that fair to Oz or Cordelia, but not being fair didn't

make it not true. "You think you can help figure out which books to look at?"

Anya nodded brightly. "I think I know where to start, too. At least the texts you should be looking at."

"How?"

"Because of the ring." Anya closed the gap between them and plucked the ring out of Buffy's hand, then held it up to the light. "The casing here, see it? It's reminiscent of a scarab. Scarabs were sacred in ancient Egypt, where you'll also find the god Khepri, who was believed to roll the sun across the sky every morning."

"Are you getting ready to audition for *Jeopardy*, Ahn, or is this going somewhere?" Xander asked.

She rolled her eyes at him. "I'm saying I think the Gem of Amara might have Egyptian origin."

"Because of the casing?"

"No, not *just* the casing," Willow said, her voice taking that pitch it so often did whenever she'd stumbled upon a brainwave. "But factor in that some beetles within this family also use their legs to roll dung into balls just like Khepri rolled the sun across the sky, and scarabs were seen as a reflection of the heavenly cycle, representing rebirth and regeneration. And that's what happens when someone stakes you, right? When you're wearing this? You regenerate?"

Buffy blinked, surprised in spite of herself, and exchanged a look with Spike. "Yeah, that's exactly what happens. The skin heals itself once the stake is removed."

"And," Anya added, looking triumphant, "the Egyptian sun god is Ra. Amun was the creator god, and they were eventually merged into one god, Amun-Ra. Which isn't all that far off from *Amara*. Dollars to doughnuts, the Gem of Amara originated in Egypt as a way for Egyptian vampires to defy Ra. Those are the texts I'd start with."

Well, that was certainly a hell of a lot more to go on than Buffy would have expected. Forget Giles—Anya was a step up. A nonjudgmental step, too, given her complete lack of concern about being in a room with vampires.

Maybe all of Buffy's friends going forward should be demons, or at least demon-adjacent. Like Doyle. And Cordelia, kind of, who wasn't

demon-adjacent but was dating a demon so like a demon once removed or something. Before she and Spike left town, Buffy would have to ask Anya on a friend date. Establish a relationship outside of their association with Xander. That way, when Xander inevitably messed this relationship up, she didn't lose a valuable connection.

"So this ring," Joyce said, breaking into Buffy's thoughts. She had that look on her face that she'd worn the night she'd discovered the truth about vampires—like her brain might be on the verge of overloading. "If it *is* Egyptian in origin, does that mean ancient Egyptian deities exist? That this... Whatever this ring does for vampires, uses the power of those gods?"

Anya didn't even flinch before shaking her head. "Of course not. Existence is not a requirement of belief. Personally, I can't tell you whether the Egyptian gods are real or not—I've never met them. What matters is the people. If the people believed in them, and people become vampires, then it stands to reason that Egyptian vampires believed in them too, and that could have led to the creation of the Gem of Amara. Something that allows them to defy Ra and death itself."

Yeah, she definitely needed a friend date with Anya once all this was over. "Wow," Buffy said, sincerely humbled. "You're all kinds of handy to have around, you know that?"

Anya straightened her shoulders and preened. "Thank you. I think I am very helpful as well."

"We should definitely start with texts originating from that part of the world, then." Willow nodded, though it seemed her excitement had ebbed. The smile and sparkle from a moment ago was gone, and she was suddenly all business. Like she knew Buffy was thinking of making a new friend and felt threatened, as though anything between them had been normal at all this year. "But make it fast," she added. "If the ring isn't Egyptian, we'll need to go back to the drawing board pretty darn fast."

"I'll make a list," Anya replied.

"Good. And in the meantime, Tara and I can work on the ingredients part." She paused, drew in a breath, and said, "We also don't have a lot of time. The glamor protecting us is good but it'd be a mistake to

consider it perfect. And Adam's going to know Buffy's in town, probably. It's too big to keep under wraps. He might be able to access files that I don't know about and put together that there's supposed to be a house here."

"I can work fast," Tara said unsteadily. Not exactly confidence-inspiring, but it was becoming apparent that was just a personality thing. "A-and if Anya gets the right book—"

Xander shook his head. "That's a lot of ifs. I don't love it. And it's all assuming that going to all this trouble is enough for the wonder twins to actually take Adam down with a couple of punches. We're just taking that on faith?"

Buffy jolted, the words spears to the brain. *On faith...*

"Doesn't look like you lot have another choice," Spike drawled, hooking a hand around her waist. "Unless you've been sitting on a better idea you haven't yet shared with the class."

Xander's expression went slack but he didn't offer a reply. Just glared. And still, Buffy's mind was reeling.

On faith. On Faith.

Just where the hell was Faith in all this? Was she still in the hospital? Had she been killed? Just lying there, a ready banquet for whatever creature slaughtered their way to her wing? Or had she woken up? That last thing sounded unlikely, otherwise Willow would have mentioned it. Or maybe, if she had woken up, Faith had taken in the scene and used her brains for once to get out of Dodge without causing trouble.

But if she was still there, if she hadn't woken up, then...

"All right, well, everyone has their marching orders." Buffy snaked her arm around her vampire's waist in kind. "I think Spike and I will get some more rest. We'll need to go hunting tonight."

"Hunting? As in leaving the house?" Joyce was shaking her head, her eyes wide. "Buffy, it's chaos out there."

"Our kind of party," Spike said, smirking.

"And we'll need blood," Buffy added. "I know the butcher shops are probably trashed, but there's bound to be good blood out there somewhere. At least enough to get us through to the fight. Not to mention, we have an experiment of our own to run."

It would have been funny, and it was, kind of, the unease that dropped on the humans the second the words were out. As though they had only just remembered exactly what Buffy was, what Spike was, after having lulled themselves into forgetting. Perhaps imagining what two vampires in a town overrun with demons would have to do in order to get blood without adding to the body count—or, more likely, wondering if the Riley Finn exception clause was in order. If it came down to starve or kill, what side of the line Buffy would fall on. The monsters they had invited in to help protect them from other monsters.

Finally, Willow asked, “What experiment?” in a way that invited further discussion.

But Buffy was all discussed out for the moment. There was too much she needed to consider. Too much to share with Spike and Spike alone, as the others would never understand. “For starters,” she said, and nodded to the ring, “if that’s enough to keep us from losing our heads, should someone try to rip it off.”

“And how are you going to do that?”

“Simple.” She glanced at Spike, who nodded and grinned. “Time to catch ourselves a vampire.”



CATCHING a vampire in Sunnydale hadn’t been much of a challenge even before the demon uprising. Now, it was as simple as stepping outside.

“Well, that’s bloody handy, is what that is,” Spike muttered, tugging the front door closed with one hand, tossing Buffy the sword with the other. The glamour protecting the house would keep them concealed while on the porch, according to Willow, but the second their feet touched the ground, they were in the open. Which meant the vampire lurking by the tree in the front couldn’t see them no matter how hard he glared in their direction. Couldn’t hear them, either, courtesy of one of Tara’s magical augmentations. In fact, the only remaining sense the magical precautions hadn’t covered for was smell, and that didn’t even matter as smell was less reliable than the others when it came to situa-

tions like this. With loads of competing odors out there, it was easy to overwhelm the nose, Spike had explained once, and hard to separate the individual scents beyond the obvious. As a result, most vampires didn't bother trying to hone that skill as far as it could be honed. Sniffing out blood and avoiding predators was the most they reckoned they needed it for.

"So, what do we think?" Buffy asked, throwing Spike a worried glance. "Kinda wiggy to step outside and there be a vampire at our doorstep. Is it bait?"

"Don't think so. Could be this one's on a scouting party. Red did say Adam might know there's supposed to be a house here."

"And just one to scout?"

"That's the thing about minions, love. They're expendable. He lives to report that there's nothing to report, nothing's wasted. He doesn't show at sunup, and Adam knows something stopped him. Maybe here, maybe somewhere else."

"Or maybe he ran for it."

"Possible, but I doubt it. Not with the inmates in charge of the asylum." Spike paused and glanced at Buffy. *Your move*, that look said. Either use this vamp to run their little experiment and potentially give up ground in the doing or go hunting somewhere else.

Buffy didn't want to hunt somewhere else. She had a larger question that needed answering.

"I'll go from behind," she said, and handed the sword back to him. "Grab him by the arms. You got it from there?"

Spike smirked and nodded, bouncing the blade with careless grace in his hand. "I got it."

Under different circumstances, Buffy might have experienced a pang of guilt. This little vampire, whether he was a scout or bait or just decided to lounge against the wrong tree, was about to be trampled. And while sometimes it felt good to let loose and do a little—or a lot—of low-effort annihilation, Buffy tended to avoid trivial little nobodies that could be done in by a stiff breeze. Barfuls of demons were more her jam, or any of the big bruiser monsters out there that regarded vampires as evolutionary mistakes. Humbling those creatures that thought themselves above her, showing them

just how fragile they were, provided the sort of rush that never got old.

Little piddly vampire guy didn't stand a chance. She was behind him almost the second she launched herself off the porch, yanking his arms hard enough behind him that she was certain she dislocated at least one of his shoulders in the doing. He barely had time to yelp before Spike was there, and it was time. Buffy twisted to provide Spike the access he needed and firmed up her grip as she felt the shift, the pressure of a ring being shoved onto their victim's finger.

"Don't get used to it," Spike growled at the still-screaming vampire. "And sweetheart, it's time to duck."

Their volunteer was tall enough she wasn't worried about accidental decapitation, but Buffy obliged just the same. There was a rush of air, the meaty thunk of the sword connecting with flesh, a bloom of blood and the hack of metal through bone, but nothing after the blade had completed its journey. Nothing except the now-familiar sound of flesh knitting and closing, and then it was over. The vampire still in her clutches, shaking and confused, his shouts having faded to sputtering whimpers and wordless pleas for understanding. But he didn't have enough time to understand—he didn't have enough time for anything. His time had come to an end.

"Thanks, mate," Spike said as Buffy ripped the gem back off the vamp's finger and shoved it onto her own. "Appreciate the help."

The poor piddly vampire gave a whimper, and then he was gone. Disintegrating into dust courtesy of the stake she embedded in his back. Buffy sighed and ran a hand through her hair, lifted her gaze to Spike's before sliding her stake back where it belonged—tonight, in the rear pocket of her jeans.

"I kinda feel bad about that," she said, staring at the dust as it drifted into the shadows. "Wrong place, wrong time guy."

"My girl, the soft touch."

Buffy lifted her eyes to Spike's, thought about arguing, but then shrugged and let herself fall into pace beside him toward the sidewalk. It wasn't that she was opposed to killing vampires. They were fair game, as far as she was concerned, especially the lurky-outside-her-house-to-report-to-big-bad types. But the Gem of Amara already

tipped so much in hers and Spike's favor, in addition to the fact that she was pretty much an unstoppable killing machine, that killing one-off vamps like this felt a lot like going out of your way to knock over an anthill. No reason to it except casual cruelty, and soulless or not, she didn't like being casually cruel.

That was one of the things Spike said he loved most about her.

But she was also strategic, and not above making certain concessions when in a larger fight. Whatever this was with Adam was almost certain to be a larger fight, and for that, they needed certain questions answered. The first and most pressing one had been sufficiently crossed off the list—the other wasn't likely to be nearly as easy to satisfy, but still essential, especially if their bad guy was as strong as the others claimed.

"Tell me about this girl," Spike said once they were a safe distance away from the house. "You put her in a coma?"

Buffy nodded and snatched his hand to ground herself. "She poisoned Angel. I was pissed. And in need of an antidote. A rare antidote that she happened to have."

"What's that, then?"

"Her blood. Slayer blood."

"Mmhmm." He slid a glance at her. "Gonna guess this is the story behind the wanker's fang marks on your throat?"

"Which are going to heal when? I'm a vampire now. I thought I had extra healing on top of all that slayer healing. The marks should be way with the gone."

He snickered and tugged her closer to kiss her brow. "Might do faster if I didn't keep opening them up. Can always stop biting you there."

"Don't you dare."

Spike chuckled again, the sort of chuckle that sank into her skin and made her bones vibrate. "So this bird decided to spare the lot of us by offing Angel and for some reason, you decided that was a rotten idea and tossed her off a building."

"That's not exactly how it happened, but yeah. Close enough." There was a beat, and then she decided, what the hell. She'd already come this far. "If you didn't wake up with human blood, after

Denver, I had it in my back pocket to find Faith and see if that'd do it."

He went tense enough that she could tell she'd surprised him. "That a fact?"

"Not ideal or anything, because if I do ever take her out, I'd like it to be a fair fight, but I was willing to kill her for my boyfriend back when I had a soul." Buffy sighed and burrowed herself deeper into his side. Even thinking about that stretch of hours when she hadn't been sure she'd ever hear his voice again, be on the receiving end of one of his smirks or eyerolls, would never feel his lips against her or be able to tell him all the things she'd been holding back, triggered some inner mechanism that she figured would always be trapped there. When that happened, she craved the comfort of contact. His heart might not beat and he might not need to breathe, but when he was awake, Spike was always in motion. The reassurance of those muscles being worked, of his legs moving of their own accord, his lips near her ear, his voice, helped her from spiraling into a vortex of what-ifs that shouldn't still haunt her but did.

He always seemed to sense it, too. The times when she was back in that black, pushed far enough that the thought of becoming the devil her mom and her friends had all thought she was hadn't frightened her. Had felt like actual justice in the wake of what Angel had nearly made happen. What all of them had made happen. Particularly the Initiative, so set on controlling monsters that they had created one of their own. And now they were reaping the reward.

"If this bird is alive still," Spike said now, pulling her fully back as only he could, "what's the plan? Don't reckon you'd be up for draining her just to give us a boost."

"No," Buffy agreed, relieved that he understood, and knowing he wouldn't argue even if he didn't feel the same way. "First, I want to make sure she's okay. It's weird but I feel a little like...like no one can kill her but me. Like the day she dies is the day *I* decide she dies because *I'm* the one doing it. Everyone else can just back the hell off. That probably doesn't make sense."

"Does," Spike replied. "Way I felt about you since the start."

There was that warming feeling again. The utter completion that

came with being utterly understood. “Second, if she’s there... No draining, but maybe a nibble?”

Spike stopped and appraised her with undisguised surprise. “That so?”

“Well, it’s smart, right? They keep saying how strong Adam is and while I like the two-on-one odds, I also know that if this doesn’t work, the next plan will probably compensate for all the effort we’re not putting in now. Give us gems *and* slayer blood? That’s an advantage I like.”

He nodded but didn’t reply. He didn’t need to. She knew what he was thinking. Confirming that the Gem of Amara did indeed work against decapitations had been a lucky break, and one they really hadn’t had to work for. The idea that a bedbound slayer might still be alive in a monster-run town was almost certifiable. A waste of perfectly good time they could be using elsewhere.

It would be helpful, though, if she were still alive. Buffy had yet to find a foe she couldn’t topple, but part of that was being smart, and part of being smart was not overestimating her own strength. She was more powerful than she ever had been before—more powerful maybe than any slayer had been before—and as much comfort as she found in that knowledge, history was littered with the corpses of humans and demons alike that thought they were too big to fail.

Adam might not be the strongest thing she’d ever faced, but then he also *might* be. And if he was, she needed to have capitalized on every conceivable advantage.

There was no gambling with life when life was finally good.



BUFFY DIDN’T SAY a word on the way back from the hospital—she didn’t trust herself to open her lips without screaming. The fact that she had gotten out of that place at all, that she’d managed to hold herself together without tearing doors off their hinges or punching holes into walls, had required power and restraint she hadn’t had to call upon in what felt like a long time. Another component of that *being*

smart thing that she'd just been patting herself on the back for pulling off as though it were some victory.

She didn't feel smart now, though. Or particularly strong. Just a blind rage that she knew couldn't end anywhere good. And thankfully, Spike knew it too, or at least knew enough not to try to get her to talk until they were back under the glamour's protection.

"Buffy!" Willow started the second she and Spike stomped through the door, but that was as far as she got, as Buffy had no intention of slowing down. Instead, she made a beeline toward the basement and didn't stop until there was a door and another vampire between her and the rest of the house.

"What...?" she heard from the other side of the door. "Is she okay?"

"Not after what she saw," Spike replied without hesitation. "Best give her a minute. She's likely to punch a hole through anyone fool enough to give her the chance right now."

"What did I do?" Willow asked, hurt. And just as she'd known it would, Buffy's temper inched closer to boiling. Yeah, she definitely needed a timeout, at least until she no longer had the urge to tear out the throats responsible for asking grating, whining questions.

"It's not personal, pet. She'd take a swing at me too, state she's in. Only I could take it."

"She'd... You guys... That doesn't sound normal."

"Sometimes you gotta let loose. And she was thinkin' enough to give me the ring to keep me from getting too bruised should she decide to knock me around."

Buffy didn't know how he did that—how he managed to not only succinctly defuse a potential meltdown but in a way that had her own bright fury hitting a peak that hadn't existed a second ago. For that was how it was with vampires. Body chemistry didn't keep you in check the way it did when you were alive; bad feelings and emotions had no ceiling, no natural stopping point. Left unaddressed, they could fester and grow until there was nothing left but the need to rage and tear and destroy. But Spike understood her without her needing to say a damn word, and she had no idea when that would stop being a surprise.

"—transfusion ward first. Was a stretch, but there were a few packs

of blood there to nick,” he was saying when she clued back into the conversation. “Bloody awful security in that place. Only had to kill two vamps of them to get there. And after, we went off to see if the other one was still alive.”

“The other one?”

“The other slayer. Faith?”

There was a sharp intake of breath. “I... Oh my god, I completely forgot about Faith.”

Buffy gritted her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut, every nerve in her body suddenly alive and pulsing with that monstrous need that lived just beneath her skin. The one ready, desperate, for another excuse to tear into people the way she had the Initiative. The one whispering at her to jump on Willow and rip out her throat for her thoughtlessness, for her willingness to leave someone behind the way she and everyone had left Faith—Buffy too, for she knew she was just as guilty, but at least she hadn’t been here. Nor had she strapped Faith to a hospital bed, left her lying there all purple and blue and yellow with bruises, a readymade incentive for Adam to offer the creatures who would do practically anything to get a sip of her blood.

That was the likely story, at least. The one that made sense to her. Faith was still in a hospital bed, only she was chained there now, bite marks stretching along her arms and neck, possibly other places Buffy hadn’t been eager to investigate. And yeah, on the surface, this was a good thing with notable caveats. Faith was alive. Good. Faith was in a state where it was remarkably easy to take her blood. Also good. Faith was hooked up to a bunch of machines that might be keeping her alive. Bad. Taking her and getting her safely out of the hospital was probably impossible. Also bad. Even if they did get her safely out, Adam would know. He’d be ready. Very bad. In the end, the best bet had been to leave. Hope she wasn’t moved between now and when they were ready to test out their ‘beat Adam’ strategy.

So that was the plan, even if it left her feeling sick with the world and herself. How it was girls like her were used, if not by the men who had created her then by the things that had made her creation necessary in the first place. Useful and expendable. A prize to be dangled. A resource to be drained. And how, yes, she was planning to do exactly

that, use Faith exactly as she had been used by Adam. How this was one of those times when her own lack of a soul came in handy but somehow still didn't mean she didn't feel it. The knowledge that she was going to do an evil thing for a good reason, and she was the one who was deciding what was good and what wasn't.

Eventually, once Spike had explained to Willow what they had found and what they were planning, he headed down to the basement with a couple of mugs of blood in tow. And the scent hit her right in the solar plexus—heady and human, unlike the spoils they normally settled for. Buffy made a grab for it almost before Spike was within reach and threw back the blood with a hunger that almost felt foreign, trying to chase away the fury, wash it down or satisfy it the way she would any craving. Except that wasn't the way vampires worked. Blood did nothing but amplify what was already there, scratching beneath the surface and desperate to rip and snarl and beat and hurt until finally the bad thoughts receded and she was able to experience some modicum of calm. So when she lowered the mug, still riddled with rage that she needed to exorcise, she was ready for what came next. She couldn't rip or tear or bite or claw her way through her feelings, but she could throw herself at Spike and let him exhaust her in other ways.

And thank god he knew that. It meant he was ready when she launched herself at him, all fangs and fury and desperation. There meeting her with biting, bruising kisses that managed to both weaken her knees and strengthen the fire at the same time, shoving her when she needed to be shoved and letting her do the same in turn, until they were wrestling from one end of the basement to the next, knocking into walls, smashing against the floor, clawing and fighting and pitching clothes into darkened corners. His hand around her throat in that way that wasn't dangerous but did a near perfect mimicry, made her feel the rush, the threat, of what could come next if she weren't exactly who she was. Feigning resistance when he tossed her to the floor, her knees scraping against the cement, and then he was behind her, breathing ragged, fisting her hair as he teased the tip of his cock along the slit of her pussy, and she was wet and angry and she wanted it wet and angry, and knew he knew it, knew the second he speared inside of her that he was going to make it hurt just right.

“Take it, Slayer. Gonna make you take every inch of me.”

Buffy braced herself on her elbows, the tips of her fangs skimming her tongue, and she nodded, growled, gasped and—when she thought she might howl—bit into her forearm to stifle the sound. Rocking instead to the brutal rhythm Spike set, his thrusts hard and unrelenting, a pounding tempo that somehow soothed the parts clinging to that toxic rage. All the while Spike muttered in that way of his, words his trade as much as blood and violence and more so. She needed it, he told her. Needed to be reminded of how the world chewed up slayers like her. How she’d been chewed up too, how she was here now, fucking the enemy because the world had let it happen. And she could accept it or she could fight, and she *would* fight, he knew she would, because Buffy always fought. She fought the wankers out there and the voices in here, she fought him and herself, and through all that fighting she hadn’t given them what they expected from all heroes who fell—she’d remained Buffy. And Buffy always saved the bloody day. Always.

Then he banded an arm around her waist and tugged her back until she was falling backward, landing with a particularly hard slam onto his cock—hard enough the sound that burst from her lips surprised her in its intensity. Spike shifted with effortless grace that always made her feel especially clumsy, but hey, Buffy was not about to complain because he was still inside of her, moving until she was astride him in full, in reverse, and he was pushing into her, dragging her onto him, meeting her with the savagery she needed, and blunting the hurt as only he could. Stroking his hand down her stomach with feather-light softness that belied how hard she was riding him until his fingers were there at her clit, moving with her and brushing against her with just enough pressure to make her tighten with something other than rage. With his other hand, he captured the arm she’d bitten into, pulled it back so he could lick up her blood with long, decadent laps of his tongue, and it was all good, it was all bliss, it was all coalescing—Spike inside of her, Spike touching her, Spike licking her, Spike whispering and teasing and loving, always loving, in that unique, entirely *her* way she needed to be loved, reminding her that whatever had happened to her, she had happened too. She might have died but she was truly living because of it, and he was right there with her, reminding her

when she needed reminding. Keeping her close to the ground when she was in danger of floating right off.

And when she tightened with all that exquisite pressure, ready to send it off for good, Spike lifted his head from her arm and presented her with his own, and she didn't hesitate. She latched her fangs into him and released a muffled roar into his ripped flesh, blood hitting her tongue, setting her ablaze, setting her free.

She was ready, too, for his fangs when they came, and the shuddering aftershock, that ripple of singular pleasure that was as primal as it was sensual. Buffy tipped back with a soft cry, reaching to wrap her arm around Spike's neck as he drank from hers, falling with him until the world went sideways, collapsing into a tangle of limbs against the floor, the roar gone. All of it gone. All of it except everything that mattered most.

Buffy had no idea how long they remained like that. Just that, eventually, Spike brushed his lips over the place where he'd bitten her and murmured a low, "You with me, baby?" against her skin.

And that was it. All it took for her to fall the rest of the way. A soft place after all the sharp edges. "I'm with you."

More importantly, though, he was with her through the good and the bad.

Death had given her that, too.



FOR A CREATION OF ANCIENT MAGIC, the Gem of Amara ended up being almost scarily easy to replicate. Granted, not all vampires had access to witches who reverse engineered complicated magic for fun or old-as-dirt former demons to help piece together origins or read through texts that were written in almost-dead languages by entirely dead people, and as Anya pointed out, the vampires who had fabricated the first Gem of Amara likely hadn't been too keen on how-to manuals for all their friends. A tool of invulnerability that everyone had was a lot less impressive than being the biggest badass on the block.

"Of course, it would've also put a target on their back," she had

conceded. “But that’s only if they were exceedingly stupid and decided to advertise what had made them impervious to sunlight in the first place.”

“Which they clearly did,” Buffy had retorted. “I mean, it has a name and everything.”

“Yes, well, most vampires *are* exceedingly stupid.”

She’d felt a rush of what might have been indignation, but it didn’t last. It wasn’t like Anya was wrong.

Also preventing most vampires from creating their very own gems of invincibility was the fact that a few of the ingredients needed to complete the spell were harder to come by than what could be sourced at a local magic shop. Such as sand from the Valley of the Kings as well as a very specific type of scarab leg. Not just any beetle body part would do. That had been some cause for concern for a couple of days until Giles overnighted a package of contraband using means that Buffy still wasn’t sure she understood. In fact, she didn’t understand the entire US Postal Service being in operation in a demon-run Sunnydale until someone—she forgot who—explained that Adam was operating as though everything was normal up until such time as he felt he had garnered enough power to start making the sort of noise that attracted attention. The package hadn’t come to Revello Drive, either, as Revello Drive didn’t appear to exist to the outside world; Tara had received it on campus, voted unanimously as the ideal recipient, as Adam had least reason to have intel on her, in case he was watching the mail.

Once the ingredients had been gathered and the spell deciphered, all that was left was the wait for the next new moon to bring it all together, then after to test the results. And it turned out that yes, apparently it was just that easy to create a second Gem of Amara, as evidenced by Buffy’s (Spike had tried to be the guinea pig, but she’d won the coin toss) unburned hand and then fully unburned self as she stepped into the daylight, then how she’d managed to both juggle the crucifixes her friends had thrown at her and gargle holy water without suffering serious mouth and throat burns. The remainder of the tests were put on hold until that night, as even though all signs pointed to the duplicate being as effective as the original, neither Buffy nor Spike

were willing to test stakes or decapitation on each other. For that, they needed to voluntell the next bloodsucker they found who happened to be at the wrong place at the right time.

Then it was done. All tests exhausted and all potential hurdles jumped. There was just one thing to do before taking the fight to Adam, and all that stood between them and that was a sunny stroll back to the hospital with the hope that Faith was right where they'd left her two weeks earlier.

They took it hand-in-hand.



BEING that it was broad daylight, Buffy had thought the hospital would be crawling with vampires. It just seemed like the sensible place to hole up, being that it was vast, centrally located, and home of the town's largest blood supply. But none of her slayer senses—or her vampire senses, for that matter—so much as twitched with warning as she and Spike walked through the front doors. Rather, it seemed like the building had emptied overnight.

Even if her preternatural instincts weren't sounding the alarm bells, that didn't stop her from contracting a grade-A case of the wiggins. The brain kicked in where instincts fell short, and right now, her brain was now screaming that something was wrong.

"Faith," she said, and that was all the warning she gave before breaking into a run. Also the only warning Spike needed, too, for he was right on her heels, heavy steps thumping in tandem with hers as she peeled down hallways, negotiated corners, and wound her way deeper into the labyrinth that was Sunnydale Memorial Hospital until she was upon the place where Faith had been fashioned into a living drinking fountain. And though she didn't have a heartbeat or a racing pulse, Buffy still felt physical weight of relief all the same when she pushed inside and found that the other slayer hadn't been moved or worse. She was still there, still hooked up to machines keeping her alive, still breathing, and still full of all that blood.

"So," Buffy said, calmer now, "empty building, clear path to our destination... Is it just me or does this have all the hallmarks of a trap?"

Spike snorted his agreement. "So, what are you thinkin'?"

"A whole bunch of things. The foremost being, I really want to get this over with. If that blood is dosed with something, it could knock us out, which would conveniently get us where we need to go a lot faster." It could also be full of the poison that had almost claimed Angel's life, though Buffy didn't say that part aloud. She thought it likely that Adam had surveillance equipment set up through the relevant parts of town and didn't want to give him any ideas. The poison was one thing the gem had not been tested against; there was no telling if the original fabricator had even known about it.

Even still, Buffy thought it reasonable to conclude, based on everything she'd been told, that Adam didn't want her dead. At least not yet. That much might be a gamble but, considering the alternatives, she decided it was one she was willing to make.

"I think we go for it. Or I do, at least."

"Anything you're drinking, I'm also drinking, Slayer."

"That's ridiculous. If it does something—"

"It does it to both of us."

Buffy squared her shoulders, gearing up for an argument, but the fight sapped out of her the second her eyes met his. There was no point. If Faith's blood was drugged, it couldn't be used as the antidote. They'd die one way or another. At least this way, it was together.

Seconds later, she was at the side of the girl she'd put into a coma in a desperate bid to save a vampire she was sure she'd have to one day kill herself, watching Spike lift a lifeless right hand to his mouth as Buffy took the left. They met each other's eyes and held there before freeing their fangs, and kept looking at each other as they sliced into Faith's skin and began to drink.

She'd asked once what it was like, the taste of slayer blood, never truly imagining she'd be in a place to see for herself. Sure, there was the odd chance that the Council might decide she was too dangerous to be kept alive and she'd have to negotiate the precarious position of being hunted the way she'd once hunted; she'd also entertained the thought that Faith might just decide to come after her on her own if she ever awoke. Dish out some revenge for the whole Angel incident. But in the end, Buffy couldn't wrap her mind around draining the life

out of another slayer, even if she were pushed to kill. There was a very arbitrary but still very real line in her head separating her from true monstrosity.

But then, life and death had taught her to never say never. And now here she was, swallowing down pure ambrosia that did more than just warm her insides—that spread through her dead body and filled it with life. With fire. With purpose. With a sort of stirring that she felt in her fangs and her fingers and between the strands of her hair, made headier by the dark, hungry way Spike looked at her as he drank. That familiar craving that was never fully satisfied, that had her reaching for him again and again, desperate to never drop from those immeasurable highs. It was wrong, she knew, but it was also innate. The urge to drop Faith's wrist and follow what her body wanted. Chase her id and fuck the rest.

"Interesting," came a booming voice from her right, doing what Buffy had thought was impossible and startling her out of her skin. "You're not drinking to kill."

She and Spike moved as one, retracting their fangs and twisting to the hospital door, where stood a hulking monstrosity with mismatched eyes and a pleased, slightly insane smile on its patchwork face.

Here it was. The trap part.

Willow had described Adam in such a way that Buffy hadn't been able to truly picture him, but even so, he was almost exactly what she would have expected him to look like. The mismatched skin, the metal plates, the pieces that were human and the ones that definitely weren't. But while he was definitely large, he somehow wasn't as mountainous as she'd been expecting. Just another oversized man who thought he was in control of the situation and was about to learn how very wrong he was.

For that the other thing—something Buffy felt the way she'd felt little else. The hum beneath her skin, the blood working its way through her body, made her something more than strong. Something that gave her the knowledge, the certainty, that whatever was coming was going to be over before it started.

"As popular as this restaurant is, I thought we might need a reserva-

tion, but it was no trouble getting in,” Buffy said, stepping toward him. “Do we have you to thank for that?”

Adam didn’t so much as blink. “I was curious if you would sample her, as she is what you once were. Curiouser still if her blood would affect you, the way it does other vampires.”

“So you just made sure the place was clear in case we swung by for a pick-me-up?”

“They do as I command. It wasn’t difficult.” Adam smirked—or she thought he smirked. “The demons in this town know not to interfere with my experiments.”

“And how would you rate this experiment? One to ten? Is your curiosity satisfied?”

“Not quite. I haven’t determined if there has been a noticeable change.”

The Franken-thing stomped into the room—not out of anger, just that he was so large that stomping seemed to be his default factory setting, which again made her wonder how he’d managed to materialize in the doorway without detection. But then, her senses had been on slayer-blood overload, the inside of her head pounding all on its own. He could have done a tap-dance and she might not have noticed until he’d said something.

Adam stopped when he was towering just in front of her in a way Buffy knew well. The way *all* men did whenever they wanted to intimidate her, make her feel every inch of her five-foot-might-as-well-be-nothing since the men in her life, with few exceptions, were skyscrapers. Only Buffy had stopped blanching and backing up well before she’d been turned—always enjoying the confusion, even annoyance, that resulted from her refusal to be unsettled. To his credit, Adam seemed more intrigued than bothered by her lack of fear. Nice to know he was a progressive monster.

“I would like you to hit me,” he intoned.

Music to her ears. “Oh, would you?”

“It seems the most reliable way to test what, if any, impact the blood had on you. I know what it is like to be struck by a vampire. Once the blood is out of your system, I will test what it is like to be struck by a turned slayer.”

“Oh, you will? You just expect me to hang around?”

There was another smirk. “Did I not mention? I’m afraid you will not be leaving. I would have thought that much obvious. Now...” He spread his arms like he was the demon messiah and favored her with what would be the last smug look he gave anyone. “Please. It is better to cooperate.”

Buffy glanced at Spike, who looked like he might bust up laughing at any moment. It really was going to be this easy. The gem, the experiments, every precaution they’d taken, and Adam was going to just stand there and let them do what they’d set out to do—see if he could be felled with a punch.

“Well,” she told him sweetly. “Okay. For science.”



IN THE END, it had taken them both. A slayer turned vampire and a vampire who hunted slayers, both juiced up on the most potent blood on the market, both punching their fists through the flesh of a Mary Shelley creation, both there to watch the moment Adam’s confidence flickered before disappearing completely. Before he became nothing more than a useless lump on the floor, his core torn out, his systems shut down forever. Another monster who had assumed he was the exception to the rule and had died learning the truth.

Buffy was glad it had taken both her and Spike to do it. The thought of having the strength on her own, even under unique and unlikely-to-be-recreated circumstances, was a bit too heady. She was stronger than any other vampire out there but not truly invincible, and that was all right. The world was more interesting when her enemies had a fighting chance.

She didn’t know how much she and Spike would wear the rings, then, though she was very glad to have them. It’d certainly make traveling a lot less dangerous. And the next time there was an apocalypse to stop or an Adam to humble, she’d feel better having the extra insurance. Knowing that even if the world was lost, the man she loved wouldn’t be.

But there was certainly no sense staying on the Hellmouth if things

were going to be nice and safe. Safe was nice. Alive was better. And fighting was what gave her life.

It hadn't been the plan—the staying part. Not long-term, at least. Buffy had been antsy after the showdown, desperate to get back on the road, back to the life lived in hotels and between bar fights, of doing whatever she wanted whenever she wanted, not a care in the world. But then Willow had asked her to stay—not forever, but killing Adam wasn't enough. They had a whole town to reclaim as theirs. Demons who had gotten used to running the show, and as much fun as that sounded, Buffy had been to demon-run towns and she hadn't liked the idea of Sunnydale joining their ranks. Not with all that chaotic hell-mouth energy for the taking. So she and Spike had talked and they'd agreed to a couple of weeks. They'd stick around to get things back status-quo-like. Make it clear to any of Adam's potential successors that they would meet the same fate as their toppled king if they got too big for their britches.

And so they had, and what had followed had been an undertaking with a difficulty set firmly on medium. There hadn't been any trouble from Adam's creations, as they had—as Willow had predicted—gone down with the ship that was Adam himself. Just switched off, batteries removed, the second the signal to their creator blinked out. A few demons hadn't wanted to accept the reversion to the way things had been before and had required a practical demonstration, which Buffy had been all too willing to deliver. Things hadn't gotten tense again until the military started poking in around the remains of whatever it was they'd been trying to do build in Sunnydale, eventually shouldering their way back to the top of the chain of command. But even that had been a let-down, as they had just stuck around long enough to grab their shit and make tracks again, more concerned with destroying evidence they had been there at all than lending a hand.

All the while, everything else had slowly gone back to normal. The Summers house had emptied with everyone available to return to their homes or dorms or parents' basements; Buffy had taken to patrolling out of habit, always with Spike at her side, ready to make mincemeat out of any creature that decided to try its luck. Faith was given priority status at the hospital when the medical staff returned, and Buffy

learned there was a good chance she'd awakened in the middle of Adam's reign but been clobbered hard enough to fall back under. Whether she'd ever open her eyes again for real remained a big question mark, but the doctors thought it possible. Maybe even likely. Her recovery had already been on the side of remarkable.

One day, Buffy realized they had no more reasons to stay. Her friends were returning to their lives, her mom had reopened the gallery, people were once again walking the streets as though the entire demonic siege had been a fever-dream. Yet she and Spike were still at 1630 Revello Drive, still in the basement, but the urge she'd had to hit the road had dwindled to... Well, a tickle.

When she'd mentioned it to Spike, he'd given her a soft smile, kissed her brow, and said, "Was wonderin' when you'd notice."

There hadn't been much to discuss, it turned out. The Hellmouth kept them busy, and Buffy was rebuilding the bridges that mattered most to her. The world remained out there—the world she wanted to see, explore—but the world would always be there so long as she was around to protect it. The same couldn't be said for her friends or her mom. One day, the sun would come up on a world without them in it, and Spike was happy to let Buffy have the time she needed to be with those she loved while they were here. He was also happy to grab her and blow on out of town if things went pear-shaped with her mates, but the choice should be hers. She'd had so little of it before.

So the plan had gone from leave, to stay for a little bit, to stay for a little longer, to stay long enough that they'd need their own place. One where they could be loud if they wanted without worrying about giving anyone nightmares. A crypt, maybe, but done up. Posh. Nice. Right next to the heart of the action in these parts. She was considering it. She was considering all sorts of things, and enjoying the liberty that came with not needing to have all the answers at the ready. Living as she never had. Getting to apply her attention to the really crucial questions—like what she ought to wear to the Bronze's grand reopening. Something sexy but practical. There was almost no chance there wouldn't be trouble.

God, she hoped there was trouble. Life was so boring when there wasn't.

In the end, she decided on a red camisole and sleek black pants, with her hair done up so the bite mark on her throat would be on full display. A reminder to some, a warning to others.

“Ready to go, pet?”

Buffy turned around, met Spike’s sparkling blue eyes and grinned. To him, it would always be an invitation.

“Don’t you look delectable?” he purred, crossing the basement floor to wrap his arms around her, his gaze pinned exactly where she wanted it pinned. Let him look at that all night—or until he could pull her into a dark corner and convince her to be just a little bad because it felt so good.

And she’d let him. She was evil, after all.

“Could skip out, you know,” he went on, pressing his brow to hers. “Enjoy having the house to ourselves for a change. Know there are some high notes I know I’ve missed helping you hit.”

“Behave.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

Buffy smirked and pressed up to kiss him. “We’ll make our own fun.”

“Promises, promises.”

“Hey, don’t we always?”

Spike smirked, considering her lips. “Do at that.”

“So come on, Barbie. Let’s go party.”

His eyes darkened. “And later?”

“Ah, ah, ah, yeah.”

“I’ll hold you to it.”

And because she was the luckiest girl in the world, she knew he would.