

# INSIDE MAN

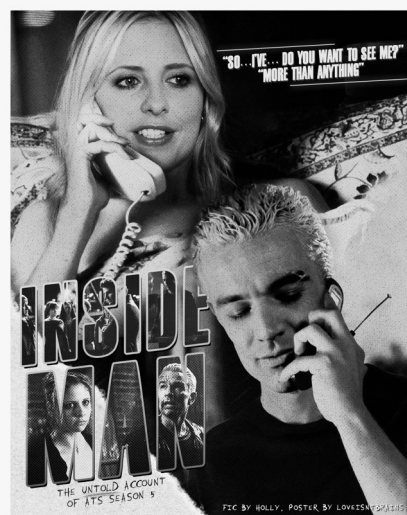
*The Untold Account of Angel Season 5*



HOLLY DENISE











IF HE'D BEEN ANYTHING BUT A VAMPIRE, KEEPING FOCUS ON THE numbers scrawled across the strip of paper in his hand would have been impossible for how hard he shook. As it was, they remained clear as day—a collection of digits separating him from hearing her voice. A voice that he'd carried with him as the world had collapsed, focusing on those three little words that he'd longed so much to hear, even if he'd known they weren't true.

Bloody cowardly thing, ringing the girl. But after these last weeks of imagining how their grand reunion would go down, he'd more or less convinced himself that a rejection from a distance was something he could survive. Seeing her, watching her as she said those three little words, seeing her gratitude but not feeling her warmth—that was something Spike knew he wouldn't walk away from.

*William the Bloody Coward.*

For the seventh time since he'd crowded himself into the phone booth, he lifted the receiver off the hook and pressed it to his ear. The offensively loud dial tone filled his head, made him all too aware of his movements as he fed the machine quarters. That place where he'd told her he'd felt his soul seemed heavy again. Heavy yet fragile.

*Do it this time. Don't be a ponce.*

Maybe she wasn't even home. Girl like Buffy, now one of thousands, had better things to do than lounge around her flat all day, yeah? She could be out with Dawn, enjoying the Roman nightlife. Perhaps chatting up a new sweetheart or, bugger, doing just about anything because her life was hers again. Odds were high she was out there living it.

If he got a machine, that would be the deciding factor. The bloody Powers telling him what he already knew. Leave the girl alone, let her remember him as the bloke who had given her the world, free of any hint of what they'd had or might have had. Free of the baggage that was his love.

Fuck, he was dialing.

And it was ringing.

*She's not home. She's not. I know she's—*

"Hello?"

A whimper pressed past his lips before he could stop it, soft and strangled but there, nonetheless. It was her.

"Hello?" Buffy repeated, urgent now. "Who is this? What's wrong?"

Right. Brilliant. Spike opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again, his mind blanking out on him. He hadn't given thought to what he might say—hadn't given thought to anything at all, beyond the number itself.

"Look," she said, that trademark Summers exasperation coming through loud and clear now. He could almost picture her, pinched expression, narrowed eyes, mouth all pouty. "If I don't know who this is, I can't help you. So either start blabbing or—"

"Buffy."

The line went silent, but he knew she was still there. Could hear her breathing. Hell, he could hear her heart pounding, and relished the sound.

"Do us a favor and don't talk here for a minute," Spike continued in a rush. "Or...just listen. Or, bloody hell, go ahead and hang up on me if you like. That'll tell me what I need to know. Let me go on with the last thing you telling me is that you love me. I can live with that. I just...needed to..."

He ran out of words before he was ready, and the silence that followed was perhaps the longest of his existence. Including all those

times he'd winked out while haunting the halls of Wolfram and Hart—even that stretch when he'd thought he was being dragged to Hell by inches. No one could do silence like Buffy Summers.

But then she did speak. A single word, somewhat choked. "How?"

He huffed a weak laugh in response. "Bloody good question, that. Still workin' out the details."

"Wh-where are you?"

"Los Angeles."

"You're in LA."

"Yeah. Seems someone thought a certain law firm would want its pretty dangly back. Landed up in Angel's office."

Something heavy crashed on the other end of the line. "Angel? You're with Angel? When? Spike, I... *How?*"

"Not with. Just left, point of fact." God, this was awkward. He should have ripped the sodding payphone off its mount the second he'd seen it. Better yet, torn the paper with her number on it into as many tiny pieces as possible and tossed them into the sewer. "I shouldn't have called. Didn't mean to spring anything on you. I just—fuck, I dunno. I'll leave you alone."

He almost had the phone back on the hook when the air exploded with her shrill voice, however muted. "Spike! Spike, don't hang up on me. Spike!"

He paused, staring at his hand, at the mouthpiece, hard breaths tearing through his body.

"Spike!"

The next thing he knew, he had the receiver pressed to his ear again. "Still here, pet."

"I... I can't believe it." A pause, then something that sounded suspiciously like a sniff. "Sorry, I'm just... Are you real?"

Spike's throat tightened, the backs of his eyes suddenly burning. The way her voice trembled, a bloke could fool himself. He had plenty in the past.

"Wasn't for a while," he replied, fighting back the torrent of emotion—determined to keep the longing and fear and anger and love from breaking through. "Was a ghosty, sent to the big boss man by post. Just recently got my body back."

“How...how long?”

“Few weeks.”

“Weeks? You’ve been back *weeks*?” She was gathering herself back—he could hear it. That steely determination that informed every move she made, helped her power through whatever tried to slow her down. “What the hell, Spike? Why am I just now hearing this? Why did it take you this long to call me?”

“Oi! Just said it, didn’t I?”

“You said you had your body back for weeks!”

“No, I—I meant I’ve been *back* for a few weeks. Body thing just happened.”

“That doesn’t make it better! You’ve just been, what, hanging around Angel and no one decided to, say, call me and let me know that you’re... That you’re not...”

Spike released a long sigh, pressing his brow against the side of the payphone, his eyes falling shut. Then it occurred to him he might be running out of minutes, so he fed the thing a few more quarters. “Not like anyone knew it’d matter,” he muttered as the coins rattled around.

“How the *hell* can you say that?”

“Dunno. Fall on any of your exes’ lips recently?”

The words were out before he could stop them, before he could process what he meant by them, but fuck, they were there. Open and honest and real and it still hurt. He’d tried to rationalize it away, tried telling himself it had just been a *hello* like she’d said, that she couldn’t crawl from his side after a night like the one they’d had and snog another bloke. And not just any other bloke, but Angel.

She’d snogged Angel after standing there in her kitchen, looking at Spike with those eyes that had haunted him across continents, telling him that she’d been there with him right after he’d put everything on the sodding table.

It was seeing that, seeing her *basking* with Angel that had stayed with him. He’d had nothing but time these last few weeks, after all. Time and annoying his wanker of a grandsire while dodging the forces that had seemed determined to pull him into the underworld. Angel bickering about how he hadn’t mattered, how none of it had mattered,



how Spike's soul was something he'd assumed so he could get his dick wet.

Granted, despite the bloody *basking* and whatever show he'd put on while in front of Angel's little gang of merry men, Spike wasn't an idiot. It had taken just a handful of seconds to realize why Angel was so touchy these days.

Not because Spike didn't matter to Buffy, but because he did. Spike mattered enough that Buffy had filled Angel in on everything following the Hellmouth's destruction, a conversation that had apparently included grilling him endlessly on just where the magical doo-dad that had spelled his demise had come from.

Buffy had cared. She might have even loved him as she'd said...

...but it hadn't stopped her from leaping into the big sod's arms the second he'd blown into town.

All of that might not have mattered once upon a time. Ever since the soul, Spike had subsisted on one piece of irrefutable understanding—Buffy owed him nothing. She never had. Anything he got from her would be a miracle. Had it hurt watching her salivate all over Robin Wood? Of course it had, but he'd respected that her decisions were hers to make. That getting a soul guaranteed nothing. Hell, he'd told her as much that night they'd shared at the house. He wouldn't ask.

And he hadn't. But she'd given. Once she'd given, once she'd put out the possibility...

Well, it hurt.

"Let me get this straight," Buffy said through teeth he could tell were good and clenched. "You've been back...for *weeks*...and you didn't tell me because I kissed Angel?"

Good. Had her on the phone for less than five minutes and he'd managed to brass her off. Glad to know he still had it. If he was going to piss all over the grand gesture that was saving the world, he might as well do it in a loud, offensive fashion.

"Had plenty of time to think, didn't I? Stuck between worlds, not able to touch anything. Not able to go bloody anywhere too far from that necklace. So yeah, I thought about it. It and us and everything and how much I..." He pressed his eyes closed, hissed out a long breath. Then grumbled and fed the sodding machine a few more quar-

ters. Bloody awkward way to break up the conversation. "I didn't know if you'd care that I was back," he said after the last coin had rattled to silence. "Had a nice, tidy exit. Not like you need me bringing you down all the time. Or chasin' after you for something you don't wanna give. Can't be that bloke anymore. Even for you."

There was a long pause. "I don't know what to say."

Again, he laughed. Couldn't help it. "Dunno either. I just..."

"Are you planning to stay in LA? Or will you leave?"

"Hadn't given it much thought, to be honest. Guess I was waitin' to hear what you wanted."

"And...what do you want?"

Loaded bloody question, that. But a useless one.

"You know what I want, Buffy. Nothing's changed on that score." Another pause. "Wanted to know you made it out. That you're okay. Once I knew that you were, I wanted...what I've always wanted. But it's not about me, like I told you."

"I want to... Spike, can I just think? This is all..."

Yeah, he knew what it was. Knew he should have hung up the second he'd heard the call go through, and definitely the instant she'd picked up the phone. But more than a century of seeking out pain made for one bloody difficult habit to break, and he'd been unable to do anything else. Part of him, all of him, had needed to know.

"How about you just forget I called. Forget everything."

"What? No! I don't want—"

"Didn't mean to muck things up, love. I just needed to hear—"

"Don't. Spike, don't you *dare*." Now her voice was trembling again, a familiar tremble. One tied intimately with anger. "Don't hang up on me. Don't. I need to know how to reach you."

"No, you—"

"Spike, *goddammit*, you can't just dump all of this on me and then... That's not how it works. I'm still trying to figure out if this is real or not. Please. Please. *Please*."

That last bit was choked out on the coattails of a sob, and something heavy and painful wrenched in his chest. The stinging he'd felt earlier matured into tears, bitterly cold and tracking down his cheeks in hard, unforgiving rivers. And all of it, the weight of what he'd spent

the past couple of days trying to dodge, came tumbling down upon him. That emptiness, that place that only Buffy had ever made warm, seizing so hard he resented his perfectly solid body and its capacity for enduring sensations like this. Hating that he loved her as much as he did, hating that he'd called, and hating that he wasn't already on his way to see her, hating that he'd decided to do it like this.

Which was how, he reckoned, he found himself rattling off the number of the cell he'd lifted from Angel's new law office not once, not twice, but three times as Buffy struggled to gather herself on the other end of the line. Never mind that he hadn't called from that line for a reason, that he'd chosen a bloody payphone because of its anonymity. There was no way he could deny her anything, after all. Not when she was crying nearly as hard as he was, reading back the number a handful of times before she was satisfied she'd copied it down right.

"Spike?" she asked after a long stretch of silence, sounding hoarse and exhausted. "Do you..."

But she didn't ask.

He heard it anyway.

"I love you," he said. "Always, Buffy."

And he hung up before she could reply.



SPIKE DIDN'T KNOW what he expected. He'd long since given up trying to predict how Buffy would react to just about anything, and he'd dropped a lot on her with no warning. She was right to be miffed, even hurt, and it sure as fuck wasn't like he was blameless in the mixed signals their relationship had been reduced to before he'd burned up closing the Hellmouth. Well, perhaps slightly more blameless than her, but Buffy had, if nothing else, more than her fair share of reasons to keep him at arm's length, even if it smarted.

There were things he wasn't proud of, either. Shagging Harm, for one. Had seemed like a good idea at the time... Except that wasn't even true. It had been reactionary, desperate, a response to suddenly being back in the world where his existence had stakes, where he could go to Buffy if he wanted and try to make a go of things. And the bone-

rattling terror that she wouldn't be happy to see him, that the moment in the cave, as the world had come crashing down around them, was the closest he'd get to having her love for real. Didn't help matters that Harm had called him out on it, known he was trying to distract himself from the reality of his existence. That he was thinking about Buffy, as he so often had when they'd been together.

In his mind, up until a certain point, Buffy had always reacted the same way upon learning he was alive. A big smile, the likes of which he'd rarely gotten from her, followed by her throwing herself into his arms and kissing his lips off. She'd whisper that she'd meant it, that he was an idiot, that he was *shirty*, and then beg him to take her to bed. All wine and roses, romance and happily-ever-afters for the bloke who least deserved it.

That image had altered over time. Buffy's radiant smile had turned bittersweet, her eyes less loving and more uncertain, even pitying. Then he'd hear her clear her throat so she could tell him just how much his sacrifice had meant to her, how much she valued him, but that was where it ended. And he'd hated her a bit and hated himself a lot for resenting the threat of a rejection he knew he deserved.

Just because he didn't deserve her didn't mean he'd stopped wanting, and didn't make the pain of her eventual rejection sting any less. Also didn't help matters that Angel had been there the entire time, making snide comments and digging in wherever he could that Buffy would always choose him, never mind the visual evidence Spike had to back that assertion up.

The soul made it easy to see that Buffy owed him nothing, but it did rot for the pain that came from being everyone's second pick. Especially to the same git who had made his existence miserable the first time around, and all the times that mattered.

It was an hour or so before his cellphone buzzed with an incoming call. An hour in which he'd had time to secure himself a place to hole up for the night, seeing as he wasn't leaving town just yet. The motel he'd chosen wasn't posh—he didn't have much in the way of cash, as it was—but it was far enough away from Wolfram and Hart that he no longer felt like he was in Angel's shadow.

Spike let the phone ring a couple of times before drawing the thing

out of his pocket, sure he'd see an LA area-code across the screen and almost paralyzed with fear when the same number he'd agonized over earlier flashed up at him.

*It's her.*

He swallowed, then flipped the phone open and brought it to his ear. "Hello?"

There was a pause before a long sigh tickled his ear. "I... I kinda thought I might have imagined everything earlier. Including the phone number. But it's really you."

"That relief or disappointment I hear?"

"Is that a serious question?"

He swallowed but didn't respond. He wasn't sure he could be honest without sounding needy or pathetic.

"So...I've... Do you want to see me?" This she didn't so much say as blurt, and the resulting warmth that flooded his system nearly had him bawling like a bloody baby all over again. Just when he'd managed to get himself under control.

"More than anything," he said in a rush, pride be bloody damned. "Do you...wanna see me too?"

It likely only lasted half a second, but the silence that followed seemed to stretch longer than his entire stint as Wolfram and Hart's resident spook.

"Yeah. I mean, yes, Spike. I do. I've...missed you."

Now he did tear up. Couldn't help it. He already felt raw, stripped down and bare from their last talk, but *god*, how long had he waited to hear those words from her? Waited to hear that he was wanted, was missed?

"You have?" he asked.

"Yes, you dope. Of course I..." Buffy breathed out again. "Look, there are...things we need to talk about. And they're not phone things. They're in-person things."

"Can be on the first plane over, pet. Just—"

"No."

And there it was. The more familiar sensation where she was concerned. "Oh. Right."

"God, that came out wrong. I want you here, Spike. For many,

many reasons, not the least of which is I just need to see you.” She paused. “But that’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about. Some of the thinking I’ve been doing. Trying to be Rational Buffy and think like a general and not...not the Buffy who thinks with her...not-so-rational parts.”

Spike didn’t know how to respond to that so he didn’t try.

“How involved are you with Angel?” she asked.

Well, if she was trying to keep him on his toes, she was certainly succeeding. “What?”

“You know, the whole evil law firm thing? The whole...him working there thing has us all a little wigged.” She paused again, released off a deep breath. “Actually, a lot wigged, especially since there’s apparently some prophecy involved that talks about the vampire with a soul being a pivotal figure in the apocalypse and not knowing which side he’s on. And since we average an apocalypse a year, it seems like, this is all just a little too...big bad evil moving the pieces where they want them to trigger the next attempt at world endage.”

He tightened his grip on the phone, not realizing it until the plastic whined its complaint. “You...know about that?”

“*You* know about that?”

“Bits and pieces, yeah.” Spike squeezed his eyes shut, demon instinct fighting against the soul, desperate to keep the next bit just to himself but also knowing he couldn’t. For as much as he loved Buffy, he would never be content assuming the role of consolation prize. If he were to receive the big Shanshu reward... That’d simple things up nicely for her. Human versus inhuman, soul or not. But he didn’t want to be the choice she made because it was smart—he wanted to be the choice she made because she loved him.

So he swallowed his selfishness, the jealousy he doubted he’d ever outrun, and forced the words out. “You know the rest of it? The part after the apocalypse?”

“You mean becoming human.”

Spike hissed out a breath. “You do know.”

“Yeah. I know. Willow is looking into a few things for me. Willow and Andrew, if you can believe it.” She sighed. “Just...because with

there being two of you. I thought...maybe, because of what happened at the Hellmouth."

"You thought I'd get the big prize?"

"I didn't know."

"Well, still got my fangs as of right now. And you said you wanted us to duke it out." He left out the part where they already had, and Angel had gotten himself nice and thrashed as a result. Somehow he didn't think she'd take kindly to the state he'd left her honey bear in, bloody phenomenal as it had felt at the time. "Might get your chance."

"We'll cross that bridge when and if we get to it."

"Make things nice and tidy for you and Angel, wouldn't it?"

"Spike, I'm not doing more jealous vampire crap right now. I want to see *you*. You can't even know..." She trailed off, and he felt like a right wanker. If she knew about the Shanshu, she'd known about it earlier when she'd been sobbing into his ear and reciting the phone number he'd given her until she was satisfied she had written it down correctly. "You can't know what it's been like. And if...if Not Rational Buffy were in charge right now, she'd be telling you to get your undead butt on a plane. But Rational Buffy needs someone in LA. Someone she trusts implicitly."

Fuck, his eyes were wet again. Spike rubbed his palm along his brow, trying his bloody damndest to keep from shaking. "That someone me?"

"Do you really need me to answer that?"

"Think I'd like to hear it."

A beat. "I trust you, Spike. With...pretty much everything, but especially this."

"This being?"

"Being my man on the ground. Staying close to Angel. Reporting what he does—telling me if you think he's going bad and giving me enough warning to get the girls in line so we can be ready to move if the time comes."

He barked a short laugh, torn—as he had been so often with her—between elation and frustration. She was the only woman in the bloody world who could make him both at the same time. "Angel's not gonna let me anywhere near him. Wouldn't believe it if I just showed up after

I made a point of telling the lot of them to sod off and that I was going to see you. Already been on him for signing on with Evil Incorporated, anyway. He'd know somethin' was up the second I—"

"So don't go back to Wolfram and Hart. I don't want you there anyway."

"Oh no?"

"Spike, they gave Angel the amulet that killed you."

"Saved the world in the process."

"But on those terms? If I'd known what Wolfram and Hart was or that was where that thing had come from, I'd have never let you put it on."

"And the First woulda won. Seems like it ended up all right—"

"All *right*? I lost you. And the world was saved with the help of an evil that is perhaps even bigger than the First. Or an evil that *is* the First—if the First is the original evil and these lawyer guys have been around all multi-dimensiony since the beginning of time, according to Giles. How are those terms good?" Another long breath. "I need you to do this. I need to know what's coming. If you can't get anything by being on the ground, that's one thing. But I know you and I know you can. You'll find a way."

Of the many things that had changed over the course of their last year together in Sunnydale, Buffy's unerring faith in him was something Spike doubted he'd ever get used to. Had been easy, in fact, to believe he'd imagined it—maybe imagined their whole bloody relationship—these days. Symptomatic of hanging around Angel, he suspected. The berk was associated with nothing but bad memories and worse realizations. Nothing that Spike had was actually his. All of it belonged to Angel, all the time. Even Buffy, who belonged to no one.

"I can do that," he promised, hoarser than he would have liked. "Never gonna be Angel's favorite person, but some of his people are all right. Fred likes me well enough. Sweet little thing bent over bloody backwards to get me my skin back. Told me I was worth saving and everything."

Her laugh filled his ear, and again his gut twisted. He wasn't sure he'd ever made her laugh before, though he also wasn't sure what it was he'd said that had been funny.



"Fred must be a lot less annoying than Andrew with the hero-worship," she replied. "By the way, I'm pretty sure Andrew's writing some epic poem about you. He calls it homework—Giles is training him to be a watcher, if you can believe it—but he gets that dreamy look whenever you're mentioned and starts scribbling on whatever's closest."

Spike threw his head back and groaned. "Do me a favor and don't let him know I'm back on the mortal coil."

"I don't think I'm going to tell anyone." She hesitated, then said, firmer, "I'm *not* going to tell anyone. That's the other thing. With all the changes and everyone being kinda all over the place, and Wolfram and Hart's connections with the being *everywhere* and all, no one can know you're back. They'll wonder why you're not here and I won't have a good reason, and telling them that you're keeping an eye on things there would just... It could get back to Angel, and I don't want that to happen."

He grinned in spite of himself. For as much as things changed, many others remained the same. Buffy shouldering the weight of the world, even in a world where there were hundreds of other slayers to assume the responsibility, would forever be one of them. Not that he didn't see the logic there—the more people who knew what he was doing, the more opportunity for it to blow up in their faces.

Though there was an obvious problem with the plan.

"Say someone figures out that I'm more undead than dead again on their own, pet. What then?"

"A bridge we'll cross when we come to it. Though you better have a reason handy for not having made tracks across the globe."

That much was easy enough—the same reason he'd waffled on whether or not to call her in the first place. That seed of doubt that had blossomed over the last few weeks, the fear that his best days with Buffy were behind him and determination to hold onto those memories, those *last* memories, as the pinnacle of their relationship.

"I'll say I thought you'd rather remember me the way I went out. Cheapen the exit, you know. Showing up after a big finish like that."

The line was quiet long enough that he wondered if the call had dropped.

“Spike, that’s...really lame. Like super lame.”

He couldn’t help it—he laughed. “Close enough to the truth, though.”

“What? You really thought that?”

“It’s why I told you to hang up, remember? Was bloody terrified—”

“You really thought I’d rather remember you dead than...than...”

Bugger. Her voice had thickened again and this time it *was* his fault. And he could do nothing but listen as she worked through it. The distance separating them took on a life of its own, and that life was painful. At the moment, more painful than anything he could remember, soul trials included. And he could have staked himself for thinking what he’d thought, believing it even for an instant, because whatever else, he and Buffy *had* had something remarkable toward the end. She’d believed in him when she’d had no reason to, when no one else had, and trusted him to be her champion. All of that had meant the world.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said earlier,” Buffy managed to say after a stretch. “About...when I kissed Angel.”

“Buffy—”

“And how that... God, I can be such an idiot.” She sniffed again. “You remember what you told me right before I left?”

That holding her had been the best night of his life? Yeah, things like that tended to stick.

“You said you were terrified.”

It took a moment, but that part of the speech came back to him. As much as had remained unspoken between them, she couldn’t say that he’d withheld anything there at the end. “I remember that.”

“Thing is...I was too.”

Spike exhaled, blinking rapidly. “You were?”

“Yeah.”

He thought she might say more, *wanted* her to say more, to explain, but wasn’t surprised when she didn’t. Buffy wasn’t one to talk at length about her feelings. Saying as much as she’d said had likely taken a lot out of her, as it was.

Buffy’s true feelings about anything were often found in the silences that surrounded her words.

"That's something, then," he replied at last.

"Something?"

Every bit of him warmed at the hesitation in her voice. "A whole lot of something, love."

"I would've been... If I'd found out that you were back and you hadn't told me..." Another whimper sounded through the line. "That would've broken me, Spike. It would've broken me."

That pain hit him again, harder than before. Pain accompanied by a rush of self-hatred almost as intense as what had crawled with him out of the cave when he'd been freshly saddled with a soul. He'd promised himself that his days of hurting Buffy were in the past. Bloody sworn it would never happen again, gone to lengths greater than any man had ever dared to make it fact.

And here he'd nearly hurt her again by doing nothing at all.

"I'm sorry, love. I'm so sorry. I wanted to be there—"

"I know." She sniffed hard, then seemed to compose herself. "Where...where will you go now?"

Spike swallowed, looked around as though the room he'd booked held an answer. "Dunno. Better let Angel and friends know I'm still in town. Or at least get the word back to him. See what happens from there."

"You'll be careful."

"Always."

"And you'll call me."

"If you like."

"I like, Spike. I more than like. I..."

It was there, dangling in the distance that separated them, so close. But she didn't say it, and he wasn't sure whether or not to be disappointed. Despite wanting the words, needing them, as badly as he did, there were some things a man preferred to hear in person. That Buffy loved him, that he'd been wrong on that score, was at the top of the list.

"Just do it," Buffy finished somewhat lamely. "And soon. I don't want to worry."

"Whatever you say, pet."

A long beat.

“I love you, Buffy,” he said, and couldn’t help but smile at her soft sigh.

Even if she couldn’t say it, that she wanted to hear it meant the world. She’d never welcomed it before, never wanted it, but that time was over. Whatever else, they’d started something new.

And he’d carry that knowledge with him until they spoke again.

SHE PICKED UP ON THE FIRST RING, AS SHE HAD EVERY TIME HE'D called this week. Spike didn't know why that kept surprising him, except that it was Buffy and everything about her surprised him. More so now that they were talking as much as they were. Hell, he reckoned at the rate they were going, they would have exchanged more words over the bloody phone line than they ever had in person.

The fact that he couldn't see her, touch her, was both a blessing and a curse. The distance separating them emboldened his nerve like nothing had over the last couple of years, but the inability to gauge how his words landed before she opened her mouth left him feeling vulnerable. Not that he'd ever been anything else with her.

"It's later than usual," Buffy said in a rush. "Are you okay?"

Spike relaxed, staring at the popcorn ceiling above his motel bed. "Don't rightly know, pet. You send someone to follow me?"

"What?"

"Some bloke named Doyle showed up when I was out tonight. Claimed he was responsible for me bein' back and all, that I was the new favorite of the Powers." He paused. "Didn't figure that was you—you'd be a peach and give me a head's up, right?"

"I... Of course. What'd you say his name was?"

“Doyle. Says he gets visions.” That much had worked out just fine. There had been a girl in an alley in need of help and Spike had helped her. Well, he’d helped her then scolded her for needing help in the first place, but points for effort. She’d kept her neck in the end, hadn’t she? “Thought he might be with your lot. Didn’t say as much to him, just in case, since we’re keepin’ it mum that you and I are best friends again.”

“No. I don’t know any Doyle. He’s definitely not working for us.” The concern in her voice made his heart warm. “Start at the beginning. You said he found you when you were out—were you doing anything to draw attention to yourself?”

“You want the truth, pet?”

When she spoke next, it was with an edge that his dick just couldn’t help but respond to. “Yes.”

“Oddest thing I was doin’ at the time was more what I *wasn’t* doin’.”

“Meaning...?”

“I wasn’t shovin’ twenties down some girl’s knickers and hadn’t even thought about orderin’ a lap dance.”

A pause. “You were at a *strip club*?”

He smirked. God, but he loved it when she got jealous. “Needed a place to be seen, didn’t I? In case Team Angel came knockin’. Dropped it to Harm that I was stayin’ in town but god only knows how long it’ll take her to carry that message to King Forehead. I wagered I couldn’t be out doin’ anything to bring too much attention to myself or they’d wonder who I’ve been talkin’ to. So I hunkered down.”

“But...a *strip club*?”

“If it helps, I was pretendin’ it was you doin’ those moves.”

“That doesn’t help! That’s the opposite of help!”

Spike chuckled again, warmth filling his chest. “Just passing the time, love.”

“Well, pass the time some other way.” Buffy sniffed. “So...what else did this Doyle person say?”

“Just that he had a vision. Some chit got herself in a situation with a vamp. Swooped in all heroic-like and saved the day.”

“Uh huh.”

“And sent her on her merry way.” Spike paused to see if she’d press

for more. When she didn't, he asked, "So, what do you figure? Could be this bloke's on our side. He said somethin' about Angel playin' for the wrong team, too, which checks with your theory."

"What else did he say about having brought you back?"

"Didn't get into specifics. Just that I owed my bein' able to throw back drinks and smoke to my dead heart's delight to him."

"I don't know." Buffy blew out a breath. He imagined her brow furrowed, her pretty lips pulled into a pout. "I guess...until we know more, if this guy comes around again, it can't hurt to listen. If he has visions, he might be able to clue us into what's going on at Wolfram and Hart. But... God, I don't know. Until a few months ago, I'd never even heard of Wolfram and Hart. Now I'm having to wrap my mind around this whole *evil law firm* thing that's apparently the biggest of the big bads and my ex-boyfriend might be on their side, meaning I'll get the unique pleasure of having killed him twice."

"Ohh, gonna do Angel in, are you? Can I watch?"

"Spike!"

"What? Think I've earned a ringside seat for that fight, pet."

"You had one for the last one and look how that turned out."

"Well, I'm a bit more motivated this time, aren't I?" He allowed himself a moment to relish the thought of Buffy sticking a stake in Angel's beefy chest, that look of shock that'd overcome the big sod's face just before he exploded into a tidy dust cloud. Hopefully not before getting to see Spike take Buffy in his arms and snog her silly. It was a pretty picture, one he imagined he'd revisit on repeat here for a bit, but also one he wasn't fool enough to think would ever come to fruition. And not something he thought he'd want, anyway. Not that he'd shed any tears over Angel, but he knew what it'd do to Buffy, and the girl had bled enough for the git.

"How are you, pet?" he asked in a softer voice.

"What?"

"Just that. Occurred to me I haven't asked you how you're holding up in all this."

He heard her swallow and exhale. "I don't even know where to begin," she said after a moment. "Is there a way to answer that question?"

A pang hit him square in the chest. "Buffy—"

"I mean, I'm living in a country I never thought I'd get a chance to visit. I'm...homesick for a place I never thought I'd miss. I miss my room, my bed. I miss my mom and I don't have *anything* of hers at all. No photos, none of her favorite art... It's just all gone." She sniffed harder this time, her voice growing thicker. "Xander is off on a mission, Willow and Kennedy too. Giles is getting ready to leave to get stuff set up in London. Faith and Robin are in Cleveland and I'm here with Dawn and Andrew. I haven't been sleeping."

Spike forced out a breath. "No?"

"It's hard...without you. Easier now that I know you're alive but...hard."

"Not like we'd made a habit of it or—"

"I know that," Buffy snapped, more defensive than he'd heard her in a while. "But that doesn't make sleeping any easier. That first night... God, I barely even remember it. Any of it. We got to LA, debriefed Angel and... I think Giles got us a hotel. It didn't really hit me until it was time to sleep that you were gone, because you'd just been there. We'd just... But then you weren't and it became real. I let you die."

"Bugger that. It was my choice."

"Yeah, but I still let it happen. I could've dragged you—"

"Into the bloody sunlight? Wouldn't have lasted either way, the way everything came down. You got out. You did what I wanted."

She didn't argue with that, though he could tell she wanted to. That was his Slayer, through and through.

"Better let you go, be the general and all," Spike said a moment later. "In the meantime, guess we can see what happens with this Doyle fella, 'specially if he gets any more wonky visions."

"I don't want to hang up."

"By all means, pet, let's run up a bloody brilliant phone bill. Pretty sure this'll get charged to Angel's corporate account, anyhow."

"What? No, we need to fix that."

Spike groaned. "Not like he doesn't have the dosh to spare these days."

"I do not want him knowing that you and I are in contact. Absolutely not. I'll get a phone from Giles and send it to you."



“Yeah, and that won’t raise questions?”

“I’ll tell him it’s for this Doyle person. That he contacted me with visions about Angel. And Giles is a lot less likely to get all Sherlock over a phone bill than a building full of bottom-line-focused lawyers.”

“And if he asks why you’re spending time chattin’ so much with a bloke you’ve never met?”

Buffy snorted a little laugh. “I’ll tell him I’m trying a new form of long-distance dating. It wouldn’t be strictly untrue.”

“That what we’re doin’, pet? Long-distance dating?”

“I... Do you want it to be what we’re doing?”

Spike closed his eyes, his chest swelling all over again. Swelling so much he thought he might just burst with it. With how much he loved her. Every stubborn, sexy inch, including the completely daft uncertainty he heard in her voice now.

And he couldn’t help but remember a time that felt like forever ago when that had been his line. How far they’d come.

“Fuck, I love you, Slayer.”

“That’s...not an answer?”

“Yes it is. Now go be brilliant. We’ll talk later.”

He waited for a beat, then another, unsure of what he wanted. Buffy was the bloody master of not discussing things that needed discussing and doing the opposite of whatever she was told. But this thing between them was tenuous and, despite everything that had come before, new. A continuation of what they’d shared in Sunnydale, yes, but one enhanced either by the fact that they were on separate bloody continents or the time that had elapsed since they’d seen each other. Time and loss had a way of rosyng up the past, after all.

At some point, his unanswered *I love yous* wouldn’t be enough for him, but Spike wagered that point was far down the line. For Buffy, all he had was time.

“Get some sleep, Spike,” she said softly and hung up.

Spike lowered the phone and glanced at the clock on the motel nightstand. It was nearly two in the morning, and he had a long night ahead.



BUFFY WAS APPARENTLY QUITE serious about not arousing Angel's suspicions. The next afternoon, the front desk bird at the motel had a package for him. Inside was a cellphone, with care from Rome, and a quick note written on yellow stationery.

*This is for you and me. Don't make any other calls on it. Be careful. I miss you. —Love, Buffy*

Spike had stared at that last bit—*Love, Buffy*—longer than he'd care to admit. He'd also sniffed the sheet a time or two too many, hoping to get a whiff of her. It was there, faint but there. Enough to quiet the voice that kept nattering about how all of this with her was in his head—more spooks like the ones that had haunted him in the basement back in Sunnyhell. Yeah, the First had managed to imitate smells on top of all else too, but the note was something he could hold. Something tangible, something real. That plus her scent and the familiar way she curled her y's was enough to convince him he hadn't gone completely over the rainbow.

The next stretch of hours was an interesting one for reasons aside from unexpected deliveries. Doyle showed up again—showed up and showed Spike to a basement apartment that the bloke claimed was his for the taking. It was modest, a bit Spartan, with a narrow bed barely roomy enough for one vamp, let alone any late-night visitors. Not that Spike was in the market for late-night visitors who weren't short, blonde, and the love of his bloody life, but, in looking at the mattress, he couldn't help but picture himself and Buffy tangled there and trying not to knock one another to the floor.

Of course, in the past, the location hadn't mattered too much. They'd done some of their best shagging under an old rug he'd rescued from the landfill, after all.

The new set-up came complete with a game system—something Spike had never dabbled in before, but found he enjoyed immensely. Gave him something to do aside from trying to catch up on his soaps—a cause he'd given up as a bad job some time ago—and staring at the phone, wondering if Buffy would ring him this time or if he'd need to wait until he knew he'd catch her by herself. That Doyle fancied showing up whenever he liked to drop news would be the price of the

place, and though Spike still didn't trust the git, he found he liked having a corner of the city to call his own.

As soon as he landed at the new flat, things progressed quickly, and there hadn't been time to ring Buffy at all. Doyle with his visions, Wes and Gunn with their surprise drop-ins, the oh-so-pleasant task of saving Angel's pathetic life, and the big group talk following Eve's dismissal—which Spike had somehow managed an invite for without raising anyone's suspicions. Guess rescuing the boss-man came with its perks.

It was nearing nine by the time he traipsed back into the flat, which was early for him and a smidge too early for a certain slayer who was an ocean away, keeping vamp hours, and sleeping through most of her mornings. Calling while Buffy was trying to catch up on kip was a good way to get himself long-distanced staked. Especially since, by her own admission, she hadn't been sleeping well.

Spike had just poured himself a nice cup of blood when his pocket began to vibrate. He fished out the phone—*her* phone—and frowned at the incoming call display.

"Why the hell aren't you still asleep?" he growled upon answering.

"Oh, so this thing *does* work?" Buffy spat back. "I've been freaking out over here. Why didn't I get a call last night?"

"Can't promise I'll ring every day. Got places to be, and what all."

"Places to be? What places?"

"Places like your honey pot's penthouse. Pulled a bloody parasite off Angel's chest and this is the thanks I get?"

That shut her up good and proper. For about five seconds, at least. "What were you doing at Angel's penthouse?"

Spike rolled his eyes, suddenly beyond exhausted. "Got sent there. Doyle had a vision. Seems your boy's been spendin' a lot of time in bed as of late. Lots of wonky dreams and the like—most of which apparently starred yours truly."

"Angel was dreaming about *you*?"

"Funny how much you two have in common, yeah?"

"Spike—wait. Back up. Doyle had a vision and sent you to rescue Angel? What kind of sense does that make if Angel's the bad guy?"

Spike heaved a sigh, wedging the phone between his ear and his

shoulder to free up his hands to give the blood a stir. "Don't know if Angel knows which side he's playing on, to tell you the truth. Think that's part of the problem. But the way these visions work, if Doyle sees it, I aim to do something about it. They wouldn't've sent that vision if they meant for Angel to dust."

"So you saved his life."

He punched in the dials on the microwave. "Course I did."

"Because...the Powers want him alive?"

"They sold it. Woulda done it either way, once I knew."

"Why?"

"Because you love the sod, don't you?" He didn't mean to bark it, but some things couldn't be helped. "Bloody well told you once, couldn't live with you bein' in pain. You think that's something that's gone *away* with the soul? I hurt when you hurt, and even though I'd like nothing more than to do him in myself, I wouldn't do that. Not to you. And I sure as hell wouldn't do it with a bloody parasite. Had the opportunity to stake him a couple weeks back. Thought about it. Wanted to more than you can know. The things he said..." Spike closed his eyes, listening to the rhythm of her uneven breaths against the soft hum of the microwave. "It ever comes down to it, I'll do it proper. Won't let some bloody fungus take all the credit."

A beat. Then another.

"What did he say? What... Spike, what *happened*?"

"None of your concern, love."

"Oh hell yes, it is my concern," Buffy shot back, her voice reaching a pitch. "You fought? With Angel?"

"Someone sent the two of us on a sodding goose chase after I was mojo'd back to the mortal plane," he replied, not sure how much of this he wanted to share—all of it or none of it. "Angel got his knickers in a twist about the Shanshu prophecy and some bloke in his antiquities department claimed there was a cup to drink out of that would make it all final-like, who got the toy surprise at the end of the apocalypse. We took off to find it and beat the ever-lovin' tar outta each other when we got there. I said some things I'm not proud of, other things I think he needed to hear. 'Bout how I'd earned my soul and he

had his forced on him. He told me I'd done it just so you'd shag me again."

Hell, just thinking about that exchange was enough to have his blood hot and his demon ready to take another swing at the tosser. The part of him that was a man knew that Angel had been lashing out, feeling sore about not being the Powers' golden boy anymore, but there had been enough truth in what he'd said, too. Things that he figured would haunt him for a while.

If nothing else, Spike was mollified at Buffy's sharp intake of breath. "He said that?" she demanded in a low, dangerous tone. "He said that to you?"

"Not the company line, then? You don't think that's why—"

"Of course not," she snapped, and he didn't have to strain himself to hear the hurt in her voice. "Spike, I told you this. You looked inside yourself, saw the monster there, and fought back. You're the only vampire in history that's ever done that. I can see why Angel finds that threatening, but to...*dismiss* what you did is just..." He heard her swallow, imagined her throat making the motion. "He was channeling his inner whiny child when I told him about the soul, but that's...low for him."

It really wasn't, but he'd let her hold onto her delusion. "How much does he know?"

"What do you mean?"

"Does he... Does he know what happened that night in—"

"No," Buffy replied firmly. "Not unless Xander or someone told him, but he and Xander aren't exactly best buds. What I told him is you were in love with me and it ended badly and you fought to get your soul back. I didn't tell him about that night. I haven't talked to anyone about that night since it happened—not if I can help it, at least."

He hesitated. "You think that's wise, love?"

"What?"

"Might be good to talk about it with someone."

"Someone...?"

Fuck, was she making this difficult on purpose? "I dunno. A counselor, or what all."

She snorted. "Yeah, I see that going over really well. 'Hi, Mr. Coun-

selor. This one time, my soulless ex-boyfriend lost control and assaulted me. But because he was the exception to every rule on vampires on the planet, he was so horrified by what he'd done that he took off to win his soul back. Is it okay if I love him anyway?' Even with the salary I'm getting from the Watchers Council now, there is no way I'd be able to afford those therapy bills."

It was a good thing he didn't need air. Everything inside him went still, shot through with shock and terror so intense it was a bloody wonder he didn't curl up on himself and start weeping. He wasn't sure how long he was quiet—hell, he wasn't even sure the world had kept spinning—but after a long stretch, Buffy's breath caught and he could practically hear the wheels in her head turning.

"Spike? Are you there?"

Did she not realize what she'd said? Or did she just assume he knew, even if she hadn't been forthcoming with the words since the big spectacular goodbye?

"Sorry, pet," he rumbled. "Just...bit thrown, is all."

"What threw you?"

"You said..."

But he found he couldn't repeat it—not on the chance it had been an accident, slip of the tongue, and she hadn't meant it. Buffy could be a bit dense but she wasn't cruel, especially not now. Not like this. Any time she had been cruel had been with a purpose. Last year when she'd told him that she needed the soulless fighter inside the souled vampire, for one. It had smarted and yeah, he'd wanted to tear her head off, scream at her for being so callous and daft, but he hadn't because he'd understood. Somewhere beneath the hurt, he'd understood.

The cruelty that had come before then... Well, he'd already forgiven her for that. And it certainly had served a purpose.

Buffy wouldn't tease him with her love and then knowingly withhold it. That wasn't her.

"You know what, forget it. Ear's playin' with me is all."

"Oh." But he heard the uncertainty in her voice. "What else...did he say? Angel, when you were fighting. Or was that the worst?"

"Pet, drop it. It's not—"

"So it's *not* the worst. Tell me. I want to know."

“Why?”

“Because...this whole thing with Wolfram and Hart and him being at the helm has me thinking I might not know him as well as I thought I did.” A pause. “Well, maybe not at all. Dawn had some choice words where Angel was concerned that have me thinking all kinds of things that... Let’s just say when your entire town becomes a giant crater, devouring everything you thought you knew and you’re suddenly in charge of not just a few but a few thousand itty bitty slayers, the way you think about things changes.”

“And Dawn said things that have you rethinkin’ the great love of your life?”

Buffy groaned, a long, drawn-out hum. “He’s not.”

“What’s that?”

“You heard me.” She sighed again, sounding somewhere past exhausted. “They’re teenagers, so they’re all little hormone time-bombs. I’m trying to keep them from getting into trouble and these kids keep talking about how they’re *in love* and they sound like children. Because they *are* children. These girls... Some of them are younger than I was. This one, Cassidy, is pretty mature for her age. Cocky and ready to take on the world, but she’s still just fifteen. The same age *I* was when Angel said he fell in love with me, and I was nowhere near as together as she is.”

Spike pressed his lips together, biting back the first response that came to mind, namely because it was self-serving as fuck. Sometimes—times like this—he missed the candor lacking a soul had given him. It had certainly made things easier.

“Gotta remember it wasn’t all that unusual for men to marry girls that age in his day,” he muttered.

“You realize that doesn’t make it better, right?” Buffy asked dryly. “A lot of things weren’t *unusual* in his day that give me the wiggins now. Or are just plain wrong.” She paused. “I’m not... I’m not saying that Angel’s a perv or anything—”

“Then you really don’t know him.”

“But...yeah. Kinda that. The guy I knew, or thought I knew, would never get tangled up with a big evil like Wolfram and Hart.”

“Or his ego’s just big enough he thinks he can actually turn the place around.”

“You’re awfully defend-y of Angel.”

Spike snickered, rolled his eyes. “Hardly. Just...” *Oh bugger, just bloody say it, you coward.* “If it happens, you and me, I want it to be because you want it, not because the shine’s off your first choice. I’ve spent my entire bloody life playing second fiddle to that sod and...I can’t with you. Not again.”

The line was quiet for a long stretch. When she spoke again, her voice was so soft he struggled to make out the words, vampire hearing be damned.

“That’s how it made you feel, isn’t it? When you saw us...”

He could have played dumb but it would do neither of them any favors, so he didn’t. Instead, he swallowed around the lump in his throat and managed, “Yeah. That’s how it felt. Told you I’d had the best night of my life and not twenty bloody minutes later, you’re all over him.”

“I wasn’t *all* over.”

“Difference bein’ what, exactly? Still happened.”

“I know. And...I’m sorry. I told you I was terrified too.”

“You didn’t look it.”

“Spike, think about this for a minute. The night we spent in that house, I told you... Well, a lot, but I do remember being scolded because I told you I wasn’t attainable. And I hadn’t been attainable because being attainable meant being vulnerable and I just... After Angel left, I stopped doing vulnerable.” A beat. “He *crushed* me. Twice. I’d let him close enough to do it more than once and I paid for it. I trusted with everything I was and it wasn’t enough. So when he left... I knew I couldn’t do that kind of pain again so I closed myself off. I didn’t even realize I was doing it. Riley left because I held back from him, I didn’t want to give him the power Angel had once had over me, and I didn’t even *know* that was why he left until it was too late. That night with you... You had tried to get close, to connect to me, and what you told me was...probably the most beautiful thing anyone has ever told me and I wanted to believe it, believe you, believe that we could... But that meant being vulnerable. Attainable, and it’s always been easier



for me to close myself off than open myself up. You had me terrified too. I'm not saying I was thinking about that at the moment Angel showed up and we made with the kissage, but it was there. That's why I told him to leave, too. I didn't need him there messing with my mind. I didn't need *him*. I had you."

Spike wasn't entirely sure when he'd started crying, but when he blinked, a few more tears leaked through, running cold lines down his face. He was vaguely aware that he should say something—Buffy telling him that much, Buffy talking about her feelings at all was so bloody novel he knew he'd never get here again if he managed to bungle it now. If she didn't sound so much like the woman he loved, down to the vocal nuances he knew even his rather brilliant imagination couldn't replicate, he'd put all this down to a dream. Or another robot, programmed to tell him all sorts of pretty lies the real thing would never so much as think, let alone say.

"Spike?"

"Sorry, love, just... When'd you decide this?"

"I've had time to think," she replied, her voice somewhat hoarse. "I try to exhaust myself working with the girls and Giles getting everything together for the new Council but I have to sleep sometime. Or try to. And when sleep doesn't come that's what I think about. All the ways I... The things I wish I'd done or said. Not just to you but a lot to you. And not just what happened at the end—all of it. When we were, uhh, groiny before and how I was then. How I never really slowed down enough to process that you'd actually left to get your soul."

*Bugger.* That was the last thing he wanted her thinking about, though he couldn't deny her words appealed to the selfish git he'd managed to smother beneath the soul. At one point, he'd have relished Buffy's horror, her acknowledgment that he'd done something no other demon could have imagined. Something her precious Angel certainly hadn't done or, it seemed, thought to do any of the three times he'd been stuffed full of soul. The choices had been his, through and through, and he didn't need her shouldering the weight of them. And because she was Buffy, that's exactly what she would do.

"I was awful to you," Buffy continued. "All the things I said, the things I accused you of..."

“Not exactly blameless over here, pet.”

“No, you’re not. But I told you that you couldn’t feel and—”

“Buffy, much as I love hearin’ this, I don’t *need* to hear it. You don’t owe me anything.”

“This isn’t about *owing*. It’s about...knowing.”

“And I know you know, yeah?”

The line went quiet for a long beat—an absolute sort of quiet, lacking the echo of her heartbeat or her breathing. Spike started to think the call might have dropped when she returned, voice even lower now, like she was struggling to hold something in.

“What else did he say? You never told me.”

He sighed again, debated the virtue of playing dumb or just flat out telling her to drop it. She’d already given him more than he’d ever thought to get from her just in the phone calls they’d exchanged since that first day. Any more would be asking for too much—more than he deserved, which of course was easy to do when what he deserved was nothing at all.

But there was something that Angel had told him during that fight that he still heard before he drifted off to sleep. Something he’d choked down and spat back out with his own nasty twist when it had been lobbed—easier to lash back out than curl over and die. That was the curse of having known Angel as long as he had—the prat knew exactly where to aim if he wanted the blow to hurt.

“He said the reason you didn’t love me was because I’m not him.”

He didn’t have to listen hard this time. The breath she sucked in was so sharp it all but sang.

“Excuse me, *what?*”

“Yeah, well. I threw a few things back at him too. Gave as good as I got.”

There was no response, and Spike wished he could swallow the words back. The rush of having spat them out, the rationalization for sharing, seemed cheap in those silent seconds.

But this silence broke, as all silences inevitably did. “Spike, what he said... You know it’s—”

“Better get some kip, pet, since you haven’t been. Or try to. Know

the sun's about to come up where you are but you can't be the general if you're not catching your winks."

One heartbeat. Then another. And another. "You're not gonna let me say it, are you?"

There it was. The opening he'd been waiting for—the one he'd thought he'd gotten just a few moments ago, there on a silver sodding platter. And if he asked, if he waited, the words would come.

But it couldn't happen. Not like this.

"Baby, you better believe there's nothin' in this world I want more than to hear you say it."

"Then why—"

"Wanna make sure when you say it next, we both know you mean it."

Her breath hitched, and the next second she was crying. Not loudly or overly obvious, not even in such a way where he could hear her, but with that quiet Buffy dignity. The same way she'd cried that night at the house. Staring at him as he poured himself out for her, silent tears making their way down her pearly cheeks, that stricken but beautiful look in her eyes as she stared at him and he stared back.

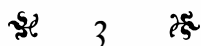
And he was crying again too. Weren't they a pair?

"Spike..."

"Get some rest, Buffy." He pressed his damp eyes closed. "I love you."

"That's not fair."

"Welcome to life, little girl. I'll talk to you tomorrow."



“GOTTA TELL YOU, PET,” SPIKE PURRED, PRESSING THE PHONE CLOSER to his ear and rolling over. The blankets bunched around his waist in a way that was almost too familiar for as brief a time as the bed had been his. “Fella could get used to you bein’ his wakeup call.”

“We have a problem.”

Bugger. All business, then. He dropped the smile and bolted upright, swinging his legs over the side of the mattress. “Tell me.”

“There’s a girl, Dana Rawat. She’s escaped an institution in LA.”

Spike snickered and plucked yesterday’s trousers off the ground. “Don’t tell me you’ve taken to seein’ things, too. Between you and Doyle, this vamp’ll never get a decent day’s rest.”

“Willow flagged her about two months ago as she was doing some sort of...I dunno, check-in spell?”

“A what now?”

“The spell that triggered all the slayers didn’t exactly come with clear-cut directions on how to contact us in case of sudden super-human strength,” Buffy replied in her clipped business voice. “The girls we’ve found have been a mixture of luck, chasing random bylines, and Willow being able to feel them through the spell and using the Scythe. Dana’s one we found but decided to leave where she was.”

“Uh huh. And why’s that?”

“Because she’s insane.”

“Ah, well, you’re singin’ my tune. Need me to hunt the dear down? It’s been a minute, but I have a spot of experience dealin’ with the deranged.”

“Spike, you don’t know this.”

He blinked. “Pretty sure I do, seein’ as it was my life—”

“No, I mean, you don’t know that Dana’s a slayer.”

Spike stood to straighten and button his jeans, wincing as he attempted to work around whatever passed for logic these days in Buffy’s head. “Then color me confused, love. Why’s it you’re callin’ me in a panic if I’m not to move on the information?”

“I want you to move on the info, but you need to play dumb. Odds are Angel will know all of this soon, if he doesn’t already. Not the slayer stuff, but the other stuff. This is the sort of thing that Wolfram and Hart jumps at.” Buffy released a slow, shaky breath. “I need you to see if you can keep him off this. You’ve been working your own angle, haven’t you?”

“Just go where the boy with the visions sends me, anytime I’m not passed out or talkin’ to you.”

“So it won’t be weird for you to turn up at the hospital to do some vampire detecting. If you’re there when Angel’s there, you can control what he learns.”

God, the amount of faith she had in him was humbling at times. Spike sighed and dropped again to the mattress, his still-somewhat-foggy head struggling to keep up with her. “I tag too close and he’ll know something’s up, pet. Made big noise about wanting nothing to do with the lot of them when Wes and Charlie dropped by with their bloody sales pitch. Throw in the fact that I hate him, he hates me, and we’d like nothing more than to dust each other, it’s gonna be a bit of a hard sell.”

Buffy groaned, and though the conversation was nowhere near the vicinity of lascivious, Spike couldn’t help where that groan took his mind. The same place all his sordid-Buffy thoughts went—back to a crypt that was now piled under a town’s worth of rubble. Her legs wrapped around his waist, one hand clutching at his head and the

other clawing at his back as he swirled his hips the way he knew she liked and drove into her again and again. That mouth at his ear, rumbling those sounds and driving him out of his bloody mind.

Fuck. Now he was hard. And apparently short on time to do anything about it, if the urgency in Buffy's voice was anything to go by.

"See if you can stay ahead of him," she said. "Don't even say the word *slayer* aloud at all if you can help it, just in case he has people around."

"People?"

"Wolfram and Hart people? Tell me that's not a thing."

"Oh no, pet, it's a thing. Just still gettin' used to you thinking this way about the wanker."

"You and me both," Buffy muttered, and there was some pain there that he didn't want to pursue. Seemed likely it was the type that might spread to him if he gave it the right prod. "Just keep him from learning what she is until we can get someone out there to take care of it."

"Someone...?"

"Likely Andrew."

Oh, sod it all. "You trust him to handle a full-grown slayer who's truly gone fishing?"

"Gone...what?"

He rolled his eyes. "Andrew's not up for this."

"Things have changed." A pause. "Okay, with him, they've mostly stayed the same but he's taken this becoming-a-watcher thing seriously and he doesn't suck at it. And if he comes, he won't be alone. We'll have a team of slayers ready to step in."

"Why not send them first?"

"They'll be there if Angel needs handling. I'd like to see if he'll work with Andrew without making a fuss."

Spike perked his brows, impressed in spite of himself. "You'll send a band of slayers after King Forehead?"

"If it comes down to that. I hope it doesn't." A pause. "Spike, I—"

"I'll do my bloody best to keep him off the trail, though I reckon my bein' there'll just key up his interest even more."

"Probably, but you can still get to her before he does. You're the guy."

"The guy," he repeated dully.

"The Slayer of Slayers. Hunting down slayers is your thing, not Angel's. I know you can find her first."

The rush of discomfort that came with being reminded of his past didn't disappoint, nor did the other rush. The rush of having Buffy's faith, of knowing she believed in him. Neither sensation felt right, both being relatively new, but he could adjust. He always did.

"Right then," Spike said. "I'll get her for you, pet."

"I know. And Spike—"

"Don't bloody tell me to be careful. You know who you're talking to."

"I wasn't gonna! I was going to remind you that if Andrew sees you, you don't mention that we're in touch. You remember your cover story?"

"Sounds all excitin' when you say it like that." He chuckled, then sighed. "Yeah, I got it. Guess we'll see if he thinks it was as ridiculous as you did."

"I thought it was ridiculous because it was ridiculous."

"Whatever you say, pet."

"It was." She released another ragged breath. "And screw it. You can be mad at me all you want, but I'm saying it—be careful."

Spike grinned. "Hardly ever."

"I know."

"I love you."

"I know that, too."



IN RETROSPECT, maybe he ought to have played it safe.

Spike groaned, pushing his palms against the cool, glass-littered pavement, every muscle in his body screaming its protest. For a girl who had spent most of her days locked up in a mental ward, she'd taken to having super strength like a bloody duck to water. Not that he could blame her—he'd been goading her to fight him proper—but he could have done without being chucked out a bloody window.

And it seemed all the posturing had been for naught. Sodding

Angel hadn't even been in the building to hear him baiting the *demon* inside the girl. For a bloke who had once been a detective, the wanker was bloody slow on the uptake.

"What happened?" Angel asked after he was out of his car.

"Oh, I just thought I'd see what it was like to bounce off the pavement. Pretty much what I expected," Spike snapped back.

"Stay out of it," the big sod barked. "Tactical's on the way."

Brilliant. Just the sort of thing that would get Buffy's knickers bunched in the not-so-fun way. "Oh, right," Spike said, loud enough he hoped the bird was listening in and had enough going on upstairs to make a run for it. "Sure, she'll stay around till they show up."

Then Angel's meaty face was all he could see—that prominent brow, narrowed eyes and clenched jaw. "You should've waited."

"Hey, keep your knickers on," Spike replied. Guess he had knickers on the brain. "Least now I know what we're dealin' with. It's a Chinese demon. Maybe a water dragon or one of those elemental things."

The look this earned told Spike all he needed to know, and his heart sank. Buffy's cat was out of the bag. It had been a long shot, hoping to keep Dana's secret mum, but fuck, he hated the knowledge that he'd let his girl down, especially when she'd had so much faith in him.

"What?" Spike shouted when Angel moved to walk away in a huff.

The big sod whirled around, brimming with that barely controlled rage that he wore so well when Spike was around. "She's not a *water dragon*, you bleached idiot!" he snapped. "She's a slayer. A psychotic slayer, and why the hell am I telling you this?"

Brilliant question, that. Either Angel was truly desperate to see the worst in him all the time or he was doing a bit of playacting of his own. "A psycho slayer," Spike repeated, injecting as much incredulity into his tone as he could without tipping his hand. "A *psycho* slayer! Oh, this is brilliant. *Just* bloody brilliant."

Angel made another huffing sound that was either an agreement or more of his disgust.

"How'd you suss it out?"

"Wasn't that hard, *William*. Maybe if you'd stopped yapping for five



seconds and listened to what she was saying, it would've occurred to you too."

Spike tensed, wondering just how much the overgrown brute *had* heard. When Buffy had told him the girl was crazy, she'd either been pulling her punches or had dramatically underestimated just how off the trolley she was. He hadn't picked up too much Chinese in the years spanning that once-glorious night when he'd bagged his first slayer, but Spike had the sort of memory that made forgetting his feats impossible. He might not have known what that Dana bird had been saying but he'd damn sure known who she'd been channeling.

Question was, did Angel know that, too?

"Go home and leave this to us," Angel snapped. "I'd hate to have to tell Buffy you dusted again before you could find the gonads to tell her you're alive."

That there was a straight-up lie. There was nothing the ponce would love more than to provide the shoulder that he imagined Buffy would cry into for a grand total of thirty seconds before offering to provide her whatever she needed to help her manage her grief.

"Not a chance, mate. If it's a slayer you're chasing, you're singing my favorite song."

"A song that just knocked you out a window. A song you didn't even realize was a slayer."

Yeah, choking back that he'd been keen to the whole *slayer* reveal longer than Angel had was going to be one of those things that might rightly kill him. But for Buffy... For Buffy, pride mattered nothing at all.

"Give it up, Gramps," Spike said, slapping Angel on the back. "You need the pros on this."

To his great surprise, he didn't get much in the way of argument. Or maybe Angel had just resigned himself to the knowledge that telling Spike not to do something was all but a guarantee he would do it, which was how Spike found himself riding shotgun in Angel's shiny cock-metaphor with wheels. The back-and-forth was easy enough to keep up, even if he was only half paying attention to what Angel said. More of the same of what they'd spat at each other at the warehouse,

just piecing the words together in a different order so the big sod didn't glom onto the fact that he was being led around in circles.

Spike was still employing this tactic when they stepped off the elevator and into the Wolfram and Hart lobby.

"A psychotic vampire slayer."

"How many times you gonna keep saying that?" Angel asked.

"Just tryin' to wrap my lobes around it. A psycho slayer."

"And you let her get away."

Spike snickered. "At least I was tryin' to stop her."

"Oh, how'd that work out?"

"At least I know the game now, don't I? I killed two slayers with my own hands. Think I can handle one that's gone daft in the melon."

Angel threw him a narrow look. "You're not handling anything, Spike. Okay? Wes contacted Rupert Giles. He's sending his top guy to retrieve her."

Oh, so now Andrew was Rupert's top man? Spike shoved down the bubble of laughter that was desperate to be let loose. If he had any luck at all in this rotten world, the little git would find himself enamored of King Forehead. At the same time, though, Spike didn't entirely mind the idea of Angel's crew seeing him hero-worshipped, even if the worship was coming from someone like Andrew. The only one of Angel's lot who seemed to think Spike was worth more than a bit of spare muscle was Fred, and he didn't get to see her as often as he had during his ghostly days.

Spike trailed Angel into the conference room, which was already packed with the usual suspects. Plus one sitting at the head of the table, only with the chair-back to the door. All poised for the dramatic reveal.

"Angel," Wesley said upon their arrival. "We were just about to—"

Andrew chose that moment to whirl around, and to Spike's great surprise, he *was* surprised. The skinny kid who had trailed after him in the Summers home had done a bit of maturing. His hair was on the longer side and he was wearing grown-up clothes...grown-up clothes that admittedly looked a bit awkward on him, like he was playing make-believe. The pipe in his hand didn't help sell it.

"Spike?" Andrew said in an awed, trembling voice. He placed his

pipe aside, his eyes widening and possibly—no, very definitely—filling with tears.

Ahh, yes. Time to perform.

“Oh,” Spike drawled, “for the love of—”

But that’s as far as he got. Andrew was on his feet the next moment, saying his name again and rushing forward. The next thing Spike knew, the boy had him by the shoulders, digging in his fingers a bit more firmly than the occasion warranted. “It’s you. It’s really you!” A sob tickled the air, then Andrew full on hugged him, and Spike wanted to go back about thirty seconds and stake himself for thinking that it might be a kick for the others to see any of this. Absence, it seemed, did make the heart grow fonder—and the brain go completely crackers.

“My therapist told me I was holding onto false hope, but...I knew you’d come back.” Andrew released a pitiful snuffle and pulled back to look at him fully. “You’re like... You’re like Gandalf the White, resurrected from the pit of the Balrog.”

Right. Spike had clearly been barking to think that Andrew’s presence here might be a good thing. The little wanker was now cupping his cheeks, and if he so much as considered going in for a snog, he was going to meet Spike’s resurrected left hook.

“More beautiful than ever,” Andrew whispered before hugging him again. “Ohh, he’s alive, Frodo.” A sob. “He’s alive.”

“You two know each other?” It was impossible not to hear the smirk in Angel’s voice.

Bloody hell, Buffy was going to have to get mighty inventive to make up for this.

Andrew finally pulled himself together, stepping back, though his eyes were still glistening and his voice didn’t lose its wobble. “Uh, yeah. Um... We—we saved the world together. I mean, Buffy helped, but...it was mostly us.”

Spike barely held back a snort.

“Uh, so what happened?” Andrew asked pointedly. “Last I heard, you went all pillar of fire down in the Hellmouth.”

“Could we save memory lane until after we contain this psychotic, super-powered killing machine?” Angel asked, making his

way around the conference table and claiming the empty seat beside Wesley.

The world had turned over. Angel had the right idea for once.

Wesley rose to his feet. "We were just about to bring everyone up to speed on slayer mythology."

"I'll take it from here, Pryce," Andrew said with what Spike assumed passed for authority. "Best they hear it from an expert."

If nothing else, the outfit and the poncy hair had certainly given him a measure of confidence he hadn't had before.

"Oh, right," Spike said. "Let the top man have a go."

He didn't miss the indignation on Wesley's face, nor the barely contained scoff, though also wasn't surprised when Wesley conceded and dropped back to his seat.

"Please," the former Watcher said, "enlighten us."

And Andrew didn't disappoint, digging up that theatrical poof Spike had spent most of the previous year attempting to dodge. If he closed his eyes, he could almost imagine he was back in the Summers' basement, playing pretend for the camera as he listened for Buffy's familiar footfalls.

"Gather around and attend to a most unusual tale... A tale I like to call... The Slayer of the Vampyrs." Andrew paused for dramatic effect, but when no one leaned in eagerly, straightened and continued, making his way around the table. "Eons ago, on the Dark Continent, three wise elders decided to fight evil with a taste of its own sinistro..."



TURNED OUT THAT ANDREW, in fact, did have knowledge the others didn't, which really made Spike wonder at what all Buffy had shared on her way out of the country. Or if the resources so lauded at Wolfram and Hart were really as extensive as everyone made them out to be. It had been months since the closing of the Hellmouth, months since the spell that had triggered all the world's Potentials had been fired off, and Angel's lot had heard diddly.

But that did more or less confirm the things Buffy had told him

over their many nighttime chats. Angel wasn't trusted anymore, not even to handle a rogue slayer.

It was sort of nice, getting this external confirmation. So nice, in fact, Spike hadn't realized he hadn't entirely believed her until the knot in his chest loosened.

That seemed to be a recurring thing with them—him telling her something, her not believing it; her telling him something, him not believing it. If they were to move forward at all, he knew the mistrust had to come to an end, but bugger, it was all too much for one bloke to take on faith alone.

Spike wanted to know how Buffy looked to others, which made him a prat, but not enough of one to talk himself out of it. It was one thing listening to Buffy, hearing what she said, what she tried to tell him, and another thing getting to see her. Moreover, he knew himself—knew how prone he was to read into the smallest gestures, build epic what-ifs based on flimsy platitudes only to have them crack whenever the fantasy was ripped away. Buffy was giving him more than platitudes these days, sure. The conversations they had now were something right out of one of those fantasies, and he was so terrified of reaching for what he thought she was offering. Terrified to discover, as he had so many times in the past, that it was all smoke.

So when Andrew tailed him on his slayer hunt, Spike didn't scoff and send the boy back where it was nice and safe, though that likely would have been the smarter idea. He let the boy prattle on about how life had continued following Sunnydale, repeating a load Spike already knew, care of the Slayer, regarding the whereabouts of the others. It wasn't until he'd realized that Andrew, cotton-headed as he was, wasn't going to bring up Buffy first that Spike bit the proverbial bullet and asked.

"So, uh...you heard from Buffy lately?"

God, he sounded pathetic, even to his own ears.

"Yeah. Of course," Andrew replied promptly. "Uh...she's in Rome. Dawn's in school there. Italian school."

"Well. Rome, eh? Never pegged her for the expatriate show."

"Yeah. She was rounding slayers up in Europe, decided she liked it there, I guess. You think that, umm..." He paused for a moment to, of

all things, stuff a penny in his mouth. Spike had seen him pick it up during their blood talk, but figured the boy was too much of a ninny to give it a shot. To his great amusement, he was wrong, though from the way Andrew's face contorted, he didn't much fancy it. "Uhh, uhh, uhh..." Andrew spat the penny back out and shuddered, then continued as though he hadn't done anything daft, "Think she needed a break from California."

Yeah, Spike just bet she had.

"Wait a minute." Andrew's eyes went wide. "She doesn't know you're alive, does she?"

*And here we go.*

"I don't think so," Spike replied carefully. "I mean... I don't know. Does she?"

The response was immediate. "No. N-no. She can't. I mean... I—I would've heard about it. We would've had a conference call."

Spike let out a sigh, not sure how to read this reaction. Either Andrew was covering for how upset Buffy had been, Buffy was doing what Buffy did best and keeping that close to the chest, or his lovesick self had gone and gotten tangled up in another fantasy. He didn't think it was the latter, but what the hell did he know? Hard to read someone who was an ocean away.

"Why haven't you told her?" Andrew prodded.

Well, here went nothing. Time to see if his excuse would pass the smell test. Spike mimed bringing a phone to his ear. "Hello, Buffy. It's Spike. I didn't burn up like you thought. How are things?"

There was nothing for a moment—a brief moment, but in Andrew-measurements, that nothing was heavy.

"Uhh...do you want me to tell her?" he said at last. "'Cause I—I'm really good with those...uh, delicate, personal—"

"No. Don't tell her. I'll take care of it."

"Got it," Andrew replied, and that was that. No more questioning. No telling him it was a barmy plan or reassuring him that Buffy had been pining away in the days since he'd lit up the Hellmouth.

It was easier, for what Buffy wanted. Of everything Spike had known, Andrew seemed the most likely to rally or champion a big, tear-filled reunion with lots of snogging and other poncy declara-

tions. That he wasn't going to ask or pry or prod for a more cinematic resolution meant Spike could likely convince just about anyone that he wasn't chasing Buffy across the globe because he'd chosen not to.

"You're a loner," Andrew went on, "playin' it cucumber, as in *cool as a*—"

"Just keep your mouth shut."

But hell, never mind how easy it made things, this bothered him. If Andrew, who had made it his business to know all the sordid dramas that had been going on in the Summers home, didn't think it was crazy to keep quiet about being alive, what did that say, exactly?

"No problem, brother. You're a troubled hero. Creature of the night. *El creatro del noche*."

God, he needed a smoke. "Please stop."

Andrew, of course, did not. "Living by his own rules. Unafraid of anything or anyone..."

Spike shook his head. No good would come of dwelling on whatever he was doing with Buffy now. There was a slayer to find and a job to do. An important job, one Buffy had given him.

He could wonder about where he stood with the woman he loved on his own bloody time.



FOR THE FIRST time since waking up without a heartbeat, Spike had no idea what time it was. He supposed he could thank the drugs for that—whatever they'd dosed him up with at Wolfram and Hart had left him lucid enough, though his brain kept spinning every time he made a move too quickly. And even though he'd just been outside, by the time he dragged himself over the threshold into his basement apartment, he'd completely forgotten whether or not the sun had been out.

He crashed onto the narrow bed without undressing, the movement making his head swish like it was full of water. He drew in a breath and pressed his eyes closed, willing the walls and ceiling to stay where they were, or for the black comfort of sleep, though he wagered

he was out of luck there. Even as exhausted as he was, even as much as it hurt to think right now, his mind was wide awake.

He should have known going up against a slayer, one he hadn't had the pleasure of helping train, would dig up old uglies. For better or worse, Spike had thought he'd made peace with his past. There was nothing he could do about the lives he'd taken or destroyed, and no sense crying over that which couldn't be changed. He felt them, those lives. Felt them with every breath he didn't need to breathe. Remorse had never been an issue—it was there in spades. But he couldn't do any good if he were huddled in a corner somewhere, feeling sorry for himself because he'd been a bad man once upon a time.

Plus, sitting in the shadows, hugging himself and crying over what couldn't be changed was something Angel would do.

What had happened with Dana, though, had demolished what he now recognized as a rather shoddy wall between himself and the past. The pain in her voice, the pain she'd sought to pay back tenfold, might not have been put there by him, but he'd done that and worse, as he'd told her. The words she'd spoken he'd heard before—some of them literally. He'd blow in like a sodding hurricane, leave behind a disaster area, and then bounce out to seek something else to destroy.

In retrospect, getting his feelers cut off was the very least of what he deserved. But he couldn't deny he was happy to have them back.

Spike forced one eye open, raising a hand in front of his face. The Wolfram and Hart specialists were good, that was for bloody sure. The incision line had already faded into nothing. When he commanded his brain to wiggle his fingers, a-wiggle they went. Like nothing had happened.

If only someone could do the same to the reel of victims now dancing in his head.

There was more. Things he needed to tell Buffy, if she didn't already know. Andrew had let slip that Angel was considered the enemy nowadays, apparently with a strong showing of other slayers ready to kick King Forehead up and down Santa Monica Boulevard if he hadn't surrendered the girl. But there were other things to consider, like the fact that Angel had come to save him at all—that he hadn't



hesitated to use Wolfram and Hart's resources to put Spike back together again.

Not that Spike was in a mood to be grateful to the big sod. He didn't much understand his relationship with Angel these days, and reckoned that went both ways. How much of Angel riding in to play the hero tonight had been because he'd wanted to save the day and how much had been his own concern that Andrew would blab to Buffy that he'd let Spike die? Sure, Angel was family, but he'd also slain his own family without hesitation, so that didn't account for much in Spike's book.

If nothing else, that meant he could likely start inserting himself into the law firm scene again. No matter how he and Angel felt about each other, there was enough there that Spike could build upon to get closer. Especially if Doyle continued to have visions that put him in Angel's path.

And when he saw Doyle again, he was going to throttle the wanker. Might have been nice to have gotten a heads-up from the higher-ups that this latest errand was going to cost him his hands, even if only for a little while.

Overactive noggin or not, he might have drifted off then. Thoughts and surroundings became fuzzy, but the sort of fuzzy that maintained a presence. Still, Spike jolted when his mobile began buzzing, then sighed and fished the damn thing out of his pocket.

It was the third call. The first two he hadn't been in a place to answer. He hadn't had hands for the first one, though Fred had asked if she needed to get it for him. Right fine place that would put him—Buffy hearing some other bird's voice on the other end, one who was fussing over him like she gave a damn. Hell, that thought had almost made it worth it, but it wouldn't be fair to Buffy to test her like that, nor Fred to be used to test her. And it'd also toss all the progress they'd made out the window, both on this covert ops thing the Slayer had insisted on and whatever was going on between them.

The second time it'd rung, Angel had been in the room. He'd eyed the mobile with clear suspicion, no doubt wondering who in the bloody hell would care enough to call Spike, but he hadn't said

anything when he hadn't answered and hadn't asked once the phone had stopped buzzing.

Spike stared at the screen, not certain he was in the best mind to talk right now, but also knowing that he couldn't well put Buffy off forever. Hell, she might hop a plane and hunt him down—and nice as that thought was, he didn't much fancy the idea of her rushing into his arms just to pummel him for being a git.

He sighed, flipped the phone open, and brought it to his ear just before he reckoned it'd slip off to voicemail. "Present and accounted for."

"Oh thank god." Her voice was shaky, her breath coming fast. "I was losing my mind over here."

"Sorry to worry you, love. Not the best night."

"Are you okay?"

"Andrew didn't tell you?"

"No. And I dropped like a *million* hints. He's obviously more loyal to you than to me," Buffy said, laughing the sort of laugh that said plainly nothing was funny. "Seriously, I must have asked, 'Did you meet any stars in LA?' about a thousand times. He wouldn't budge."

"Maybe he reckoned you wouldn't care," Spike said before he could help himself. The second the words were out, though, he wished he'd just dusted back at that warehouse. He was tired and cranky and lovesick, and none of those things were Buffy's fault.

He expected, deserved, a stern dressing down. All that came through the line was a choked sob, which was infinitely worse.

"Just tell me you're okay. Andrew... He mentioned that when they picked Dana up, there had been an incident."

God, he was such a prat. Spike closed his suddenly burning eyes. "I'm sorry, pet."

"Sorry? Why sorry?"

"For bein' an ass."

A pause. "Pretty sure that's your default setting."

He grinned, even as a tear trickled down his face. "I'm fine," he said. "Did get into a tussle and I'm not sure if the girl will ever be all right in the head. She was channeling slayers from the days of yore, and bein' that I did considerable damage to two of them—"

“Oh god.”

“Yeah. Had me confused with some bastard who had really done her wrong. Took my hands away to keep me from doin’ anymore.”

“She...took your hands away?”

He raised his right hand, flexed his fingers. “No worries. I got them back. Wolfram and Hart can indeed put Humpty Dumpty together again, it seems. Your ex rode in and saved the day before Dana could get a mind to do something a bit more permanent.”

Again, the line fell quiet, save for the sweet cadence of Buffy’s breathing. After a beat, he heard a sniffle before she said hoarsely, “Are you really okay?”

Spike tightened his grip on the phone. “You want the answer that’ll help you sleep tonight, pet, or the truth?”

“The truth.”

“Well, truth’s messy. Mind’s all twisted.”

“About what?”

“You. Always you. And us. What this is.” He shook his head. Hell, she’d asked. “If I can trust it.”

“Trust me, you mean.”

“And me. Told myself more lies than you ever did.” And that was certainly true. “If what I hear is really there or if it’s me makin’ up stories again.”

“Spike—”

“No, don’t. Not asking for reassurance. Not asking for anything. Just givin’ you the truth as it is right now.”

He thought she’d argue with him, but she didn’t. Instead, Buffy released a trembling breath. “Do you... Do you want to come here?”

“Come there?”

“Just... Would that make it easier for you? If you could see me and not just hear me?”

The thought had his chest tightening, seized with hope so pure it could blind. “More than anything,” he said roughly. “But I’m stayin’ put. Have a job to do.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I know. But it’s what’s right, right? Bein’ your inside man.”

But that wasn’t all, and he knew it. Despite however much he

wanted to see her, how the possibility of touching her, having her look at him with everything heard in her voice set him on fire, Buffy deserved more than a wreck of a man. More than someone with his insecurities and need, and he needed to trust. He needed to trust her when she told him the things he most yearned to hear, and himself that he wasn't finding things that weren't there. Being with Buffy would make that easier on some accounts but impossible on others. When she was around, all he saw was her.

"Gonna get some kip now, pet," Spike murmured. "All will be right as rain when I wake up."

"I—"

"It means a lot that you asked."

"I want you here, too, Spike. I wasn't asking just for you."

The stinging in his eyes intensified again. "I think I know that."

"Just think?"

"Give a bloke some time. I love you."

"I... Thank you. For loving me." Another one of those trembly breaths. "Someday, maybe, I'll know why."

And in a classic Buffy turnaround, she hung up on him before he could ask what she meant by that.

“BAD DAY?”

Spike snorted, seized a beer out of the fridge, and wandered back to the couch. Wasn’t fair—he’d just started to kinda like the place, too, hole in the wall that it was. No telling if he’d get to keep it now that the cat was out of the bloody bag, but that was what he got for going and getting himself all attached to anything anymore. “Can say that,” he said as he collapsed against the cushions. “Found out that I’ve been someone’s bloody puppet from the start.”

“What?”

“Doyle, love. Doesn’t exist. Or did exist at some point, but not the bloke I know.” Spike rolled his head back, feeling every second of his hundred and some odd years. “What I get for thinkin’ I could be the Powers’ shiny special boy, yeah?”

“Wait, Doyle doesn’t exist?” Buffy sounded confused and hell, he couldn’t blame her. He’d been trying to suss out how he felt about all this for the last few hours and hadn’t made much in the way of progress. “Then who have you been talking to?”

“Some cowboy with a yen to put the hurt on your ex. Seems Angel did him wrong some time ago. I was just his toy soldier.”

Not only that but, if what he’d heard tonight was reliable, Doyle

—*no, Lindsey*—hadn't even been original. Seems Spike had been following in Angel's footsteps in more than just the obvious ways, which grated more than it should. Because nothing in this sodding world could be his, not even his own redemption story.

"That doesn't exactly answer my question," Buffy said in her I'm-being-patient-why-are-you-being-difficult voice.

"Well, pet, what do you want me to say? Thought I was doin' something there, didn't I? Got me a line to the PTB, loads of helpless in this city just beggin' to be rescued, doing it on my own, no help from Angel or his lot. Doing it for me. The one thing I had goin' for me." Brilliant, now he was whining and he didn't know how to stop. "Sorry. Just... bloody sick of being used, though it seems that's all I'm good for, soul or not."

The silence that followed was expected—he hadn't exactly set out to say all that, but at the moment he was too frustrated, not to mention exhausted, to give much of a damn about stepping around anyone's feelings.

"You know that's not true," Buffy said at last, now in her I-don't-want-you-to-know-you-hurt-me voice, which did little more than make him feel like the world's biggest asshole. "Spike, you—"

"Save the speech, Slayer. I'll let you know when my ego needs tending."

"Oh, and that's not now?"

He supposed he deserved that. Spike contemplated his beer for a moment, set the phone down long enough to crack it open, and debated just letting that be that for the night. He wasn't good phone company as it was and Buffy didn't deserve to be his punching bag, verbal or otherwise. Except a selfish part of him rallied right back with a slew of memories in which he'd taken on that role for her, and why the hell not?

But that wasn't what he wanted. None of this was. Spike tossed back a sudsy swallow, willing himself to relax. His muscles refused to cooperate, but no matter. That was what the booze was for.

"Cordelia woke up," he muttered at last. "Or we thought she had."

"What does that mean?"

“She was solid enough I could take a bite outta her, whatever you wanna make of that.”

“You bit Cordelia?”

Spike closed his eyes, focusing on that moment in the hallway. For a girl who hadn’t really been there, she’d been mighty solid. Smelled and tasted real, too, for the brief sip he’d taken. He wasn’t sure what all went into that higher being nonsense, seeing as his sole purpose up until the last year or so had been to cause as much mayhem as possible. The Powers didn’t take interest in vamps who didn’t have that extra power-up, so he hadn’t had much occasion to ponder. That she could have been there without being there was something he wagered he’d never wrap his mind fully around—what it meant that the Powers could send her in to tidy up a mess he’d been in the process of making without bothering to reach out to him at all.

Did that mean Angel really was the Champion written about in the Shanshu Prophecy? He got the special line, after all. All Spike got was fucked around.

“Had to,” he said somewhat hoarsely. “Got told she was the big evil and needed taking out. But I thought I’d give her a sample first. Didn’t know the bird all that well, but the times our paths had crossed, she’d been human. So I had to be sure. Had to get a taste. Which is how it came out that I’ve been made a bloody fool yet again.”

“Spike, that’s not your fault.”

“Isn’t it? Never questioned Doy—*Lindsey*, did I? He saw me pining away, figured I’d be an easy mark. That he could pull my strings.”

“But you did good, didn’t you? There were people you saved.”

“Yeah, and how many you wanna reckon he put in danger in the first place just to sell the story?”

“Angel. You saved Angel.”

Right. And that made everything better. “Just thought I was meant for something, is all,” he said, feeling perhaps smaller than he ever had. “That there might be a reason for all this.”

“All what?”

“Getting a soul. Saving the world. Bowing out and coming back. Felt big—like I was a part of somethin’.”

"Spike, you *are* a part of something. What we're doing right now? It's a big something."

"Feels like we're throwing darts in the dark. What good has my bein' here done, love? Been playin' at it for a bit now with nothin' to show for it."

There was a pause and a long sigh. "What about me?"

He shuddered, having known the question was coming but not knowing what to do with it. If she was asking if she was enough for him when she knew the answer to that—or she should. But there were degrees of Buffy, loads of them, and while the degrees he'd had up until now had kept him going, they wouldn't sustain him in the long run. Not unless he could have all of her, every part, the way she'd given herself to everyone else. And yeah, it was selfish of him to want, but it was also selfish of her to want if she wasn't willing to give.

*You stopped her from saying it*, he reminded himself. That was perfectly true. But so were the reasons why.

When the silence slid past comfortable into awkward and he still didn't have a clear answer, though, he panicked and blurted the first thing that came to mind. "You know how I feel about you."

"That's not what I asked."

"No, it's not."

He thought she might hang up on him, and he wasn't sure he could blame her if she did. But her breaths kept coming, slow and trembling, but there all the same, which made him feel worse than if she'd started yelling or screaming or crying. A hurt or brassed-off Buffy he knew what to do with. Knew what to say, how to grovel and apologize, how to make it right when he was the thing that was wrong.

A Buffy who was trying, though... That was something new.

And that she was trying gave him courage to be honest.

"Told you once it's still all about you," he rasped, trying to ignore the tightness in his chest—the same that shouldn't exist, since nothing there beat or breathed and therefore couldn't feel pain, yet managed to do so anyway. "The reason I went for the soul was you. To give you what you deserve. Someone who wouldn't... Who'd never hurt you the way I did."

"Spike, that—"



"And it was okay. Got back and everything was miserable, but reckon that's what I asked for. Couldn't see myself existing outside of you, even if you wanted nothing to do with me. You believin' in me was more than I thought I'd get. Letting me in. Hell, the fact, that you hadn't asked Willow to wave her herbs around and yank back my invite was shock enough. You knew what I was and what I'd done but you'd kept the door open anyway."

He paused in case she wanted to say something—stop him now that he'd started. But she didn't, so he continued.

"Never thought it'd go anywhere. You started seeing Wood and that was all right with me. Can't say I liked it 'cause we both know the answer there, but I understood my place in your life. Made sense. I wanted you to have what you wanted—whatever that was. Pretty much knew it'd never be me."

Another pause. Still nothing except the slow cadence of her soft, somewhat-wobbly breaths.

"When you started to give, pet... I didn't know what it was. Then that night..." He sighed, feeling the sting of tears again and cursing himself for his own weakness but unable to stop. "That night and what you told me after was everything. That it was real. That you were there with me. It was *everything*." The image of her smiling up at Angel before greeting him with a kiss burned his retinas, turning the sting into something worse. "Then it wasn't."

Now she did speak. "Spike—"

"Know we talked that out. Not meanin' to drag it up again." Though it had never left—that conversation or what he'd witnessed, or how much it had killed him. How much it continued to kill him. "Was just made clear to me that it'd never be me. Not with you."

"That's not—"

"And then the world went up and it was bye, bye, Miss American Pie. 'Cept I couldn't have that either, could I? Some plonker had to drag me out of what was a right brilliant send-off—but not for me. Again, I was fool enough to buy the line. Daft enough not to think that whether it's you or the sodding world, Angel is still at the center. The cowboy wanted revenge so he used me to get it. Let me think for a minute that I might matter, be somethin' special."

“Spike, you—”

“Not askin’ for reassurance. Told you once I’m not asking for anything. Learned to stop asking.” He released a shuddering breath. The shiny end of the tunnel he’d envisioned, the one he’d thought might be for him and joke’s on Angel this entire bloody time, was gone now. He could make out the outline against the dark, like an image burned into the telly after having been frozen there a second too long. “Not asking. But not apologizing, either. Wager ol’ Spike’s got more than enough reason these days to feel sorry for himself. Let a bloke wallow a bit.”

He heard her exhale, could almost see her pinched lips and blazing eyes. It seemed all the goodwill he’d heard just a moment ago had run out because he knew what came next. Knew how Buffy sounded right before she was about to launch into a good scolding, and bless her, she didn’t disappoint.

“Wallow,” Buffy said dully. “I’m glad you used that word because that’s exactly what you’re doing.”

“Catch on, did you?”

“Hard not to. Did you listen to that little speech of yours?”

“You wanna chew me out, Slayer, pick another night.”

“No. You’re sitting over there feeling sorry for yourself because some jerk with a grudge pulled one over on you. And you’re pulling me into it.”

He snickered. “You were already in it. Have been since the beginning.”

“I told you what that was with Angel—”

“Yeah. No need to go over it again.”

“Obviously there is if you’re still—”

“What? Sore about it?”

“I was terrified! People do dumb things when they’re scared.”

At that, Spike thought of Harmony—the bout of insanity that shagging her had been—and he found himself cackling before he could give fair warning. Supposed the Slayer had a point. People did do bloody *dumb* things when they were afraid. And ever since he’d fallen in love with Buffy, part of Spike had been nothing but afraid.

“Something funny?” Buffy asked, her voice so terse he could

perfectly picture the tightness of her jaw, how hard she must be gripping the phone.

"You got me there, love." He laughed harder, then harder still when he remembered how brassed off Harmony had looked when she'd shoved him off her, snapping about how he'd rather be with Buffy. "Bloody stupid things we do when we're afraid. You snog Angel. I shag Harm. Don't get dumber than that."

Spike didn't miss her sharp intake of breath—he couldn't, much as he'd like to. Much as he'd like to seize the words and stuff them back down his throat where they belonged. Or better yet, turn the clock back to the day he'd gotten that bloody package and punch himself in the face before he could drag Harmony down that hallway. Not just for Buffy but for himself too. He'd known what he was doing, known that Harm carried a torch for him—dizzy little thing that she was—and he knew better than most just how bloody rotten it felt to be used. Still, he'd seized her and used her just as surely as Buffy had used him during those months back in Sunnyhell. Only he'd been worse—Buffy had been going through something then. Something he hadn't been able to understand and reckoned he never would. All Spike had been going through when he'd ripped Harm's knickers down her legs was the utter fear at the prospect of seeing the woman he loved again.

"You... You've been sleeping with Harmony?" It was impossible to miss the way her voice shook, impossible to block out the pain. "You've been sleeping with *Harmony*?"

Spike screwed his eyes shut again. "No."

"No. So you said that just—"

"I shagged her once. Right after I got my body back. First thing I did. Haven't touched her since."

A hard laugh sounded through the line. "Oh, that's better. Thank you so much for clarifying. The first thing you did when you got your body back, after telling me that I'm the one, is to bang your soulless ex."

"You are the one, love," Spike replied, doing his best to keep his voice steady. "The only one there ever can be, far as I'm concerned. Just wasn't sure I was the one for you."

"So...so you screwed Harmony because I kissed Angel, is that it?"

“Yeah, guess so.”

Fuck, he ought to just stake himself and have it over. Today had been a banner day all around. So long as he was burning destinies and breaking hearts, he might as well go all the way out. No half measures for this vamp. Not anymore.

“Not sure what you have to be upset about,” he drawled instead, ignoring the screaming in his head and the ache in his chest. “It’s not like I ever loved Harm. Not like I spent years pining after her, measuring all birds against her forever and ever while secretly hopin’ she’d realize the error of her ways and crawl back to me. It was a fuck. And if it helps, I was thinking about you the whole time.”

“You’re such an asshole,” Buffy choked out, and he could hear her crying now. There was no inflection in her voice. If anything, it sounded like she was fighting to get out the words she managed.

He saw himself as though from a distance, someone else—someone manic—at the helm. And he was too far away to seize control. The brakes were off, this train was gonna run itself off the rails and take its conductor down with it. All the while the Spike that loved, the Spike that cared, had been shoved into the bloody caboose.

“Yeah, turns out the soul’s not worth so much, is it? Took you long enough to suss that out. Me too, point of fact.” He barked another hard laugh, tears spilling down his cheeks. “So how is it, Buffy? How do you like me now?”

“Fuck you.”

That was it. A click and the line went dead.

Thank fuck. He hadn’t had the stones to hang up—hell, he’d just been getting started. Hating himself and her and loving her so much it hurt to bloody exist. Hating the world he’d landed himself in, this thing he’d fought for but would never really deserve.

Despite appearances, Spike wasn’t a moron. He knew he’d feel what he’d just done, what he’d likely just cost himself, with everything he was once the dust settled and he came to terms with the picture of what he’d lost. That thing that had never been his to begin with.

Spike eyed the fridge. If he was going to drink until the conversation he’d just had became little more than white noise, he’d need something stronger than beer.



THERE WERE four voicemails waiting on his phone. All from her.

Of course they were from her. No one else had this bloody number.

Spike winced and sat up, the room going somewhat lopsided with the movement. He'd been mostly lucid the first time the phone had sung out last night—well, the first time following the conversation that could only be described as a bloody disaster. Yeah, he'd started throwing back the contents of his fridge, but Buffy had rung only a few minutes after disconnecting. He could have picked up and babbled an apology, but as out of his head as he'd been, he'd been aware enough to know nothing good could come from talking to her just then.

The second, third, and fourth calls, he'd somehow missed.

And now he had a collection of messages from the woman he loved. The woman he'd made cry last night.

For a long time, he just sat in his bed, phone in hand, trying to muster the courage to listen to whatever she had to say. The telling off he knew he had coming—the end of whatever they'd been trying to build.

Spike sighed, punched the keys on the phone until he figured out how to pull up voicemail, then closed his eyes, and raised the device to his ear.

*"If you wanted to hurt me, Spike, well, congratulations, you succeeded. I hope you're happy."*

Short and sweet, just like his girl. The message was more or less what he'd expected, but that didn't make the pain any easier to bear. No half-measures where Buffy was concerned. Causing her hurt had sent him to the ends of the world once and nothing had changed there. No matter the size or scope of the hurt itself.

Three messages to go.

*"If I pined for anyone, it was only because I knew he'd never do to me what you did."*

There it was. The punch along with the pain, ripping more skin off a wound that hadn't had a chance of starting to heal. Because that was his girl, too—she knew just where to aim her blows, how to make it hurt, where she needed to focus if she wanted to do lasting damage.

There were any number of things Angel wouldn't have done to her, by her account.

A scream tore from his throat—deep and guttural, leaving him gutted and hollow.

He wasn't sure he had the stamina to listen to the next two, but also knew he couldn't do anything but.

*"Spike... What I said... If there was a way I could erase it, I would. Or just, you know, go back in time and not say it at all. I didn't mean it. I'm just...hurt. I'm sorry. Please call me."*

Well, that was something. A surprising something. Spike released a ragged breath, fumbled with his phone to select the button that would replay the message. He listened to it once more, then again, and a final time before he was satisfied he hadn't imagined anything.

*Sorry. Buffy was sorry.*

Here he'd unloaded on her—dumped on her the weight of his own self-loathing and acidic jealousy, demanded she carry it for him, and *she* was sorry?

One message left. Could be she'd come to her senses.

*"I'll stop blowing up your mailbox. Not sure it's smart to be leaving messages on each other's phones anyway, in case something happens. But... Spike, I can't sleep. And that can't be it, can it? I don't want it to be. Just...call me. Please."*

Spike shot a glance at the clock on his bedside table. It was nearing four in the afternoon. Sodding hell, he'd slept the day away. Which, granted, wasn't all that unusual for a creature of the night, but he'd more or less become accustomed to keeping human hours. The combination of disappointment and alcohol, sprinkled with broken heart for good measure, had knocked him off his ass.

Four o'clock here meant one in the morning there. If the girl was trying to get some sleep, if she was trying to keep to proper hours, now wasn't the best time to call.

He called anyway.

The phone barely had time to ring before she had it answered.

"Spike?"

Spike opened his mouth to say something—apologize, tell her he was an idiot, that he loved her, anything—but the most he got out was

a strained cry as the weight of the last eighteen hours caught up with him.

"Oh thank god." Buffy was laughing, a tragic sound that made the ache in his chest worse. "I thought maybe I'd... You'd never talk to me again or something."

"Never talk to *you*? Buffy, pet, I'm so sor—"

"No. No, I... I thought about it. I mean, I really haven't been able to do anything else today." She sniffed, laughing a bit still. "I get it."

"You're one up on me, then."

"You and Harmony. I get it. And...you were right."

Spike winced, still not entirely convinced he wasn't hallucinating or dreaming. Finding his phone full of messages from the Slayer after the telling off he'd given her, having her apologize to *him* was the sort of thing that only happened in fantasy worlds. He might have been a bloody bad poet, but he'd had a decent imagination. Managed to imagine himself with Buffy so thoroughly even he'd believed the lie in the end—or enough of it to do something unthinkable. That was how they were here now, wasn't it?

"I was right?" he asked, not sure he wanted her interpretation of *right*.

"It was different because you didn't care about her." He heard her swallow. "And you were right about...putting certain people on pedestals. Or pining for them."

Ah. Right. "No reason to lash out at you though, love. I was just sore and—"

"Spike, pretty much my entire romantic life post-Angel has been me trying to get over Angel. And...and honestly, I don't even know that I ever really knew him." She paused as though waiting for him to interject, but he was done talking over her. "The guy I knew...I thought would never get himself mixed up in Wolfram and Hart. Even if he thought he could... I dunno, change it from the inside. But the truth is I don't think the Angel in my head and the Angel in real life are the same person. I think it could be that what happened with us just... screwed me up so much that... Well, I don't know. But he never knew me the way you do, either. Not even close."

"You don't have to tell me what you think I wanna hear, pet. I was bloody awful last night."

"Yeah, you were."

At least they could agree he was a git. Bully for progress.

"But...when I couldn't sleep, I just kept thinking about you and Harmony and—"

"Buffy—"

"And how much it hurt. After everything we'd gone through, said to each other. I know you don't love her and never have, but that didn't make it hurt any less." She paused, drew in a breath. "And I realized just what seeing me kiss Angel must've been like for you. Like last night, only a thousand times worse. Because you were right."

Spike opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again. "I was?"

"If I hadn't kissed Angel—if those last nights had been just you and me, no awkward third, and I'd said...what I said to you before you died, would you have still slept with Harmony?"

Fuck, what a question. The right answer was there immediately—the one he knew she wanted. The one he wanted to give her and the one that would likely put this whole ugly mess in the past where it would die and never bother him again. But the truth was more complicated, nuanced. Remove Angel from the equation and Spike still wasn't sure he'd have believed that her love declaration was anything but an act of kindness to a dying man from a woman with a bloody huge heart.

If they were going to be anything, though, they had to start with honesty. He couldn't tell her the truth as he wished it or the truth as she wanted to hear.

"Like more than anything to say no," he said at last, his voice scratchy even to his own ears. "But truth is, I dunno."

A beat. "You don't know."

"Without havin' lived it, no."

"Well, that fills me up with all kinds of warm fuzzies."

"Answer remains the same, pet. Same as what I told you last night—it was about you."

"You know, when a guy cheats on you and insists he was thinking about you the whole time, you—"



“Cheat?” He couldn’t help himself—he laughed. “Have to be together to cheat, right? We weren’t... Fuck, I know what I wanted. Same as what I’ve always wanted. What I want now. But the most you gave me was *maybe* and *after*. After never came for me, and a maybe isn’t—”

“So this is my fault?”

“Bloody hell, no!” Spike jumped to his feet and started to pace. The confines of his apartment had never felt so small before. “I put myself out there. Scariest bloody thing I’ve ever done. You knew it, too. I told you. You didn’t owe me anything—I never thought I’d get more than you gave anyway. Didn’t know I meant anything to you more than a friend, if you could call us that. Or a warrior.”

“That is *not* fair.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“I told you I loved you, Spike. I was there. I remember saying the words. Are you saying that meant nothing?”

If his heart had been beating, this was where it would have jumped. Hell, part of him was convinced it did anyway.

“Course it meant something,” he rasped. “Meant the bloody world. But I remember tellin’ you something back.”

“Yeah, and by the way, remind me to kick your ass for that when we see each other again.”

“Buffy, I was a dying man and you knew that’s what I wanted more than anything. Easy to say it when you don’t reckon the bloke’ll be around the next minute to hold you to it.”

Her breaths came hard and heavy. At least she hadn’t hung up.

So he went on.

“Even still, I had that picture, right? You standing there, *looking* like you loved me even if I couldn’t believe it. That was my last memory of you. Telling me you loved me and...it was the perfect way to go out.” He exhaled, pinched the bridge of his nose. “Then I was back. Wanted to go to you right off, but the longer I hung around, the more I just... I had this final perfect memory of us together, made up for all the bad. Thought there was a decent chance you hadn’t missed me at all.”

A few beats of silence, then she cleared her throat. “You told me this.”

“Yeah. Was true both times. ‘Cept I didn’t wanna bloody brag about being such a sodding coward I decided to use Harm to feel better about myself.”

“It’s not like you’ve got the market cornered on using people, Spike.”

“No. Doesn’t make it right, either.” He hesitated, sighed. “None of it was right. I wanted you. Always want you. Then I learned about the prophecy and thought maybe that was it. Come to you as a human because the whole universe has decided that I’m the man who deserves the big prize at the end. That might be what beat my exit—coming to you in the daylight, not burnin’ up. Could be what got you to see a future with me. But that was a bloody wild goose chase and when I let go of it...”

He stopped talking, and she didn’t start. He listened to the sound of her breathing, picturing her wearing that frown that used to drive him batty. Or perhaps she was disgusted with him, which would be fair. He wasn’t too high up on himself at the moment.

When she spoke, her voice was barely above a whisper. “It was just the one time with Harmony?”

“Yeah,” he replied. “Just the one time.”

“Are you...seeing anyone?”

Spike chuckled, some of the tension draining away. “Reckon she’d have to be the most understanding bird in the bloody world, seeing as the part of the day I look forward to the most is when I get to hear your voice.”

“That’s a no, right?”

“That’s a no.”

“Good. I mean, I thought you weren’t—it honestly never occurred to me that you might be until you mentioned... Well, in my mind it’s still all about me, I guess.”

“Not just in your mind.” He waited for a beat, swallowing. “And you? Seein’ anyone?”

“Seeing? No. There is no seeing. But I kinda am in a long-distance relationship at the moment.”

God, he was going to cry again like an absolute ninny. She’d alluded to them being in a relationship before, but he hadn’t really believed it.

If she could still say that after everything he'd thrown at her, he had no choice but to believe. "That a fact?"

"At least, if he wants to—"

"He does."

"You seem awfully sure about that."

"Told you once, you're the only thing I've ever been sure of."

"Maybe," she replied softly. "But not sure enough, I guess."

The conversational twists and turns this woman could take would never stop surprising him. "Buffy—"

"You're sure of how you feel. You're not sure about how I feel." Buffy huffed out a short laugh. "Which I get, Spike. I do. I wasn't sure how I felt then either, except terrified, too, like I said. But I know how I felt when you weren't there when we checked into the hotel after Sunnydale. How it felt to go to sleep without you. I know how it felt when you told me you'd slept with Harmony, even if...even if you had your reasons."

Spike didn't trust his legs to keep him upright, so he dragged himself back over to the bed and sank onto the mattress. "I'm sorry. The way I was when we last talked..."

"I understand."

"Dunno how you can."

"Well, maybe I don't all the way, but...enough, I think."

Small bloody graces. The phantoms that had chased him into his dreams the night before gave one last wail before falling quiet. Maybe it was the distance talking. Maybe she'd feel differently the second there wasn't an ocean separating them or when the shock of his being alive finally wore off, but hell, he wanted to believe. He'd never wanted to believe anything this badly.

"So," Buffy continued a moment later in an overly chipper tone, "are we good? I should get to sleep. Long day of being me tomorrow."

"We're good, pet. Long as you are."

"I am. But Spike?"

He waited.

"Don't sleep with anyone else, okay?"

"There is no one else, pet."

"I know. Just...please don't sleep with anyone else. Unless you don't

want to be my long-distance guy, in which case, maybe just tell me now before I make myself out to be an even bigger idiot than—”

“I love you. I’ll be your anything.”

The low, melodic sound of her laughter filled his ear, damn near making him swell up with pride. “That’s dangerous,” she said.

“Been a rebel most of my life, pet. Too late to turn back now.” A beat. “I do love you, Buffy. Will until the stars wink out.”

“Well...good. But you’re not going to let me say anything back.”

No, he wasn’t. As far as they might have come over the last few minutes, Spike wasn’t sure he could trust it just yet. And there was that voice reminding him that this might be fleeting on her end. Buffy was right about one thing—what she’d experienced with Angel had bugged up her view on love well and good. Spike couldn’t be another Riley for her—someone she wanted to love because she thought she was supposed to. When he heard the words from her, if he ever did, they both had to know what it meant.

“Maybe some other time,” he said instead. “Go get your kip.”

“That’s British for sleep, right?”

“That’s right.”

“You should learn English sometime.”

“Back atcha, pet.”

Buffy released a small laugh. “Good night. And Spike?”

“Yeah?”

“That guy who was pretending to have the visions, telling you that you have a destiny... Well, just because he was playing you doesn’t mean he was wrong.”

The line went dead before he could reply, which was probably a good thing. Once more, Buffy had displayed her knack for rendering him speechless.

It was one of the endless things about her that he loved beyond reason.



THEY WERE BOTH CAREFUL OVER THE NEXT FEW CONVERSATIONS. Not touching on anything too heavy or significant, which Spike both appreciated and found bloody annoying. It was like her to withdraw a bit after a large emotional upheaval, though, and like him to follow her lead. Pushing for anything more seemed a fool's gambit at the moment, especially since all he'd really be pushing for was reassurance of what she'd already told him. That as far as she was concerned, they were together—in a complicated, long-distance relationship, sure, but together all the same.

More often than not, they stuck to shop talk. Updates on what Angel was doing, how Spike was inserting himself into the group little by little so few people questioned why he was there. Most of the time, he stuck to Angel, picking up what he could—which wasn't much just yet—and passing along anything in the hopes it'd be helpful. Since Cordelia had popped back into existence just long enough to unmask Lindsey, Angel had been more or less buried in work, and given that everyone else was elbows-deep in their own dramas, that meant no one saw what Spike saw. Angel losing himself a bit more every day, turning little by little into a corporate stooge, and being blind to it.

Tonight, though, Spike had something else to report other than Angel watching to report.

"Missed some excitement, it seems," he said when Buffy picked up. "Blast from the past showed up to dish out some payback."

"Oh god. Dru?"

He paused, momentarily thrown, then chuckled. "No, love, not Dru. Haven't seen her since... Well, that wasn't the best way to declare my love. I can admit that now."

"But it was super memorable."

"Finally got you to admit it."

"Well, it was the only one that involved chains. Kinda tends to stick out."

Spike rumbled another laugh. "Maybe we'll have ourselves a reenactment someday, eh, love? Or a bit of role reversal. Wouldn't mind being the one wearing the chains."

He'd meant it mostly as a joke, but couldn't deny the rush of excitement let loose by the way her breath caught. And god, just that little sound was enough to make him blow off the rest of her harebrained plan to get him in Angel's inner circle just so he could see what else would earn him a reaction like that. It had been so long since their relationship had been at all playful—what little of it *had* been in the first place, that was—that he'd forgotten how much fun it was to make those sorts of suggestions. See which made her flush, which made her wrinkle her nose or give him the cold shoulder for the rest of the day. The first time she'd slipped on a pair of handcuffs, he'd nearly come right on the spot, which had been its own form of torture since he'd been so bloody determined to earn the trust she'd given him. The same she'd sworn she never could.

Not for the first time, Spike found himself wondering just how open Buffy would be to taking the edge off together. He knew he could coax her to orgasm just by whispering naughty little things to her, and the sound of her coming would likely be enough to send him over, but his Slayer chose the most random moments to embrace her puritanical sensibilities, and he wasn't brave enough to suggest that just to have her shut down and not talk to him for a few days.

Maybe after they stopped walking on eggshells around each other,

he could bring it up. God knows how many times he'd already tossed off after talking to her—after hearing her say things he'd never thought he'd get. It was enough to make a bloke start thinking about a white picket fence and a cozy little crypt for two again—or at the very least a shared apartment. Like they might have a chance, despite everything, of being a normal couple one of these days.

"So," Buffy said a moment later, and cleared her throat. "Who was this past-blaster?"

*Oh, right.*

"A sailor boy Angel sired back during the Big One."

"The big what?"

He laughed again, loving her so much he thought he might burst. "World War Two, sweetheart. That's what some of us old-timers call it, at least."

"Oh, I... Wait. Angel sired someone during the Second World War?"

"He not tell you this?" Though now that he said it aloud, Spike rolled his eyes. Of course Angel hadn't told her this. In Angel's version of history, he'd been the victim. It'd be a bloody miracle if Buffy was privy to anything that had happened in Angel's past prior to the rat-eating stint he'd pulled just before meeting her.

"He told me he hadn't had taken human blood since the day he got his soul."

"Dunno what to say, pet, 'cept that's a load of bollocks," Spike replied dryly. "Spent some time after getting the soul shoved up his arse tryin' to fit in with me and the women. Bloody begged Darla to have him back, too, and flashed his fangs to prove himself. Didn't know this at the time, mind. Darla and me were never bosom chums, but Dru and I caught up with her in the fifties. She told us all about Angel and his soul then—seems she'd had a change of heart and wanted him back, see if she could make him his bad ole self again, though I don't reckon she ran into him until Sunnyhell."

The line fell quiet for a long moment. When Buffy spoke again, her voice shook. "I just... He *told* me he hadn't had human blood. That's the kinda thing a girl remembers when she finds out that the man she's been crushing on has fangs. But he'd killed people *and* sired them?"

There was no reason for him to say it—after all, hearing Buffy go sour on Angel was at the top of his Christmas list and would remain there forever. But some part of him, undoubtedly tied to the soul, apparently couldn't help itself. "Seems I recall doin' a fair bit of siring, myself, after they put the spark in me."

"That's different. You were brainwashed. And you had no idea. I'm guessing Angel was neither brainwashed nor under the influence when this happened?"

"Not as far as I recollect, no."

"You were there too?"

"Prisoner, wasn't I?"

"A prisoner?"

"Yeah. Nazis bagged me and a couple of others. It was this German U-boat, see, and—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa," Buffy said, and he could almost see her waving her hands and screwing up her face. "You were grabbed by Nazis?"

"Seems to be a bad habit of mine."

"How did I not know this about you?"

There was the charitable answer and there was the truth. He wasn't sure which she was in a mood for right now.

Thankfully, Buffy seemed to realize the same thing the next second, for she said, "Well, I guess asking and showing an interest has never been my strong suit."

Spike let out a little laugh, relaxing by increments. "Wager there's more I'd rather not tell you and you'd rather not hear than we'd ever get around to sharing, love."

"But it's you. The good and the bad. I take both."

Well, bugger. Here they'd managed to dance around the weightier topics the past couple of days and he was about to start blubbing like a baby. "Buffy—"

"I know. That got weirdly heavy. So, tell me about your time as a Nazi prisoner and how in the hell it figures in with Angel making a vampire when he was all Mr. Soul."

Spike laughed again—he couldn't help it. Only Buffy could think discussing Nazis, war crimes, and her ex's less-than-tidy past was less



heavy than anything they might talk about as it pertained to them. But he was a slave to her as always, couldn't help but indulge her. So for the next ten minutes or so, he rattled off what he remembered. Being nabbed by the SS, shoved in with a few other vamps, being the only one clever enough not to get himself staked during Angel's less-than-heroics—though he conceded that much might have been familial on Angel's part, since the big brooding sod hadn't come at him with a stake once. Then about what he recalled of the boy. The bloody prototype for Captain America, his wholesomeness, and how Angel had justified the siring. When Buffy asked how Angel had known that his offspring would actually steer the U-boat to safety and not just relish in the inevitable carnage, Spike didn't have an answer. He figured Angel didn't have one, either. Maybe self-preservation had played a part. After all, Sam had known what Angel was, and perhaps he'd reckoned he ought to do as he was told if he didn't want to end up biting the dust in a more literal way.

"What about you?" Buffy asked after a stretch.

"What about me, pet?"

"Are there any Spike progeny running around out there that we'll have to deal with one of these days?"

"Nah. Was never much for it, truth be told. Most siring I ever did was in Sunnyhell, building the First's army."

"Huh."

He didn't know what to make of that *buh*, so he continued. "Do it right, do it proper, a sire'll stick around and show you the ropes. Load of responsibility, that. Never much my style. I lived in the moment, never really thinkin' about what came next, just as long as there was fun to be had and mayhem to create. Think for others... Like Angel, it was another way to make it hurt. Turn something good and pure, like what Dru was before, into somethin' twisted and evil. That wasn't my gig. I just liked the party."

"So...you never did it?"

Spike scoffed. "Didn't say that, did I? Yeah, there were a few, here and there over the years. Mostly I'd stake them myself when they wouldn't let a man go in peace. Dru was the mother in our family—she loved creating. Sometimes asked me to make her a new dolly and I

would. Then she'd get right jealous if she thought the dolly was prettier than her and stake them herself. Far as I know, the only one I turned and wasn't done in by me or her was done in by you."

He thought she might ask, considering the breadth of their relationship—the load of good and bad they'd heaped on each other over the years. But then, he should have remembered that she was Buffy, and Buffy was many things, but she wasn't one to forget someone she'd lost. No matter how the losing came about.

"Billy Fordham."

"That his name?"

"The guy who wanted to be a vampire, who traded me for immortality. Yeah. That was him." She sounded strained, and he couldn't blame her. Thinking about those days wasn't a picnic for him for any number of reasons, but he'd been in charge of himself then. Not the one it was done to—not the girl who'd had to pick up the pieces. There were times—innumerable, if he were being honest—when Buffy's willingness and patience to be with him at all, souled or unsouled, struck him as more than just the wonder it was. How anyone could have done as much bad to her as he'd done and still have this, have her in some small way.

It spoke volumes for the sort of person Buffy was. How she gave and forgave, even when it wasn't deserved. Maybe especially when it wasn't.

"Man of my word, and all," Spike muttered a second later. "Plan didn't go as I'd liked, but the boy had a point. So I gave him what he was due. Never told him that you'd just as likely stake him the second he rose. Figured if he didn't know that himself, he was hopeless."

Buffy laughed, something he'd never figured she'd do when discussing someone she'd lost. And it wasn't a forced laugh—rather warm and fond, like the ones he'd heard her give her mates over the years. Like she meant it.

They talked a bit longer, though not of anything of consequence. Things they were planning to do in coming days, things they'd done *back* in the day, experiences they'd shared but never discussed.

Spike was careful not to talk about the future in definite terms. What they'd do when they were together again, where he might take

her, the things he'd like to see as a man with a soul standing beside the woman he loved. The future was unwritten, after all, and by the time it rolled around, there was no telling for what might have changed.

He did make a point to tell her he loved her before he disconnected. He always did.

And since it was his own bloody rule that had stilled her tongue, he did not tell her how much it hurt when he didn't hear those words back.

This was what he'd chosen.



"HELLO?"

"Angel's a bloody puppet!" The words burst out of him in a giddy rush as he bounced on his heels, doing his damndest to shove back the cackle that had seemed permanently stuck in his throat. "*A puppet.*"

"Huh?"

"Won't be for much longer, if Fred's tellin' the truth, but the wanker became a *puppet*. A *puppet*."

"Spike, slow down. You mean someone's pulling Angel's strings?"

And that did him in. Spike keeled over, laughing so hard he wagered his lungs would be having a time of it if he relied on them. The phone tumbled to the ground beside the bed, Buffy's tinny voice coming through, demanding to know if he was all right and what was so funny and what the hell he meant about Angel, but fuck, all Spike could see was the felt frown immortalized on his wanker of a grand-sire's sour puppet face. The detachable nose, the gaping mouth with its stationary tongue, and how even the master puppeteers had managed to capture Angel's gravity-defying hair—he was beside himself, tears streaming down his cheeks and every time he tried to get a hold of himself, he'd remember something someone had said or, hell, even Buffy asking about Angel's sodding strings and lose the plot all over again.

"Spike!" Buffy was screaming from a great distance. Oh, right. The phone. "Spike, I swear I'm going to fly over there just to kick your ass if you don't *tell me* what's going on!"

Still giggling, Spike scooped up the phone and brought it to his ear. "Sorry, pet," he said, his voice rumbling as his body threatened to betray him again. "But—"

"Angel's a puppet."

Another laugh burst through him. "Strong little blighter, too. Bloody adorable when he fights."

"A literal puppet. Like—a hand puppet?"

"Is *Smile Time* a show you get overseas?" Not that Buffy would have much occasion to watch the telly, and if she did, not a kiddy program. "Bugger, *Sesame Street* then?"

"Oh my god," Buffy said, though he could swear he heard a tingle of amusement in her voice. "Like...Bert and Ernie?"

Spike started laughing again, and this time, Buffy went with him. And it was brilliant, him reliving the glorious fight in which Angel had tried to best him as a wee little puppet man and Buffy trying to paint a picture of how she envisioned it, though she eventually calmed down enough to ask if her ex was all right.

Which was when Spike said something stupid.

"All right enough to take his new bird out for brekkie. Seems the wolf's gotta thing for felt."

The silence that answered this had every bit of his good mood slipping out of him, and that dull Angel-shaped throb struck him in the chest.

Right. Buffy learning that Angel had in fact moved on, or was trying to, would smart. No matter if Spike was her long-distance fella, according to her. When it was Angel...

Well, some things never changed.

At length, Buffy released a long, heavy breath. "All right. I can say without a doubt that I did not see that coming."

Neither had he and he should have. Not Angel moving on, but Buffy's reaction to it. "Buffy—"

"She's a wolf?"

He swallowed. "Werewolf, yeah. Did the hero bit earlier on this year, saved her furry arse. She went doe-eyed and has been sniffing around him ever since. Took him a minute to cotton on, or decide it was somethin' worth—"

“Okay, I get the picture.”

Yeah, so did he. Painfully. “Right. Might be a good place to end it tonight.”

“What? No, don’t hang up.”

“Buffy—”

“I’m thrown, is all. I just kinda never thought Angel would...be with someone else. Though I guess that’s dumb. That’s what happens when people break up.”

Except in her case, Angel had shattered her heart for her own good, claiming he could never love another and there would be no moving on for him. Spike knew the score—he’d been there in the immediate aftermath, seen how she’d tried to pick up the pieces and move on. There had to have been some comfort, at least, in the thought that Angel would spend the rest of his days pining over her, no matter what she went on to do. Probably a good bloody reason she’d never let go of the prat; she’d known he’d never let go of her.

And he wouldn’t. No matter how Angel felt about Buffy now—and Spike didn’t think it was love anymore, rather some sense of proprietary affection—Angel would keep his hooks in her as long as he could. It made him the martyr, which made him the Champion, which made him the one deserving of all the accolades and awards.

How would Buffy react if she knew that Nina wasn’t the first woman to catch Angel’s eye since he’d stalked off to Los Angeles? If she knew that he’d been in love, fully, with someone else?

Part of him, the part connected to the man he’d been before the soul, wanted to toss that out there just to gauge her reaction. Do what he could to dismantle this romantic idea she had of Angel good and proper, stomp it out until the big sod’s shadow couldn’t stretch over them and anything they might have together.

“Spike?”

“I’m here, love.” And he always would be. Even when it seemed the safest, sanest route was to let her go. “You all right?”

“Yeah. I’m...yeah.”

“You don’t have to lie to me to spare my feelings, pet. I know how you feel about the git.”

“Not sure how you can when I don’t.” She laughed a mirthless

laugh, one that assaulted the ear. "Look, am I surprised? Yes. A whole lot of yes, but... It's okay. Really."

"Buffy—"

"I mean *really* okay, not putting-on-a-brave-face okay. I told you I've been thinking about this, about that whole relationship, a lot recently and... Well, I'm not sure where I am on it but it's at a place where hearing that doesn't hurt. Or it does, but not for the reasons you'd think."

"You don't owe me rot, you know. I can handle—"

"Spike, I need you to hear this. Really hear it. Do I love that Angel's involved with someone else? No. But it doesn't hurt like it would if he was still the guy I wanted." She paused, and he could almost see her. Brow furrowed, mouth twisted, her eyes busy as she reached for the right combination of words to placate him. "I think this means I might actually be over him."

Spike couldn't help it—he laughed. "Slayer, you don't—"

"When you told me about banging Harmony, I cried for three hours straight."

That wiped the smile right off his face. "What?"

"I-it's true. I mean, it was all of it. That wasn't my favorite conversation in the world."

"Fuck, pet."

"But it was mostly that. I just kept seeing it and it hurt so much. And thinking about it now isn't much fun." She laughed this time, the same sort of broken sound she'd given him before, only this laugh wasn't just mirthless—it was pain itself. Pain he could feel just as surely as if it were his own, likely because it was.

"It wasn't just her, though," Buffy continued a moment later. "I started thinking about other things, too. When you and Anya—"

"Bloody *hell*. Buffy, that was—"

"I know what that was and it wasn't anything I have a right to be upset over, especially two years later, but I never really got to process just how much that hurt."

Because almost immediately after, he'd hurt her in the most unforgivable way. Yet here she was, talking to him, crying over him, telling

him these things that made him second-guess his own name, let alone his reality. "I'm sorry," he said in a low voice. "For that. For her. For what came after. For Harm. For *all* of it. You'll never know how sorry—"

"I think I do."

She spoke with such calm assurance that he didn't have it in him to argue. And hell, maybe she did know.

Maybe he wasn't giving her enough credit where he was concerned. Or Angel, for that matter.

"So," Buffy said in a peppy voice, "was there a reason behind the puppetry or was Angel just trying something new?"

And that was all it took. Spike exhaled and let everything else go. He rambled through the order of events as he knew them, cracking himself up again as he relived the moment he'd walked into Angel's office and gotten a look at him. Buffy laughed too, the sound soft and sweet and musical, which made it hard to keep from embellishing or, hell, just making up rot in order to keep her laughing. But there wasn't much beyond his own brawl with Angel and what he'd gleaned after the others had taken the fight to the evil puppet lair.

"Oh, and pretty sure Fred finally made a move on Wes," he finished, though not knowing why, except he was downright chuffed for the girl. She'd been making eyes at old Percy for some time now, and even if there was no accounting for her taste, she deserved her slice of happiness more than most people he knew. "So there's an office romance to keep things interestin'. If I'm lucky, might be more entertaining than my soaps."

"Really?" Buffy replied, sounding charmingly perplexed. "As much as the Wes in my memory fits every bad stereotype, I do remember him salivating over Cordelia."

Spike frowned, not following. "Cordelia's dead, pet."

"Well, yeah, and I don't think they ever got together. But knowing—having *literally* heard his lusty Cordy-thoughts—I'm just a little surprised, but I guess I shouldn't be. The right person, and all, can make all the difference. Just look at Willow. She was head over for Oz but that didn't stop her from getting her gay on."

A second later, the clouds in his head parted, and he couldn't help

but chuckle. "Buffy, Fred's not a bloke. Name's short for Winifred. She's a bird."

"Oh." He heard her swallow, and when she spoke again, it was in such a way he knew she was choosing her words carefully. "This Fred that you like so much, who said you were worth saving... This entire time, you've been talking about a woman?"

"You didn't know that?"

"No, it must not have come up."

"Weren't you in LA for a spell after the big showdown? Figure you two woulda—"

"Well, gee, Spike. I'm sorry if I don't remember the name of everyone I meet, especially following major trauma. I'll try better next time. But sure. Tell me more about how great *Fred* is."

The edge in her voice was one he'd rarely heard before now. And bloody hell, he might be a reformed man, but he was still a bad one in many ways because he loved hearing it.

"To be fair, I haven't talked about her all that much."

"Enough for me to know you like her and she likes you."

"Same way you like Xander, for some barmy reason, and he likes you." Though perhaps that wasn't the best example, considering Xander had been salivating after Buffy for years now. "Bugger, love, she's a friend. All she's ever been. All I've ever wanted her to be. The girl's cute as a button, I'll grant you, but there's only one woman in the world for me, and I'm talking to her."

"Uh huh."

"I just told you she's gotten on with Wesley, didn't I?"

"Yeah, and you've *never* been all crushy with someone who was with someone else before."

Spike groaned. The humor he'd found in the subject was quickly waning. "Can tell you this as many times and as many ways as you fancy hearing it. You're the one, Buffy. The only one. Even if you told me to sod off for good... Might be I could make a show of moving on, but you'd always be there. You'd always be the one. Anyone else would just be someone I was with 'cause I couldn't be with you."

There was nothing for a moment but the sound of her steady breathing. Then, she inhaled deeply, and let out a little self-deprecating



laugh. "I know that. I think. I mean, I hear it and I believe you believe it and all because, well, you're you, but... Buffy-brain isn't always, you know, functional."

And throw in the fact that she was still reeling from the confessions the other night, and the lingering rush of pleasure from before officially dived into self-loathing. Because Spike *did* know how she felt, and as much fun as it was being on the receiving end of someone's jealousy, he also knew it would take time for Buffy to be entirely secure in any relationship. There was a lot of damage and heartache to undo, trust to build. A different kind of trust than the one they already shared. A better, bigger trust—one that they'd never had the chance to develop. One between lovers.

"Also," Buffy said a moment later, "from what you've said about Fred, she's been all nice and sweet and supportive and...that's stuff you never got from me."

"Buffy—"

"I know. I'm dropping it." That was Buffy-code for not-dropping-it-just-not-talking-about-it-anymore. "I know you love me," she continued. "It's just... I have trouble understanding why sometimes."

Yeah, she'd mentioned that a while back and it still didn't make sense. But it also did, in that it was Buffy, and she'd always been blind to the best parts of herself. Harder on herself than anyone he knew, perhaps with present company excluded. There was everything he'd told her that night at the house—things that were as clear to him as the room around him now, and more than that. It could have been easier with someone else, almost certainly would have been, but it wouldn't have been right. It wouldn't have been what he wanted. It wouldn't have been Buffy.

Spike had never done anything easy, soul or not.

"I'll just have to do a better job of showing you, I suppose," he said after a moment. "You all right?"

"Peachy keen, that's me."

He pressed his eyes closed, sighed. "Look, I'm sorry if I didn't catch on that you thought Fred was a bloke. You'd been here and Willow's still in touch with her, I think. And hell, all I can see is you. So much so I forget you can't see what I see, yeah?"

“Again with the not knowing why, but this conversation is officially going in circles.”

“Right then.” And he could reassure her until his dead lungs ached, but that didn’t mean she’d believe it. “One last thing, though, before we table it.”

“What’s that?”

“Blood, not brains.”

“Oh, so you’re saying I’m not the smart choice?”

“Bloody hell...” Though Spike was fairly certain he caught the hint of a grin in her voice. “You make me crazy, you know that?”

“Pretty sure if you didn’t go crazy when your last serious girlfriend was actually crazy, you can’t blame anything of the sort on me.”

He chuckled, relaxing fully. “Yeah, she had the crazy for both of us. With you and me, split’s a bit more even.”

“I’m equality girl.”

*My equality girl*, he wanted to say, but stopped himself before he could let the words out. Though they were together—as together as a couple separated by an ocean could be—making declarations like that felt more like assumptions, and Spike was through assuming anything when it came to Buffy. Even when she was adorably jealous—more jealous at the bloody prospect that he had a female friend than she was at the fact that Angel was off snogging other girls and making breakfast dates.

It was enough to make a man hope like he’d never hoped before, but that still left the potential for a fall—and as someone who had a habit of falling whenever Buffy was around, Spike wasn’t certain he’d survive the next one.

“Better let you get to sleep,” he said. “You’re keepin’ vamp hours.”

“And you’re keeping people hours. How did this happen?”

“Guess it’s to be expected when you’re several time zones away from your best girl and she has you spying on a law firm that works a regular nine to five.”

“Just your best girl?”

“Only girl, Buffy. Only one for me.”

She sighed, a sound that lit him up from the inside. “I won’t be a

crazy ball of insecurity forever,” she said. “Just... It’s hard when you’re there and I’m here and I can’t touch you.”

Spike bit back a groan, the words going straight to his cock. Again, the possibility of getting naughty with her over the phone flitted across his mind, but he pushed it back for now. It really was late over in Rome and his girl needed her rest. But maybe, if touching him was what she wanted to do, they could discuss a bit of the next best thing at a later time.

“Spike?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you wanna... I mean, I’ve never done it and I’ll probably embarrass myself but we could try to... With the phone thing.”

He paused, arching an eyebrow, then chuckled again. Once more, Buffy was ahead of him, which seemed right. Ever since he’d first laid eyes on her, she’d kept him on his toes.

“Next time, pet.”

“Next time? Why next time? Why not this time?”

“Because I can hear you’ve had a bloody long day and you need your rest. Besides...” He dropped his voice in the way he knew got her knickers wet. “We do the *phone thing*, we do it proper. I want to take my time. You remember how I like to take my time, right?”

Buffy whimpered her response, and now his cock was fully involved, straining against the zipper of his jeans, and he almost said bugger it. But this was part of it, too—the anticipation. The decision to prolong it, knowing how that would intensify what they experienced, make the release something other than good, but bloody brilliant.

“You’re using your bedroom voice,” Buffy replied. “That’s not fair.”

Spike grinned. “Never liked it before.”

“I liked it. I just didn’t like that I liked it.”

“You think I didn’t know that?”

“No, I think there’s very little about me you don’t know.”

“Bout time you caught on.” He broadened his grin. A fella could get used to this. “Now get some rest, yeah? We’ll talk about the *phone thing* tomorrow.”

“Fine,” Buffy replied. Undoubtedly, she meant to sound put out, but

the effect was lost when she yawned halfway through the word. “You get some rest, too. Puppet wrestling is very taxing, I’ve heard.”

“I love you.”

“I am not allowed to respond to that.”

“Someday, sweet Slayer. Now get some sleep.”

THEY KEPT MISSING EACH OTHER OVER THE NEXT COUPLE OF DAYS. Some mini-crisis arose among the new slayer blood that demanded Buffy's attention and intervention, so she only had time to do quick check-ins. The exhaustion and exasperation in her voice carried over, though, both at the situation she was handling and that there wasn't time to do much beyond touch base, never mind explore the delights of phone sex. Still, Spike treasured these calls, brief as they were—that she was carving out *any* time to make them, or answer them if he rang first, even though she was up to her arse in whatever mess teeny slayers could make.

Which, he knew, was probably a larger ordeal than she'd made out, being that slayers, teeny or not, could make huge bloody messes.

Still, he was happy to be making progress at Wolfram and Hart. Once everything was said and done, he'd have something to tell Buffy that wasn't more of the same. Angel had offered to send him abroad, supposedly under the pretense that they would kill each other if they remained in the same city, which sounded well and good but was also the kind of sign Buffy had been waiting for. That Angel worried that having Spike around and *not* on the payroll would compromise whatever he was working on—if indeed he was working for the other side

now. The offer had come with all sorts of pretty strings, too, intended to keep Spike indebted to Wolfram and Hart in some fashion—or at least under Angel's thumb.

Yeah, Buffy would find that all right interesting once they got a chance to talk rather than play phone tag.

Then the sarcophagus arrived at Wolfram and Hart, and everything changed.

Spike managed to fire one call to Buffy before he and Angel took off for England, for the Deeper Well. The call had gone straight to voicemail, and despite Buffy's reservations about leaving messages, he'd left one anyway.

*"Something's happening to Fred. Angel and I are off to see if we can stop it. Dunno when I'll have a chance to check in. I love you, Buffy. For god's sake, stay safe."*

That last part had been nerves. He'd forgotten what it was like when things happened to others he cared about—how it made *everyone* he cared about seem vulnerable in retrospect. It had been that way during his human days, with his sickly mum and his small but tight social circle—or those blokes he'd thought of as friends until he overheard them mocking his poetry. But death and disease had been just another London backdrop then, impossible to avoid, and every time he'd gotten a bit of bad news about someone he knew, it had made his mum seem all the more fragile.

Given that Buffy had already died once on his watch, Spike wasn't about to take for granted that it couldn't happen again.

The trip, though, turned out to be a bloody waste of time. To undo the thing that was consuming Fred from the inside, thousands would have to die. Maybe millions. He still wasn't sure how that worked out—how yanking a demon invader could have that sort of impact—but he trusted it was true. After all, Drogyn could not lie.

And, if Spike were being honest with himself, he'd thought about the path of destruction Illyria's essence would leave behind with more than just innocent people on the brain. Every person, Drogyn had said, between the Deeper Well and Los Angeles, would die. Every person. And Spike didn't know where Buffy was—where her own crisis had taken her. He didn't know where Dawn was, if she was still in Rome or

somewhere else. He didn't know, and maybe it had been selfish, but those were the lives he'd focused on. The lives he'd weighed as more valuable. Perhaps a better man could have said it was all of the people who'd be lost, but despite appearances, Spike wasn't a better man, and the knowledge made him a bit sick.

By the time he pulled himself over the threshold into his flat again, he felt he'd aged about a thousand years. Parts of him ached that hadn't ached since his human days. And for a few minutes, he just stood in the middle of the apartment, taking in the surroundings that had gone from foreign to familiar seemingly overnight. The telly, the gaming system, the refrigerator, the bed that had looked so narrow and lonely the first time he'd set eyes on it. These things that were his because of some cowboy with a grudge—a cowboy currently being tortured by the higher-ups at Wolfram and Hart for sins Spike wasn't sure he cared enough to know about.

So many second chances awarded to a creature that didn't deserve it. If he actually started counting the number of times he'd avoided what was coming to him, he wagered he'd just break down.

Spike eventually forced his feet toward the ugly red couch and crashed into it the second it was within reach. He should sleep—he wasn't sure when he had last—but he didn't think he could, exhausted as he was.

It was unfair that he should have the chance, that he should be here at all, but he was, and he wanted what he wanted.

And that was to hear her voice.

He didn't bother with mental math. Didn't spare much thought, really, for what time it was over where she was. Hell, he wasn't even sure he expected her to pick up. Everything from the last couple of days seemed like a different version of reality—not quite a dream, dreams weren't this vivid, but not the real world, either. A worse world, one he had no hope of saving.

"Spike?"

And that was all it took. Every inch of him unwound. He could bloody well melt into her voice.

"Hey," he said hoarsely. "Didn't know if you—"

"How is she?"

Right to the point. At that moment, he didn't know if he loved or hated her for it. "Dead. She's dead."

Buffy exhaled in a rush, like the wind had been knocked out of her. "Oh."

"Yeah."

They sat like that for a few seconds, neither talking, the silence somehow both empty and full at the same time. He listened for the things that kept him grounded, the breaths she took, the steady thumps of her heart, those things that reaffirmed Buffy was alive. She was safe. He couldn't touch her, couldn't pull her against him and inhale her scent, but he had this—the sound of life. Her life.

She didn't ask what happened, of that he was certain, but Spike found himself spilling the story anyway. About the mysterious sarcophagus that had arrived, how it had infected Fred, carved out her insides to make way for Illyria. How he and Angel had hopped a plane to England and visited a place called the Deeper Well. How they had stood there, both capable of saving Fred but neither willing to do it. He didn't mention the thoughts he'd had about the specific lives he'd considered or how that made him feel, knowing that part of him had been keen to spare himself the pain another man was suffering tonight. And yeah, even if Buffy hadn't invaded his thoughts then, Spike knew he wouldn't have made any other call. One life was not worth thousands.

Except he wondered, if Illyria had chosen a different vessel, if he might have said *bugger it* and lived with the consequences. That he didn't immediately know the answer to that question had him again wondering the value of the soul—if it was there or not.

But that was just one thought in a brain stuffed full of them at the moment.

"Ended up tellin' Angel I aimed to stick around," he said. "So there's that, I suppose. For better or worse, not just lurkin' about and popping up anymore. I'm well and truly on the inside now. He knows I'm not goin' anywhere, and it could be I'll be able to do some good now. Real good. Not whatever I've been playin' at so far."

"Spike... God, I am so sorry." And she did sound it. She sounded as haggard as he felt, which made everything both better and worse. It



was nice, not being alone in misery, but misery was the one thing he wanted Buffy free of forever. “Are you sure you want to stay?”

*No. Yes.*

“Wanna find out what happened here.” He swallowed. “This could be it, right? The bigger plan? Illyria’s a conqueror, taken out whole bloody civilizations.”

“You think Angel might have let this happen?”

And there was the other thing—the thought he’d been batting around for hours now.

“I dunno.”

Angel seemed to think this whole mess was his fault, and Spike wasn’t sure how he meant it. If he was seeing just how bloody barmy it had been to set up shop in the belly of the beast, or if he was speaking more directly.

The man had appeared truly torn up about Fred, talking about the things the girl had said to him when they’d first met, and especially raw after having lost Cordelia. There were times Angel could be a decent actor, pull one over on him, and there was no accounting for how much being at the helm of Wolfram and Hart might have warped that goody-good center of his. How much Spike’s own appearance had Angel contending with the fact that the prize he’d thought would be his one day might be dog-eared for another man. Already he’d seen Angel make some calls even Spike’s soulless self would call suspicious, and justify it as being part of working for the greater good.

Illyria opening up in Fred’s lab might have been solely due to the bloke Wesley had shot dead earlier, solely due to Gunn signing the wrong thing. Or it could be indicative of something else.

“Except for that stint a few years back, I’ve not been around Angel all soulful-like,” Spike said after a moment. “Know what I saw when he was your boy, how bloody annoying he was at the time, how he seemed to play you—”

“I’ll let that go on account of trauma.”

And he let it go on account of not wanting to start an argument, as well as his own uncertainty of where his deep loathing for Angel ended and an objective accounting of what the man was like began. The Angel he’d known back in the day had been a manipulative, sadistic

prat who would have relished every bit of what had happened the past few days. The big ideas bloke, the one dead-set on ending the world, had seemed an overcorrection, in Spike's estimation—Angelus reacting to the indignity that had been the soul by trying to wipe out the world that had made him suffer through it. In the old days, ending the world had been a thing he and Darla would entertain over a few pints after decimating a village or twenty, but never actually see through. A world ended was a world not enjoyed, and Angelus wouldn't have been happy if his toys were taken away. He needed innocent people around so he had someone to torture.

What had happened to Fred would have been Angelus's idea of poetic devastation. After Wesley had pined for the girl for so long, he'd finally had a glimpse of what happiness might look like, only to have it ripped from his arms. If that wasn't enough, no piece of the woman he'd loved was left behind—no soul waiting in the afterlife for a tearful reunion. Nothing left of Fred at all but a demigod wearing her skin, speaking in an approximation of her voice, and existing in the spot she'd stolen.

Yeah, to Angelus, that would have been a masterpiece.

And Spike couldn't say—because all told, Angel seemed more or less the same to him as he had back in the day, only perhaps a bit subdued—if he could imagine his grandsire as he was now, moving the pieces needed to bring forth someone like Illyria. If she was part of the price for the shiny new office and the garage full of vintage cars. After all, it seemed Gunn had played a role in Fred's death, albeit unwittingly. It was possible Angel had done the same.

Bugger, at this point, the only person in LA he trusted was himself. It was truly a miserable state of affairs.

"Dunno what I think anymore," Spike said at last. "These last... Fuck, Buffy, I don't know what to think."

"If you want to leave, just say the word. I'll have you on a plane to Italy in a jiffy."

"What happened to bein' your bloke on the inside?"

"I'd rather you be my bloke *here*. Away from demented demon goddesses and whatever is going on with Wolfram and Hart."

He curled his lips into a smile at hearing her say *bloke*. Couldn't bloody help it. She was adorable. "That's not the general talking."

Buffy sighed heavily, a sigh he felt down to the bone. "No, it's not. The general would kick my ass for pulling you out now." A pause. "I really don't like being the general sometimes."

"I know, but you're good at it. A natural."

"I'll respond to that once I figure out whether or not it's a compliment." She offered a tragic little laugh that just about did in whatever was left of his heart now. "You're not going to listen to just Buffy, are you?"

"Buffy who thinks with her not-so-rational parts? Could listen to you all night. But you're right about what's happening here, love. It's important." And it seemed a slight on Fred's memory to tuck tail and run now. Whatever else, she had been a friend, the only person to really believe he was worth saving since Buffy, and she'd done all she could to rescue him from the in-between where he'd been stuck for so long. The least he could do was find out more about the thing that had killed her and, if necessary, be a part of the solution that stuffed Old Blue back into the sodding sarcophagus. "Gotta stay, sweet," he murmured after a beat. "What we're doin' here...bloody hard as it is, it's important."

"I know," Buffy replied. "I know it is. I just... I hate this."

"Me too." And truer words had never been spoken. It would have been easy to leave it there, focus on the things he wanted but couldn't have. That had been his path thus far—the path he knew—but it wasn't the one he was on anymore. There was more still to fight for, the girl on the other end of the world being chief among them.

"But you're okay?" Spike asked, shaking his head—wishing he could shake away the thoughts in there just as easily. "Got everything sorted with the bitty slayers?"

"What? Oh, yeah. It's... Well, compared to what you've been through the past few days, it seems downright trivial."

"Tell me."

"Spike, you should get some rest. You sound deader than usual."

"Couldn't sleep worth rot if I tried," he argued, not sure if that was true but entirely sure he didn't want to put it to the test. Now that he

had Buffy on the line, Spike wagered he could listen to her for hours. Her voice alone was calming the open sore inside him, bringing him back to the place he'd been just a few short days ago. "Tell me about the kiddies."

Buffy breathed another long sigh. "All right. For starters, I'm packing up here and heading to London."

"Well, bloody good thing I didn't jump on your offer, then. You'd have me flyin' into the wrong country."

The cheeky bint blew a raspberry at him. Granted, the effect was somewhat lost since it was through the phone, but she blew it just the same. Which, naturally, made him think of her tongue and all the other things she was good at blowing, which just proved that no matter how bloody wretched he felt, he was a sucker for her.

"What's in London?"

"Watchers Council central," Buffy replied. "Dawn's going to stay here with Andrew for a while, which I don't love, but she's in school here and she's happy, so it doesn't seem fair to make her uproot. Plus, I kinda need people to think I'm still in Italy."

That shoved him from exhausted to alert in half a beat. "Why? Somethin' after you?"

"Uhh, maybe. I'm not sure how this is going to shake out." She huffed that little laugh of hers, the one she brought out when she wanted to downplay just how serious she was. "Did you know that demon mafia is a thing?"

Bugger. He should have seen that one coming. Even though he and Dru hadn't hung around Rome all that long, it had been long enough to flirt with getting in a turf war with one of the families there. "Bloody hell, don't tell me..."

"It has to do with the school of slayers here. This...mob word for boss?"

"Uhh, *boss*, last I checked."

"Okay, then not boss. Like a high-ranking member—"

"Capo?" Spike ventured.

"Yeah. Capo de...something something Goran. Turns out one of the slayers is or was dating someone within the family, which, I've seen them and she must have a very specific fetish." Buffy made her stan-

dard *yuck* sound—the same she'd made once upon a time while sitting on a sarcophagus in his crypt, throwing back drinks and being more adorable than any woman had any right being. "Anyway, her being a slayer is kind of a big deal because, to them, it gives them a leg-up in these never-ending mob wars. Other mob families aren't as thrilled and are starting to come after her. Which wouldn't be a problem if she weren't so new at the whole gig. She tells me the boyfriend can take care of himself and her if it comes down to it, but I've met these Goran things and they do not inspire confidence in the kicking-ass-taking-names department. I honestly don't even know how she met this guy since the Gorans don't operate out of Rome, but that's the kind of luck I have."

"So how does a move to London figure in?"

Buffy blew out a long breath. "This is a plan so convoluted it can only be Andrew's, I'm telling you. Bianca—that's the slayer—is apparently a dead ringer for me. I don't see it but everyone else does."

Spike quirked his lips. He'd heard once that Buffy hadn't thought the Buffybot was a good likeness of her, either, though he opted not to mention that.

"Anyway," she continued, "Bianca is going to stage a public breakup with this guy and then get sent to London to... I dunno, go to rehab for slayers who fall in love with monsters. In actuality—"

"She stays in Rome and you're off to London."

"Exactly."

"Accomplishing what?"

"Well, since I have a reputation of being a demon magnet when it comes to dating, the story will be that, after Bianca devastated this Immortal guy, I was there to pick up the pieces and—"

Spike was on his feet in a flash. "The Immortal? The bleeding Immortal? That's the bloke messin' with your slayers?"

"Uhh, I take it you've heard of him."

"*Heard* of him? Owe that bastard a thrashing. Chained me up one time so he could put the moves on Dru, and of course it worked because no girl can resist him, that—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. No girl can resist this guy? I mean, there's slime and antlers standards, sure, but these Goran demons are

not exactly eye-candy, so this random slayer and your crazy ex aside—”

“The Immortal’s not a bloody Goran,” Spike snapped, then wished he hadn’t for reasons that were both highly irrational and completely lucid. Knowing his bloody luck, Buffy would get curious and want to snag a peek and then fall under whatever spell the Immortal cast over the women in his life. “Might be a friend of the Goran family—wanker had alliances all over the place. He’s a demon and you stay away from him or he’ll put the mojo on you and I’ll—”

“Stay away from him? I’m leaving the country. I think that’ll do just fine.” Buffy sounded somewhere between amused and brassed off. “Though, just curious, what do you think would happen if I were to *not* stay away from him?”

“Repeat of bloody history, that’s what.”

Dammit. She was grinning now—he knew he heard a grin in her voice. “Are you jealous?”

“Considering that my best girl is on another sodding continent and the Immortal likes going after the women I love, I’m not—”

A light giggle tickled his ear. Brilliant. Just brilliant. Now Buffy was laughing at him.

“So, is he super dreamy? Tall, dark, handsome? Does he have an accent?”

“I have an accent.”

“Yeah, but not an *Italian* accent,” she replied before bursting into laughter again. “Completely different vibe. Not as passionate or—”

“You’re saying I’m not passionate?”

“I’m saying here I thought Bianca was into hobbits and she actually found her very own Fabio.”

Spike growled and shot the door to his flat a wary look, wondering if he could hijack Angel’s company jet before his grandsire caught wise. Then he decided he didn’t care if Angel knew or hitched a ride in the cargo hold. Either way worked out the same—Spike would get to Italy, get to the girl, and keep her too busy shagging to have her consider meeting the Immortal face-to-face. Sod the greater plan and heroics and all that rot.

“Spike.” Buffy’s voice was a notch calmer when he clued back into the conversation. “Spike, you know I’m teasing you, right?”

“You *think* you’re teasing.”

“I gotta say, I am enjoying this. The jealous mess that has been me as of late was making me feel a bit self-conscious.”

Spike pulled the phone from his ear to scowl at it. “You’re hell on a man’s ego, Summers.”

“You really think I’m in danger of being wooed by this Immortal guy? I mean, what kind of name is that, anyway?”

“Asking the wrong bloke,” he muttered in a tone that was *not* bitter. “Wouldn’t say *danger’s* the right word, but... Hell, love, after the day I’ve had—make that *days*—the last thing I wanna hear is that the woman I love’s gonna cross paths with that arrogant git.”

“Again with the non-path crossing. And seriously, do women just throw their panties at him or what?”

He made a low, growling sound in lieu of answering, entertaining himself with visions of tearing the Immortal’s arms off and beating him senseless with them. While his rational side more or less accepted that Dru’s dalliance with the wanker had been less about him and more about her overall penchant for sleeping around, time still hadn’t softened that particular blow.

But Dru wasn’t Buffy, thank fuck. And Buffy didn’t mess around on the man she was with.

As though hearing the thought, Buffy said softly, “Spike, you know that you being my international guy means I’m not interested in anyone else, right?”

He muttered something that resembled words, but only distantly.

“Right?”

“Suppose so. Just...different, isn’t it? This you and me business.” Not to mention a bomb had already gone off in his world this week and he felt a bit gun-shy. It would be a while before he trusted anything with him and Buffy wasn’t conditional or otherwise fragile. “So that’s the plan? Your slayer pretends to be you while romancing the Immortal and you’re off in London?”

“The logic is that demons are less likely to attack Buffy Summers than they are Bianca Rossi, and the Immortal can help her fend off any

demons that *do* attack. Plus, this way they don't have to actually break up. I'm all for romance these days."

"Thought you thought the girls were too young."

"Some of them are," she conceded. "Mucho with the young. Bianca's not, though. She's about my age. So I really can't tell her to ditch her supernatural honey without being a massive hypocrite."

Fair enough. Still... "Not seein' how this solves the problem, pet. If this girl's been hangin' all over the Immortal and she keeps on, won't people just assume it's still her?"

"Nah. Dead ringers we might be, but our styles could *not* be more different. Bianca's more goth, so this entire thing involves her dyeing her hair blonde, ditching the nose ring, and wearing clothes with actual colors."

That sounded all right then, though it didn't answer everything. "Okay, so, wouldn't having Buffy Summers be a step up for the Gorans?"

"Ahh, but Buffy Summers makes no allegiances. There's the difference."

"How's that?"

"Well, everyone pretty much knows my whole history with Angel. Apparently there are fan-sites dedicated to us."

Spike snarled without meaning to. "I'll burn down the bloody internet."

"Put your torch down. This is a good thing. *Because* everyone knows my history with Angel, they also know that I cut ties with him because of the Wolfram and Hart gig—that my company policy at the moment is Angel's a big question mark, possibly evil and bookmarked for being taken out."

"And this helps you how?"

At that, he could practically hear her roll her eyes. "Well, if *Angel* is on my no-fly list, and he's my big epic love, then the Gorans know there's no chance they'll get a hold over me. So *Buffy* dating the Immortal scores them precisely zero political points, and almost guarantees that if they step out of line, I'll bring the Scythe down on them in a big ole way."

Right then. He supposed he could see the benefit there. But that



didn't mean he had to like it. "There are bloody fan-sites for you and Captain Forehead?"

"Being famous has its drawbacks."

"And I suppose there are none for the two of us?"

"Well, if that really bothers you, I can tell Andrew he's good to publish whatever he's been working on."

He wanted to growl at that but couldn't. He'd waited too long to be on the receiving end of Buffy's gentle teasing to throw much of a protest. And who the hell cared if Angel got the girl on the internet? By her own admission, the Slayer was over the sod and firmly Spike's girl now, so fuck it, Angel could have the consolation prize.

"Spike?"

"Yeah?"

"You're really okay with fake-me dating the Immortal?"

The last of his irritation melted into pure warmth. "Would it matter if I wasn't?"

"Well, I'd think you were being a little possessive and way overreacting and I probably wouldn't change my plans, but I'd feel maybe a little bad about them."

He chuckled. "I'm fine with it. Much as I hate to admit it, when you lay it out, it makes sense."

"See? I can do a few things right."

"You do many things right, pet. Never let anyone convince you otherwise."

"Like what?"

"Like fish for compliments." Spike grinned when he heard her bristle. "And get this cranky old sod to laugh after the few days he's had. Remember what he's fighting for."

"That was almost poetic."

"Story of my unlife, bein' almost poetic."

"Huh?"

"Another time." He paused, swallowed. "I love you, Buffy."

There were times he worried he'd exhaust the words—say them so many times the meaning became unclear, or she didn't feel the intent behind them. And the words themselves were somewhat weak when it came to describing what he felt, how much he felt, how much he

would always feel. That was where humanity came up lacking, he'd always thought so—trying to minimize something as powerful and all-consuming as love to letters and syllables. It was one of the reasons he'd first started penning poetry, his hope of one day taming the language enough to unlock all its uses, or find some combination of words that would do justice the things that kept him in perpetual motion. But in the end, all he had were the words, and he could only hope that she understood what all he packed into them.

And maybe, one day, feel strongly enough that she could say them back and mean it. Mean it so they both knew it, so there was no doubt.

"Spike..."

But that day was not today.

"Get some sleep, love." He released a deep breath, wishing more than ever that she was here, that he could curl himself around her and breathe her in. And to think, he'd almost decided not to call.

"Wait just a second. I've been thinking, and it's really not fair. This whole you-can-say-it-but-I-can't thing."

Spike swallowed. "I need it to be real, Buffy."

"I know, but—"

"Gotta understand, feels... Hearing your voice but not seeing you, you tellin' me things I've dreamt of hearin' for years... Dunno if I can trust it if I can't see your eyes."

"But I can?"

He scoffed at that. "Yeah, because I've been real shy about how much I—"

"I know, I know. It's just...hard. I want you to know that..." She trailed off, then blew out a breath. "I am so not good with words and you're holding hostage the only words I can think of."

"Buffy—"

"Okay, let me try this. Even though you're not here, you are to me."

Fuck, he was too drained to fight off the tears that stung his eyes. Maybe the words themselves didn't matter, so long as he could feel the sentiment behind them. Seemed fair that Buffy would speak better poetry than he could ever hope to write.

"Ugh." Buffy groaned. "That was way lame."

"No, it wasn't. It was everything."

“Really?”

“Yeah.” He grinned, sniffed loud enough that he knew she heard. “You too, pet.”

A little sigh sounded through the line. “Good,” she said. “Talk tomorrow?”

“Assumin’ the world’s still spinning, yeah.”

Another groan, this one more animated than before. “Spike, you lived in Sunnydale for how long?”

“What?”

“Long enough to know better than to say things like that. If you just made it so the world ends tomorrow, I am going to kick your ass.”

He chuckled. “Knowin’ me, I’ll look forward to it.”

“Perv.”

“Never pretended to be anything else.”

“Well, you did for a while, but it didn’t take.”

“Buffy?”

“Yeah?”

“Shut that glorious gob of yours and go to sleep.”

“Only since you asked so nicely.” She blew another raspberry in his ear, then giggled at herself, the sound light and musical, and he loved her so much he could hardly bear it. “Good night, Spike.”

“Night, Slayer.”

“HEY, YOU.”

Every tense muscle in his body relaxed at the sound of her voice.

He had a routine now, or what he supposed passed for a routine. It wasn't every night, but most of them—the best ones, at least. After tailing Angel all day, wandering the halls of Wolfram and Hart and getting his arse royally handed to him by a pissed off demigod stuck in a human suit, he'd do a quick look-see around his neighborhood, wash the law firm off in the shower, warm up some blood, kill time playing video games...and then talk to her.

Tonight, he was lounging on his bed in a pair of sweats and nothing else. It had been a trying day for no particular reason and Spike found himself missing her warmth and scent in ways that weren't new but a bit harder to bear than usual. If he concentrated, he might be able to fool himself into thinking she was curled next to him rather than on the other side of the planet. The thought didn't provide much comfort, but some.

“Evenin', love,” Spike replied, staring at the ceiling.

“I need to ask you something.”

Well, that sounded right serious. He sat up, scooted back until his back was pressed against the headboard. “Everythin' all right?”

There was nothing for a moment, then he heard it—a sound he would know anywhere. His girl was crying, and everything in him went cold.

“Buffy,” Spike said, trying to keep his voice measured. “Baby, talk to me. Are you hurt? Are you—”

“If you get the Shanshu Prophecy, what will you do?”

“What?”

“If you save the world, the vampire with a soul, and become human, what will you do?”

No, repetition didn’t clear anything up. He still wasn’t sure what was wrong, and the question didn’t match the anxious clawing at his insides. “Buffy, what hurt you?”

“Just...answer me. Please.”

A fine thing to ask after she’d gotten him all in a tizzy. Spike swore and tore a hand through his hair, pushing through the confusing tangle of thoughts to focus. In truth, he spent more time these days thinking about the prophecy than was likely advisable. Hard not to when it meant what it did—absolution from the sodding universe itself, recognition that the bloody hard calls he’d made had been the right ones, that his existence held meaning beyond these walls, that he actually had a destiny after all. But at the same time, Spike knew better than most what became of men who fixated on the prize, and he’d spent too many years wasting away in the hopeless chase of an idea.

All of his years, if he were being really honest. The prize might change but the fight remained the same.

“Spike?”

“Yeah, love, sorry,” he said, shaking his head and dragging a hand down his face. “Just...caught me off guard, is all.”

“But do you know what you would do?”

“Suppose the answer’s supposed to be summat grand, yeah? Big plans for the big day, and all that.” He snickered at himself. “Told you as much a while back that the first idea was I could come to you in the sun. Top my big Sunnydale exit with an entrance you’d never forget. Gave up on that, though.”

A whimper sounded through the line. “You did?”

“Well, you know I’m back, Buffy. Have for a minute now.”

“And you haven’t thought about the prophecy at all since we started doing the long-distance thing?”

“Didn’t say that. Think about it all the time.”

“Then you know what you would do, don’t you?”

Bugger, where the hell was she going with this? “Haven’t sussed out the itinerary just yet, Slayer. Seemed a bloody waste of time for somethin’ not likely to happen. But if you need an answer right now, guess the best I can do is go for a walk.”

She drew in a sharp breath and went quiet.

Spike waited for a beat, then another, then huffed out a laugh that sounded tragic even to his ears. “Go ahead and say it.”

“What?”

“Bloody pathetic, aren’t I?”

“Huh? No, Spike, that’s not—”

“Big dream, huh? Turn human and take a bloody stroll.” He laughed again. “Should mention you’re there, in this little fantasy. So I can see you in the sun all proper like. Watch the way it hits your hair. Got to see it once, mind, but I didn’t take my time to savor it then, bein’ a right wanker.”

“Spike—”

“But that’s it, love. The big plan I have at the mo’, though if you give me some time, I’m sure I can come up with somethin’ that’ll—”

“Would you *stay* human?”

Well, that was twice in one conversation she’d managed to knock him speechless. “What exactly do you reckon my options would be?”

“I need to know if you’d stay human or if you’d... I dunno, decide that being with me without vamp strength is too dangerous and you’ll just get me killed so it’s better if you go back to the liquid diet?”

She’d lost her bloody marbles. Only explanation there was.

Spike opened his mouth, decided the thing he’d been about to say was a bad idea and closed it, then opened it again. “You’re really asking me this?”

“Yes.”

“So in that beautiful, barmy head of yours, there’s a world where I get everything—the prize, the girl, the sun, and I turn it down?”

“Specifically because it’s impossible to be with me.”

“Slayer, I know I bloody well told you that you need a bit of monster in your man, but if the day comes I’m suddenly warmer than room temperature, I’m still gonna be *me*. That monster part goes nowhere.” Now he laughed again, harder than before and with a bit more feeling behind it. “Fangs are just a gimmick. The real beast is tucked away. Easier to sneak up on you like that—you don’t see it until it’s too late.”

He heard her take another breath, and when she spoke again, some of the urgency had left her voice.

“There’s something I need to tell you.”

Spike pressed his eyes closed. No good could follow those words, he was sure. “Yeah...?”

“I’ve told Willow.”

“Told Willow what?”

“About you. That you’re alive. That you’re working in LA because I asked you to.”

Well, that was... He didn’t know what that was. Not exactly the bomb he’d thought she might have been preparing to drop, but also not what he’d expected. Buffy had been bloody determined to keep his being back among the living under wraps from her mates—or that she knew he was back, at least. The reasons she’d given him had made sense at the time, even if he couldn’t recall them at the moment, and she’d been serious enough that any change in party line would be one of those things he’d have thought she’d mentioned before now.

When Buffy didn’t immediately launch in to elaborate, he asked, “When was this?”

“After you told me that Doyle wasn’t Doyle.”

Ah. The night of his epic temper tantrum. Even better.

“There was...a lot to take in then,” Buffy went on, and he knew she was thinking about Harmony. Cried for three hours, she’d told him. “But one of the things that stuck was your destiny. How...upset you were that not-Doyle had made you think you had one. I wanted to see if I could get some answers for you.”

No, that wasn’t what she’d wanted at all. “You wanted to give me a destiny.”

“I refuse to believe that the reason you’re back is to mess with

Angel. That's... The Powers wouldn't let you come back if that was it. Not after what you did."

"Cept they didn't stand in the way when Red and the others got chanty around your grave, now did they? Sometimes things—"

"I'm not going to argue with you about this, because... Well, I don't want to. The point is, I wanted to see if Willow could help find anything out about you and why you're back, which involved telling her that, by the way, Spike's back." She paused long enough to catch her breath. "Ever since Sunnydale, when she did the spell to trigger all of the slayers, Willow's been exploring the different levels of her power and trying to learn more. Part of this started as—well, bringing Buffy back from the dead upset the balance, so what happens after we take out the Slayer line completely and just make it so everyone with Potential is just automatically a slayer? Things we didn't have time to think about in Sunnydale because, well, we were at war."

Spike nodded, even though she couldn't see it. Even though he wasn't sure he was following at all. "Right..."

"Okay," she replied, like he'd made a good point and she was giving in. Like she'd heard his thought. "Willow found out that Angel can't Shanshu."

The words were a sucker-punch.

"What?"

"Apparently, a few years ago, Angel turned human for a day. Then he decided that he was better off being a vampire because of Angel-reasons and asked the Powers to turn him back. Or the Oracles. Or...I don't know my super-beings, but the Cliff's Notes is, he can't Shanshu because of it." Buffy's voice had grown thick again, and this time he knew what it was. Hell, it was a bloody mystery that it had taken him this long to figure it, given the number of times he'd heard her cry over the wanker in the past. "And the reason he decided to go back to being fangy was because of me."

No bloody part of that made sense. Not a syllable.

"Sure about this, pet?" Spike asked, doing his best to keep his tone carefully measured. "Your ex isn't the sharpest tool in the shed, but—"

"No, I'm sure. One hundred percent sure. Willow... Whoever she talked to gave her this orb thingy. Said that if I smashed it, I'd be



completely restored. Didn't know what that meant until I did it." Now she was crying, the sounds soft and miserable. "Do you remember that time we were attacked by Chumash over Thanksgiving?"

Spike couldn't help it—he laughed. "Not something a fella's liable to forget, pet. Bear and all."

"Right. Well, Angel was there. Came down because his Doyle got a vision about me being in danger." Buffy exhaled shakily. "I was...mad. Mad enough to make up an excuse to go see my dad in LA when all I really wanted to do was rip Angel a new one for leaving me, but still thinking he could swoop in whenever he wanted. While I was there, this demon thing attacked and... Long story short, its blood turned Angel human. And we were together for a day until he got himself hurt on a demon hunt and decided that he needed to be a vampire so that he could keep me safe." By the time she got to the end, her voice was shaking in that telltale way it did before she lost her head for good. "He *left* me so that I could have a normal life, Spike. He *left* me because I deserved something other than vampire. And then this...this... *miracle* happens and he can give it to me, but he doesn't. He chooses—"

"I get what he chooses," Spike said, grappling between the need to comfort her and his screaming instincts. The ones that couldn't help but frame this the way he knew he shouldn't—the way where the picture included him. Or, in this case, didn't. "Dunno what you want me to say, pet. 'Sorry you could be living happily ever after with someone else'? Might have a soul now, but that doesn't stop me from bein' a selfish son of a bitch."

Amazingly, the girl laughed. "I knew you were going to take it like that," she said, sniffing. "I knew it."

"Ever so glad not to disappoint."

"This isn't about you and me. It's not even about me and Angel."

"Color a fella confused, then," Spike replied dryly. "What's it about?"

She didn't answer right away, rather filled his ear with the rhythmic sound of her breathing. Then her voice came again, a smidge calmer than it had been before, though he could tell she was struggling. "I wasn't enough," she said. "I've never been enough."

"Bollocks."

“No, Spike. I wasn’t. Angel wasn’t happy being weak. I wasn’t enough to make being human worth it for him. He told me I needed normal but never wanted to be the one to give it to me.” Buffy fed him a heartbroken laugh that damn near had him shattering. “I thought he was done hurting me. For years, I’ve thought that. That he—he loved me so much he had to be away from me for my own good but if things were different, he’d choose me. Always. I *believed* that and it was a lie.”

She dissolved again, and fuck, listening to her sob was a brand of torture beyond anything Angelus could have ever put him through. At once, he felt small and insignificant but somehow full of enough rage to pummel his wanker of a grandsire until there wasn’t even enough of him left to dust. Then there was the nagging voice he seemed incapable of shaking, the one that had followed him for over a century, loudest always when someone was doing a side-by-side with him and Angelus. He hated that it was there—that he couldn’t seem to turn it off, no matter the circumstance.

It took a moment, but Buffy managed to calm. The hard sobs softened into raw whimpers and heavy breaths.

“So that’s it,” she said in a voice smaller than he reckoned he’d ever heard her use before. “If you get to Shanshu... Is that something you’d be okay with?”

He didn’t understand the question. “What?”

“You won’t...ask to turn back into a vampire?”

“Why the bleeding hell would I do that?”

“I don’t know, okay! I don’t know what’s so wrong with me that I’m so hard to be with.” Buffy sniffed, choked another sob, and he could have kicked himself. “I thought it was just Riley I pushed away, but maybe there’s something really, really wrong with me. Maybe—”

Oh, bugger this.

“There is not a single bloody thing wrong with you. Riley was a wanker who couldn’t handle you bein’ stronger than him and, oh ho, turns out you have a sodding type.” Maybe he really would stake Angel next time he saw him. It’d at least make *him* feel better. “Your ex has never been a follower—never learned to look to others and suss out what they need, always assumed he had the right of it. He was like that

with Darla, who had a good century and a half on him, and with you. The calls have always been his to make.”

“And you won’t do that?”

“Buffy, I do that to you—take the choice away from you the way he did—you have my blessing to stake me, human or not.”

Nothing for a moment except the sound of her shaky breaths, then, “It won’t bother you, not being as strong as me?”

Spike snorted, shaking his head. “Hate to break it to you, pet, but you’ve always been stronger than me. Bloody turn-on, is what it is.”

“I’m talking about human-you, not weirdo vampire-you with a pain fetish.”

“You think it’s just vampires who get off on pain?”

“I think you might find out that, even if it’s not, *you* don’t.”

“Then we bloody well adjust, but that’s not gonna happen.” He snickered again. In a thousand years, he never would have predicted he’d be having this conversation with the love of his unlife, and yet here he was. If he didn’t know how important this was, how serious she was, he might find this hilarious rather than bloody tragic. “On my life—human, vampire, or whatever the sodding Powers decide to turn me into—I would never run out on you. Haven’t come across much worth fighting for in this miserable world, but you’re the real fucking deal, Buffy. Not sayin’ it’ll be easy. Reckon we’ll have us some real screamers, if we do it proper, but every day I’m alive, you’ll be worth fighting for.”

She was no longer crying, which he took for a good sign, even if he didn’t know what to make of her continued silence when she didn’t say anything right off. After a long beat, though, she exhaled, the sound still shaky, and said in a voice roughened with tears, “Really?”

Spike closed his eyes, grinning in spite of himself. “Bloody swear it. Dunno how many times I have to tell you that I love you for it to get through that thick skull of yours.”

“So you won’t run off and try to get vamped so you can fight with me again?”

“Slayer, dunno if you noticed, but there are plenty of human demon-fighter types. If memory serves, you tried to date one not too long ago. It comes down to it, I’ll always want to be in the thick of things and yeah, could be a bit of a chore, but I’d learn. I’d do

anything.” He paused, something else occurring to him. “And if I don’t get the big prize?”

“What?”

“You’re doin’ a fair amount of assuming, love. Already fitting me for my heart monitor and the prophecy is nothin’ but a load of guess-work.” Spike waited a beat, then continued, “You’re not hanging your hopes on me turning human, are you? Planning on cutting me loose if it doesn’t happen? ‘Cause if that’s it, you best tell me now so I know where we stand.”

“Are you... Spike, no. Of course not.” Now she sounded a bit firmer. “I hadn’t given much of any thought to the prophecy until I asked Willow to look into it, and even then... I wanted to know for you, not for me. Because of what happened with not-Doyle and what it meant and you deserved it so much. But when she gave me that day back, I just... I thought he was done hurting me like that. Now that we’re... what we are and I realized I’m over him, I didn’t think he could anymore and it had me thinking all kinds of things.”

Spike closed his eyes, hating that he needed to say it but also knowing he wouldn’t be able to sleep if he didn’t. “You don’t need to say things you don’t mean for me to be in it with you. Been a sucker for most of my life. Not lookin’ to change on that score—you know where I stand.”

“Huh?” But he didn’t get the chance to elaborate. “No, Spike. It hurts...a lot, but not because I’m in love with him. It hurts because I was—I was *so* in love with him and I was *so* ready to give him anything. Would have given him everything and he... I thought he loved me like that too and he didn’t. Not enough to even try beyond one crappy demon hunt. And I spent so much time being hung up on him, being *unattainable* because of something that wasn’t ever as real for him as it was for me, and now I feel like the biggest idiot in the world because I never tried as much with anyone as I tried with him and he didn’t deserve it. He didn’t deserve me loving him the way I did.”

Hell wasn’t fire and brimstone, Spike decided. It was this. Hearing her say all the things that had lived in his head for going on six years—hearing her say them, believe them, even, but knowing what it cost. Knowing the kind of love he wanted, had always craved, was some-

thing she'd already given up to another man, no matter how unworthy he'd been, and that that man had trashed the gift so thoroughly she might never be able to feel that again. Two years ago, he'd been so certain Buffy loved him for as passionate as she was, as fiercely as they came together, and that she'd been running from that love out of fear. Turned out that might have been half-right—the fear part. The love had never been for him.

“Spike?”

He shook his head, inhaling deeply. “Still here.”

“Good.”

“Do me a favor, though?”

She breathed out. “Okay.”

“Don't say it. Don't tell me you love me unless you mean it like that.” The words were out before he could stop them, though he wasn't sure he would have, had he given them any thought. And yeah, he knew he was being a selfish prick, taking everything she'd just confessed and turning it on himself, but he'd always been selfish, especially when it came to her. “Way you just described. Whatever happens—if I get the bauble in the box and get to become a real boy or stay like this forever, that's what I want. Know it's too much to ask so I'm not asking for it, just askin' it not to be called something it's not.”

The silence that filled his ear went on long enough he wondered if that might be it—the moment she realized she wasn't in it, really. Not with him. Or that he was too selfish to really deserve her, because who the bloody hell put requisites on love? Spike, apparently, but he couldn't seem to find the voice to snatch it back. In the end, he felt the way he felt and there was nothing else to it.

He was somewhat surprised when she spoke again. Thought she might be better off hanging up.

“Spike...I can't love like that anymore.”

Well, at least she was being honest.

He pressed his eyes closed, fighting against the sting. “Then never say it.”

“No, you don't get to do that. I can't love like that anymore because I'm not that person anymore. I'm not sixteen. I'm not...*naïve*. That love wasn't good love. It almost killed me and I almost let it.”

“Buffy—”

“What I feel for you shouldn’t be the same thing I felt for Angel, because you’re different. *We’re* different. And...and we should be better. It should be better than that.” She was gaining volume, now, volume and speed, finding her stride. “I don’t want to suffocate ever again. Do you?”

“No.” Again, he spoke without thinking, but this time the word felt more pulled from him than given freely. The ache in his chest, the one that had always been Angel-shaped, had stopped throbbing quite so hard. “What would you call us, then?”

“Grown up, I think.” Buffy sniffed like she might be crying again, but chased it with a little laugh. “When Angel came to Sunnydale right before the big fight, I told him I wasn’t done becoming who I would be and when I was done, I’d be ready for whoever I was supposed to be with.”

Had she? He must have skipped out and missed that part of the reunion. “Yeah?”

“There might have been a really bad cookie metaphor. Something about me being cookie dough and waiting to be baked or... I don’t remember.”

He snorted and shifted so he was lying on his back once more, staring at the ceiling. “Lots of people like eatin’ the dough, pet.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Amazingly, she laughed again, the sound lighter and brighter than it had been even a second ago. “After you died, though, it occurred to me that you were part of who I was becoming... and that maybe baking by myself was kinda dumb because... I’m never going to be done. No one is. We just grow and learn and *bake* together. And if we crumble apart—”

“Really stickin’ to the cookie thing, are you?”

“Shut up.” But there was no venom in her voice, only more laughter. “If we crumble apart, we crumble apart. But I want someone I will get to be cookies with. The kind where the dough gets all runny and makes a monster cookie that is large and delicious.” Another beat. “That’s what I want, Spike. And I want it to be so much better than what I had with anyone else—I don’t want it to be pain. I mean, I know there *will* be pain, because we are who we are and it’s kind of

inevitable, but I don't want to be waiting for something bad to happen because it has to. I want to be with someone who will face the bad with me, fight with me, get to the other side of it, and not run away even if it gets hard."

Spike swallowed, his throat tight. For a second, he could have sworn his heart started thumping, and wouldn't that be the bloody way to cap the conversation? But the things she'd said, the earnestness in her voice—yeah, he might not have known exactly what he wanted the future to look like before now, but the picture she'd painted was suddenly all he could see.

"Yeah," he said after a moment.

"Yeah?"

"That's what I want, too. All of that. Sounds bloody brilliant."

"Good."

He waited, and she waited, and he wondered if she'd say it then. While what he'd told her before was true, and he wanted to see her before she gave him those words again, the part of him that was starved for them—for her—couldn't help but give a little whimper when the line remained silent.

But this was his doing. That he went back and forth on whether or not it was what he really wanted wasn't her fault, just a bloody byproduct of the uncertainty they were locked inside. At times she felt so close to him he could breathe her in—other times, she might as well be ringing him from the sodding moon for as deeply as he felt the distance.

"You sure you haven't gotten yourself set on this rosy ending where I get my heartbeat back?" he asked to distract himself. Not that this topic was much lighter. "Seemed like you mighta had the script all planned out."

She laughed a little. "I'm sure."

"Not very normal, vampire and slayer."

"By this point, I'm pretty sure normal is for other people," she said somewhat dryly. "I mean, I'm in charge of a bunch of slayers from across the globe, my best friend is a transdimensional traveling megawitch, my ex is in charge of an evil law firm and possibly evil himself, and my boyfriend is, well, you. Formerly evil archenemy. Even if you did go

all human on me, I'm pretty sure no one in their right mind would ever call you normal."

Fuck, he felt like a complete prat, but hearing that made his eyes sting all over again. Buffy had called him a lot of things over the years—most of those things were deserved—but *boyfriend* had been mentally cataloged as something he'd only hear from the likes of a robot wearing her face. And since she'd likely roll her eyes or shake her head in pity if she knew just how much the word affected him, he was suddenly very glad that she couldn't see him at the moment.

He sniffed and wiped at his eyes, tried to cover it with a laugh. "Would be a novelty, though."

"What's that?"

"Shagging with body temperature, for one thing."

That did it. The next second, his head was full with the quickening beats of her heart.

"You... That would be a new thing? What happened to 'I've always been bad?'"

"Mighta told you a tall tale or two."

"How old were you when you were turned?"

"Twenty-six."

"And you...hadn't...with a woman?"

He chuckled, relaxing by increments. This was more familiar territory—better, for as vulnerable as he felt at the moment. "Couple of mates tried to get me to visit a brothel a time or two when I was at university," he said, absently dragging a hand across his bare chest. "Was properly scandalized. Victorians were filthy hypocrites, I'll grant you—got up to all sorts of nasty things. I never had enough nerve, though. Lacked..."

The word he wanted was *poetry*, but he wasn't sure he wanted to give her that much ammunition. Better to let her learn a little at a time just what a nancy-boy he'd been back in the day.

"So..." Buffy's voice dropped, taking on a sultry purr that brought every part of him to life. "What did you do to...relieve the tension?"

He laughed again. Bloody hell, but this was intoxicating. Over the years, he'd seen many sides to the Slayer—the best and worst of her, as he'd told her one night not too long ago. But Buffy being openly flirta-



tious, even playful, was something out of another man's life. Something he'd only dreamed about.

Enough to make a man doubt, for the millionth sodding time, how much of this was real, and how much was in his head.

"Exactly what you'd expect," he replied, shoving the waistband of his sweats down enough to free his cock, which promptly strained for the ceiling. "Though I'd feel bloody wretched about it."

"What? Why?"

"Victorian," Spike repeated, stressing the word. "We were hypocrites, yeah, but repressed hypocrites. Worst bloody kind. First time I wanked off, I spent the next week or so convinced I was going to Hell for doin' that in a house where my mum slept. Not wrong on that score, I suppose—the Hell part."

"Why in the world would you go to Hell?"

He blinked and pulled the phone from his ear to examine it, as though it might have turned into something else. Near as he could come to giving her a look. "Uhh, you do know who you're talking to, don't you, pet?"

"Yes. A vampire who fought to get his soul."

"Still plenty demon in here, too."

"Spike, I've been to Heaven and I've been to Hell. You're not going to the latter."

"When were you ever in Hell?"

"A few hours one day about five years ago. Or at least a hell dimension of some kind, if not the actual Hell. I started a slave revolt, as I am wont to do."

"Bloody hell. Never told me about that one."

"It was during your brief stint away from the Hellmouth. Mine too, come to think of it." A pause. "That summer, between Acatlha and when you came back looking for a love spell."

Ah, right. A period she hadn't talked about much. "Right. So you figure, your few hours in a hell dimension of some kind makes you an authority on the sort of blokes who end up there on the regular?"

"More so than you."

"Demon, love."

"Who fought for his soul. Not saying that makes everything that

came before it just not count, but... God, Spike, do you still not get how big getting your soul was?”

Considering there were times that the soul seemed more or less incidental, he wasn't sure how to answer that. It seemed likely that was par for the course, though, being that he'd never had to get used to a soul before. He'd never had to live with one knowing he was a monster—his own goodness had been something he'd taken for granted, though also never just assumed outright.

At the same time, though, he knew how life had been before the soul, the things he'd thought he'd understood but hadn't at all. He also knew the things he'd expected to happen after he had the soul, and how tits-up that had gone. The soul had been for Buffy but had ended up being just as much for him, and that wasn't something he could say he regretted, even if everything was confused at the present.

“You're a good man, Spike,” Buffy said softly. “And...if I haven't said it, I think you could have been one before, too. If we'd given you the chance.”

“Fuck, pet, how can you say—”

“Because you went to get your soul. That was a decision you made all by yourself.”

“You know why.”

“Yeah, I do. Which is why I... As messed up as we both were that year, I'm not sure how it might have gone differently. Maybe not enough to matter but I'm not sure. I never gave you the chance.”

Spike huffed, not sure what to think about the turn the conversation had taken, if it was something he could agree with or not. For as wrong as they'd been that year, a lot of it had felt right, particularly in the beginning. There were things he'd do anything to take back and suspected it would be like that for the rest of his life, however long that proved to be, but also things he cherished. Their first night in that building—all fire and anger and sex—had been bloody brilliant. Not what Buffy deserved but what she'd needed at the time, and he wouldn't trade the memory for anything. But then he'd gotten desperate, tried pulling her down into the darkness with him, the only way he could see himself keeping her. She'd been right to break it off when she had, but had things been different...

He couldn't see it.

As though sensing this—and maybe she did—Buffy cleared her throat. “Just tell me you know you're a good man now.”

“Can't. Told myself I'd never lie to you.”

“Spike—”

“But it means... Buffy, that you think that...” It was almost better than hearing she loved him. Almost. “After everything, it means the whole sodding world. I hope you know that.”

“I think I do,” she replied, her tone soft and warm. Then she inhaled and said, much lighter, “And I think I want to hear more about the naughty stuff you did back in your Victorian days.”

Spike cast a dubious glance to his cock, which had checked out sometime during the conversation. “Dunno, love. Was rarin' to go a second ago, but think the moment mighta passed.”

She fed him an aggrieved sigh. “It's the phone, isn't it? Not the same as if I was there.”

Less that and more the talk about where he'd spend the afterlife. For as much as he'd wanted, craved, the opportunity to steal time with her, wank with her whispering little dirties in his ear rather than recalling how she sounded after they'd both hung up, it was important enough to get right with Buffy that he didn't want to push it unless they were both in the mood. And at the moment, she sounded less sex vixen and more resigned. “Well—”

“Cause I'm pretty sure I could do things with my mouth that would have the mood all rekindled.”

Of course, until she went and said something like *that*. His cock began to swell once more as his mind took that image and ran with it. Buffy on her knees before him, blinking those bright green eyes and grinning as she parted her lips and ran her tongue along the underside of his erection—playful, the way she was with him now. The way she'd never been with him before.

“Fuck,” Spike said, the word riding out on a sigh. He fisted his prick once again and gave it a good tug. “What all would you do with your mouth?”

“Hmm. You know, it occurs to me that I have been stupidly remiss in the *giving* part of our relationship.”

“Not true.” Except it was and wasn’t. Buffy was explosive between the sheets—so much so he’d been fortunate to keep up with her, as wild and untamed as she could be when she was in deep need. He’d never walked away from her feeling anything less than physically satisfied, and even that was a bloody understatement. But there were things Buffy hadn’t done often, and when she had, it had been to prove a point. That point being, more often than not, that she was in charge, he was hers to command, and he’d take whatever she had to dish out.

Which was why hearing her say, “I wanna lick you,” in such a soft, warm voice nearly had him busting a nut and leaving the party early. There was no assertion there, just sweet earnestness. Buffy wanted to lick *him*.

“God, yes,” Spike replied with a groan, squeezing the base of his cock. “Want you. Your mouth. Around me. Wanna feel you all around me.”

“I think I’d start slow. Well, I’d have to. You’re a lot to take in.”

He groaned again. “Never had trouble before.”

“I was always in a hurry before,” she pointed out. “Not like you. Not when I let you take your time. You always made me feel...loved, which, of course, was the last thing I wanted so I’d make with the big exit, but it was there. I always felt it.”

Spike closed his eyes again, pulling harder at his cock. “You did?”

“Oh yeah. In a big ole way.”

“Always reckoned if I did it just right, you’d get that I was serious. Understand how much I love you. That it was real.”

“Spike, you always did it just right. It was just the wrong time for us.”

“And this is the right time?”

She didn’t answer right away, but that didn’t worry him. Rather, it made the words she did say ring with truth. “I want it,” Buffy told him. “I want all of it.”

“God, so do I. So much. So goddamn much.” This was bordering territory that would get him into the less-fun sort of mess, and he didn’t much feel like blubbering tonight any more than he already had. So, as he dragged his foreskin around the tip of his cock and squeezed, he pulled some of his favorite fantasies out of his mental vault to give

them life. “Wanna watch you while you suck on me, baby. Your mouth stuffed full of me, lips so pretty and pink.”

A fluttery sort of sigh sounded through the line. “Oh.”

“You want that too, don’t you?”

“Uh huh.”

“And you’d keep your pretty eyes open for me, right? Want you to see nothing but me.” He fought another groan at the image flooding his head, pumping his cock harder. “Think I’d like to tangle my fingers in your hair, hold you there. Would you let me do that, Buffy? Would you let me fuck your mouth?”

He didn’t really expect a reply, but when she whimpered and hissed a low, “Yes,” he found himself there on the edge again, both starving for the fall and dreading it because then this would be over and he didn’t want to end it just yet.

“Wouldn’t be gentle, pet,” he growled thickly, the air around him filling with hard, rhythmic *thwacks* as he worked his hand up and down his cock. “I’d take you hard.”

“Oh god.”

“You like that?”

“I want it. Spike...”

*Balls.* If sucking him off had been nothing but an occasional treat when they’d been together before, then giving him control had been flatly out of the question. And for the most part, Spike had been happy with that. Bloody tickled whenever she’d put her mouth south of his belly-button, when she deigned to give pleasure rather than take it. But he’d be lying if he said he hadn’t thought about fisting her hair and bucking hard against her, shoving his cock down her throat at a pace that would hurt were she anything but the Slayer.

“Wanna come down your pretty throat. Would you let me?”

“Uhh...yes.”

A thought occurred to him—one that should have occurred about three minutes ago, but hadn’t, intent as he’d been on his fantasy. But Buffy’s voice was rough in a way he hadn’t heard it in nearly two years. Those soft, sweet gasps, the needy sound she made at the back of her throat, how she sighed his name when she’d let her guard down... “Fuck, baby, are you touching yourself?”

She didn't so much as hesitate. "Uh huh."

"Thinkin' about sucking me off got you hot?" The thought was so novel he almost felt ridiculous for voicing it, but when she whimpered her response, that was it. Back to the edge, to the precipice, and he was coming, white strands of semen erupting from his cock as he bucked his hips and shuddered into pure physical ecstasy.

A few seconds later—though it felt like hours, like he might have blacked out—Spike blinked his eyes open and frowned down at the mess covering his chest. Looked like he'd be visiting the shower again before he called it a night.

"You just came, didn't you?" Buffy asked, and hell, the sound of her breathy voice had his cock stirring like he hadn't just jizzed all over the place. "Wish I could've seen it."

"Fuck. You have no idea what you do to me, Summers."

"I think I do a little." She gave him one of her soft laughs, but it turned into a whimper that went straight to his dick. "Oh..."

And then his brain switched all the way back on. "Strugglin' to get there?"

The mewl she gave him was answer enough, but she followed it with a needy, "Uh huh."

His poor Slayer. Still, Spike couldn't keep from grinning. Sure, it made him a bastard, but as a bloke who knew just how effortless it was to show the girl stars, that she was having trouble made him feel a bit invincible.

"Are you all spread out?" he asked, fisting his cock again. "Tell me."

"On the bed."

"Lights on or off?"

"Off."

"Why?"

"Easier to pretend when they're off."

That sounded familiar—a bittersweet sort of familiar that he didn't care to explore too closely. But all that was old was new again, which meant that though her methods might remain the same, the motivation was what counted.

"What's it you're trying to pretend, then?" he asked.

"What do you think?"

"Dunno. Got quite the imagination."

"I just...really wish I was with you."

*Fucking hell.* If he ever did get the words from her, there was a bloody brilliant chance he'd just combust on the spot, especially since little things like *that* were enough to do him in. "God, pet, me too." He rubbed his palm across the head of his cock, then wrapped his hand around the shaft and started stroking again. "What would you want me to do if I was there?"

"Things of the X-rated variety."

"Such as?"

If it was possible to hear a blush over the phone, he heard hers, which was downright delectable. Never mind the fact that she'd just been teasing him about sucking him off without so much as a flutter—this woman could switch between confident sex goddess to quivering virgin at the drop of a pin. This same woman had ridden him at a bloody gallop, all the while muttering a string of naughty that could make Angelus blush, but could also manage to work herself into a bashful frenzy. The dichotomy was addictive, and he was thrilled to discover little had changed where that was concerned. He wanted all incarnations of Buffy equally.

"I miss the way you touch me," she said a moment later, if possible, even more breathless than before.

"Uh huh. That with my mouth or my hands or my cock?"

"Umm, all of the above?"

"And if I were there now, what would you fancy I do with *all of the above*?"

"Uhh... Spike, I am not good at this."

"At drivin' me outta my mind? Gotta disagree, sweet, you're a natural." He chuckled when she whimpered, then decided to take pity on her. As much fun as teasing her was, he'd much rather listen to her gasp his name in orgasm than in frustration. "How about this, then. If I were there, I'd want your legs nice and open. Wanna see that glorious cunt of yours, make sure it's wet and ready for me."

"Unh."

While the knowledge that he might one day be human again was enough to make him wonder if the universe really had a plan for souled

lovesick sods like him, the fact that he was a vampire meant he could hear everything. In this case—the hint of wet suctioning that told him she was exploring her pussy. That told him she was more than wet for him, she was downright desperate.

“What then?” Buffy asked, her voice little more than a breath.

“Well, I think I’d need to be very sure.”

“Uh huh.”

“See, a girl can look wet, but that doesn’t mean she’s ready. I’d need to get really close. Put my face between your legs.”

She didn’t say anything, just panted a bit harder. He could just picture her, spread out on her bed like she’d said, one hand clutching the phone to her ear as the other worked feverishly between her legs, her skin soft and glistening with sweat. Fuck, he could almost smell her.

“Lick you up,” he rumbled, squeezing the base of his cock. “That’s what I’d do, Buffy. I’d lick you up. Suck on that sweet little clit of yours, get you hot and writhing. Then I’d sink my tongue inside you. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“Oh god. Keep talking.” Those wet sounds intensified, making his balls ache. “Keep talking, Spike.”

“Ever told you how much I love fucking with you my mouth? Think I missed that most of all. Could get you to scream for me and only me. I was the only one who ever did you right.”

“Uhh...”

“So I’d let you ride my tongue a bit, get the taste of you in my mouth again.” It had been so long since he’d tasted her and he found himself parched for it. “Then I’d kiss my way back to your clit, but you’d need something inside, wouldn’t you, baby?”

Buffy didn’t manage any sort of reply then, just a long, tortured moan.

“I’d try with one finger first. Get it nice and wet and slide it in and bloody hell, you’d clench me good. Soft and wet and hot. Never been with anyone so hot before.” Spike pulled harder at his prick, but his hand was no substitute for what he wanted. And knowing she was there, so close yet unreachable, craving him and his mouth and his cock, damn near stretched his mind apart. “Love the way you clamp



around me, too. Like you can't get enough. Like you need me inside you."

"Spike... God, I'm..."

Just as well. He wasn't going to last much longer either, and he wanted to tumble over the edge with her this time. "But one was never enough for you," he said in a low, urgent rush. "So I'd add another, then a third. Gotta make sure you're ready for me."

"Spike—"

"And I'd keep sucking on your clit. Fucking you with my fingers isn't enough. And when you come, Buffy, that's when I'd get you around my cock. Wanna feel every bloody—"

But that's as far as he got before she gasped in that telling way of hers, and then he was following her, this orgasm more intense than the one before—something more than just the ecstasy of release. It was sharing it, feeding off hers, off the weight of her breaths—a few that sounded close to his name—and experiencing all of it with someone else. That was nothing he'd ever had before, least of all with Buffy. As often as they'd fucked, the after had always been lonely and hollow, shadowed by the knowledge that he couldn't hope to pretend too much longer. That she would leave behind everything he'd tried to give her when she rolled out of his bed. When it was all over.

He was alone now, too, except he wasn't. Spike felt more closely connected to Buffy than he ever had. So much so that, for an instant, he was more terrified than he'd ever been of the prospect of seeing her in person again. The love she kept trying to give him had seemed intangible before, but he thought he could touch it now.

If their best moments could only happen when they were on opposite ends of the globe, he wasn't sure he'd survive. Less sure he'd want to.

But fuck, he was willing to try.

"Spike," Buffy managed between gasps. "I... Wow."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. That was... *Oh* my god, how lame would it be now if I said I needed to sleep?"

He chuckled. "Good to know I can wear you out even when I'm not there to do it in person."

“I felt like you were, for a second.”

“So did I.” Spike allowed himself a moment to soak everything in, then cracked an eye open and eyed the mess his earlier mess had morphed into. “Better clean up and get some kip, myself. Tuck in, love, and I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Mmm...’kay.” A pause. “Spike?”

“Hmm?”

“You gonna say it?”

And that was it—the moment the fears from before faded for what he thought might be for good.

“I love you.”

“The fight-for-it kind of love, not the she’s-better-off-on-her-own kind, right?”

“Caught me in the nick of time. The soul hasn’t had a chance to warp me that much just yet.”

The sigh she gave him was what he imagined bliss might sound like.

“Good. Me too.”

And before the words could register, the cheeky little bint had hung up on him.

THERE WAS LITTLE BLOODY CHANCE SPIKE WOULD BE ABLE TO THINK of anything else other than those two perfect, seemingly innocuous words Buffy had uttered before hanging up the night before. They had chased him into his dreams and played such a starring role that it was difficult to immediately remember that he'd actually heard them when he awoke. Not that dreams of Buffy telling him she loved him were out of the norm—they weren't. Hell, they were bloody constant. But it had never been like that—rushed and naughty, like she was slipping in something under the wire, which made the confession easier to accept as reality than a byproduct of his imagination as the dreams faded and consciousness returned.

It seemed about right, then, that the second he set foot on the premises of Wolfram and Hart, he was all but commanded into Angel's office, an antsy Gunn and Angel waiting to give him yet another one of their pet tasks. His mind still fully occupied with the blissful night he'd had, Spike pulled out the gaming system he kept handy for when things got slow and powered up from his last save. They could blather all they wanted; nothing was ruining his mood today.

Of course, Spike's supreme lack of interest in the subject didn't slow Angel down a lick. The old sod *did* love hearing himself talk. And

talk he did—at length, about an assignment that would take Spike overseas to collect some corpse or what all. Not that the prospect of being that close to Buffy wasn't tantalizing—it was—but also dangerous, given as deep as they were in this thing they were doing.

The next time he saw her, he didn't want it to be in between good-byes. The next time he saw her, he meant for it to be the end of the last time they were apart.

"Bugger it," Spike said, not taking his eyes off the console in his hands. "Do it yourself."

"Spike, this is a delicate matter that needs to be handled with a lot of finesse," Gunn said, worked up in ways Spike didn't see all that much anymore. "And why the hell are we talkin' to him?"

That last bit, he assumed, was aimed at Angel. Seemed a bloody good question.

"Because he signed on to help," Angel replied in his I'm-the-boss voice.

Spike rolled his eyes and sent his grandsire a glare. "Not to be some glorified garbage collector."

"It's not garbage," Gunn snapped. "It's a body. And there's a bloody gang war coming our way if we don't get it back."

"This stiff's that important?"

"It's the remains of the Capo di Famiglia of the Goran demon clan."

*Fuck.* Of course it was. There went the wind from his sails.

"Never heard of 'em," Spike replied, wondering how much Buffy would yell at him if he rang her early today. Though they hadn't explicitly said otherwise, she'd never tried to contact him when she knew he was busy at Wolfram and Hart, and he'd returned the favor. Too dangerous when they were out in the open—someone might hear something.

But if this involved the Gorans, it could involve that bitty slayer who was shackled up with the Immortal, and that seemed the sort of information Buffy would want sooner rather than later.

"That's 'cause the Capo was human-tolerant," Gunn was saying. "Kept a low profile. More interested in profit than mayhem."

"What happened to him?" Angel asked.

"Died on a business trip in Italy. We need to go there, retrieve his body, and return it to his family in the next"—Gunn looked at his watch—"ooh, twenty-six hours."

Bloody hell. That settled it. The second this meeting wrapped, Spike was heading home to call the Slayer. He just hoped that she wasn't in the middle of something important.

"Or what?" he drawled for his audience. "He gets deader?"

"No," Gunn said shortly. "He stays dead. They die, they pupate, they live again, but only if the proper rituals are performed by the immediate family. If the Capo's body isn't returned in time, the rituals won't take. So long, Capo. Hello, power vacuum."

"Which the rival clans will try to fill," Angel surmised, like that needed explaining.

"And they aren't as tolerant of humans," Gunn agreed. "If we do this, it all stays cool. If not—"

"We'll stick with *do*," Angel said, approaching Spike and knocking his feet off the arms of the comfy chair he was sprawled in. "Okay, come on." Then, to be a bloody prat, he snatched away the game console.

"Hey, hey!"

"Pack your bags," Angel said, strolling back to his desk just as the phone rang.

"I don't even speak the language," Spike snapped. Not true, of course, but he wouldn't bargain on Angel knowing that.

"We'll get you a book," the big git replied before picking up the phone. "Yeah?"

Spike shifted his attention to Gunn. "Yeah, how do you say *wank off* in Italian?"

"Can somebody please just get on a plane?" Gunn replied, throwing up his arms.

Spike snickered but didn't make to get up. It was times like this that the role he'd taken on for Buffy came close to intolerable. Couldn't move too fast or the lot of them would wonder why. Couldn't say no because he needed to run interference. Not that this espionage business wasn't a load of fun—mostly due to the daily needling of Angel and everyone around him—but it was delicate, acting like he

didn't give a fuck while trying to gather as much information as possible to pass on to the Slayer.

That was when he wasn't being issued the jobs no one else wanted. Like studying Illyria. Granted, getting thrashed by a super-powered chit with a god complex was among one of his favorite pastimes, but Angel and friends were fooling themselves if they thought Spike didn't know he'd been given that task out of spite.

"When?" Angel asked whoever was on the phone, and the shift in his voice was dramatic enough it commanded the room's attention.

Brilliant. More bad news and Spike had been too busy worrying about how to reach the Slayer to eavesdrop.

"I understand," Angel continued, still sounding thunderstruck. "Thanks."

"All right, what is it this time?" Spike drawled as the sod replaced the receiver. "Uber-vamps? Demon gods? Devil robots?"

Hopefully something that would keep Angel occupied long enough for him to fire off a call of his own.

"It's Buffy," Angel said.

Well, that just bloody figured.



THERE WASN'T TIME. The second Angel dropped the news that the Immortal had been hanging around the Slayer, Spike gave up all hope of sneaking off to ring her with the warning that her big-foreheaded ex thought she was in danger. Of course, Angel would drop everything and rush across the globe if he thought that wanker was sniffing around the girl he still viewed as his. And of course, if Spike didn't stick to him like glue, he'd take off to do it solo, likely fantasizing himself happy all the way to Italy, which would just make everything worse, pained as Spike was to admit it.

So now Spike had two Italian jobs—he had to keep Angel away from the bird posing as Buffy so he didn't blow the whole bloody ruse *and* rescue this demon body to prevent a turf war from breaking out. That the Immortal was involved would likely, for the first time in their mutual history, work in Spike's favor, seeing as he was so chummy

with the Gorans, but Spike wasn't going to count on anything until they landed and he had a better grasp of the situation.

"Huh," Angel was saying, studying the empty bottle he'd snatched from the mini-bar. "Really can't get drunk off these things."

Spike slouched, twirling his own empty bottle. "Not us, anyway. Vampire constitution. Not always a plus." He paused. "How did you know?"

"Drank a lot of 'em and I still don't like you."

He scoffed. "About Buffy. How did you know she was in trouble?"

"I got word."

"From who?"

"A source," Angel replied in that annoyingly evasive way of his.

Still, evasive or not, it told Spike everything he needed to know. "You've been spying on her?"

"I just wanted to make sure she was all right."

"Sending your lackeys to do your stalking for you. That is really pathetic."

"All right, fine. I'm not proud of it, but it's...it's Buffy."

Yeah, it was Buffy, which meant whatever path Angel decided was the best one was also one he could justify. Whether it was giving up his chance at mortality and a happily ever after because of his martyr complex or stalking the girl he'd dumped even when she was across the ocean, he'd find a way to tell himself that he was in the right of it.

Bloody hell, might be Buffy would be brassed enough when she found out that she'd stake the git for good. Not that this particular discovery was entirely surprising, and it made all the precautions she'd taken in securing their ongoing communication more than worth it. The concerns she'd had about the phone Spike used to call, the tacit understanding that they shouldn't leave voice messages—a rule she'd only broken the once, and for reasons that still filled him with shame—and the coded way they'd decided he'd talk if he was anywhere but his own flat.

"How many you got on her?" Spike asked a moment later.

"Uh, just the one," Angel replied. "But he got spotted. Called me from the hospital after he regained consciousness."

Spike fought back a smirk. "You should've had more of your people

watching her,” he said, as it seemed the proper, shunned-lover thing to say. And if Angel did that, put more spies on that Bianca girl’s tail, odds were grand that the Immortal would sniff them out. Hell, he wouldn’t be surprised if that was the reason Angel’s lackey had ended up with head trauma.

“Yeah. We’ll be landing soon,” Angel replied, sounding exhausted. “Remember the last time we were in Italy?”

He snickered. “Like it was yesterday.” Then, just to be ornery, he said, “What was it, ’58? Bloody hell, those were the days. Don’t make clubs like that anymore. Not my style, granted, but Dru loved the duds—always was fun of playin’ dress-up and makin’ a night of it. Times like that she almost seemed lucid. Plus there were a couple tasty waitresses who kept makin’ eyes at me, and whatever they’d taken made their blood taste especially sweet.”

“Wait a minute. I wasn’t in Italy in the fifties,” Angel whined.

“Oh, right. Guess you weren’t.” Spike killed a smirk and inclined his head. “Really missed out.”

“Guess so. Sounds a lot better than when I remember it.”

“1894?”

Angel nodded, all stoic-like again. “The room of pain.”

And that was all it took. Angel started blathering on about their last stint in Italy, and Spike fell into an easy pattern of nodding and making the right sounds as his grandsire walked him through a story he’d had a ringside seat for and could probably tell better himself.

Angel was focused on Buffy and the Immortal to the point of being redundant, though Spike wagered that was the one bit of good news in all of this. Buffy had been out of Rome for a minute now and apparently had been stealthy enough in her getaway to fool even Wolfram and Hart’s people. All of this, of course, assuming that Angel was being forthright in everything, which Spike knew he couldn’t take for granted.

Still, he thought the odds were in his favor. Angel had never thought too much of Spike, either as a vampire or a man, something that was reinforced every day when Angel failed to do more than grumble at the show Spike had been putting on for him. Truth of the matter was, Angel



hadn't been around long enough to know him at all—at least not the version of himself he'd become. There had been the years under Angelus's tutelage, Spike doing whatever he could to impress the bloke he thought of as his true sire, whatever else Dru had been; then Angelus had up and vanished and Spike had been the sole man in the family. A family that had dissolved just as quickly without its proper figurehead.

Aside from their jaunt on the U-boat, the only other interaction they'd had in the last century had been during the stint in Sunnydale. Spike had aged a century, found what he'd thought was his footing, and been rather secure in his place in the world, aided by the fact that Dru had needed him as she never had before or since.

But he'd been a bloody fool, and Angelus had relished in that.

Angel had never known Spike as anything other than a punch-line—a deadly punch-line, sure, but nothing to be taken seriously.

And he had no idea just how patient Spike could be when properly motivated. How the soul had calmed his sense of urgency, given him the foresight to shelve what he wanted for himself and what was needed to win the long game.

Joke was on him then.

Spike nodded again as Angel took him through stumbling back to their accommodations and discovering Darla in a state of satiated bliss, trying hard not to smile. Sure, the memory wasn't a fun one for him either, but the sting had softened over time. And it was hard to be sore about it now when he knew, at the end of this trip, Buffy would be waiting for him.

If anything, the next few hours were going to be a bloody hoot.



THEY BOTH KNOCKED when they stopped outside the door, and the fact that his hadn't been the only knuckles to touch the wood seemed to irk Angel.

"Let me handle this," the big ponce said, or rather commanded.

"Bet you'd like to," Spike replied. Enough time had passed since the Slayer had moved to London that her scent had dulled—dulled, but

not faded entirely. Dawn's was vibrant, lived-in, and for the first time, it occurred to him that he might see his Nibblem on this trip.

Of course, she wasn't his Nibblem anymore. Hadn't been in two years.

His heart twisted at the thought. Maybe they could fix that.

Then the door swung open and Andrew, dressed in a bathrobe and a T-shirt, was blinking at them in clear bewilderment. And Spike had a second to experience a shock of panic—from what he remembered, Andrew had no bloody poker face at all when it came to spinning yarns. Bugger, he'd *really* hoped for Dawn. She'd been pulling the wool over big sis's eyes since she was a teenager and had likely only improved with age. If Angel sniffed anything amiss, the whole gig was up.

The second flashed by, and Andrew clutched his hands to his heart.

"Spike! *Oh mio dio!*" And then the little git had flung himself around Spike in a surprisingly strong hug. "*È come un sogno incantevole.*" Thankfully, the hug wasn't a long one, and Andrew took a step back. "What are you doing here?"

"About to ask you the same question, Andrew," Angel drawled.

"Buffy and Dawn are letting me crash," Andrew replied with surprising smoothness. Seemed getting out of the States and taking on watcher training had done a lot for his confidence. "My *casa* was incinerated when that thing happened."

"What thing?" Spike asked.

"Cultural misunderstanding," Andrew said, this time with a nervous titter. "Let us speak of more pleasant times. *Entrate pure*. I part my threshold." When this earned him nothing but a couple of blank stares, he shifted and clarified, "I mean, my apartment. Obviously."

If Andrew had the ability to lay down the welcome mat to the undead, he was more than just a house guest. Spike would have to ask Buffy about that later—how it was Dawn had caught the job of babysitting the mini-Watcher.

Well, he reckoned there would be a whole sodding list of things to ask Buffy later. At the moment, his only priority was keeping Angel from catching wise. Spike made to cross the threshold at the same time Angel stuck his oversized self through the doorway, and they were

caught for a second until the big sod wrestled free, bloody determined to be the first one inside. As though there was a victory there.

That was one thing Spike had noted over the last few months, ever since he'd arrived at the conclusion that the reason Angel was snarkier than usual on the subject of Buffy was because he knew that Spike was important to her. Every time Buffy was in the mix, conversationally or otherwise, Angel reverted to a version of himself that Spike had only seen on the rare occasions the older vamp had felt threatened. It was nothing like the calm stoicism he'd exhibited back in Sunnyhell or that time Spike had ordered the stuffing to be tortured out of him. He didn't even seem all that heartsick, which more or less confirmed Spike's theory that this was all about ownership on Angel's part. Buffy could live her life so long as Angel liked the choices she made—or so long as Spike wasn't a part of it.

"So, um, I had plans later this evening, but I can change them if you guys wanna hang," Andrew was saying, now furiously attempting to clear up the evidence of his having nested. The apartment was very much lived-in. "Uh, I could show you Rome at night, a city of contrasts. Anywhere you want to go, anything you want to see."

"Buffy," Spike and Angel said together.

Andrew didn't look particularly surprised at that—or alarmed, Spike was happy to see. Rather, he seemed just a touch resigned. "Right, because you two both..." Andrew nodded and crossed his arms. "Yeah. She's not here."

Like that wasn't bloody obvious.

"Where'd she go?" Angel demanded.

"To meet the Immortal."

Spike forced back a grin. Yeah, his concerns about Andrew pulling this off had been in vain—the little blighter didn't so much as flinch at the lie. It was only fitting to reward this performance with a rather stellar one of his own.

"By herself?" Spike barked out, all incredulity and worry.

Andrew shifted again. "I told you I had plans."

"When did she leave?" Angel asked.

"Just missed her," Andrew replied.

"Then we're not too late," Spike said, urgent. He couldn't let Angel

stop and suss things out—otherwise, the arse might clue into the fact that the apartment only had a faint whiff of Buffy, overpowered by Dawn and Andrew's scent, plus a third that Spike didn't recognize but assumed to be Bianca's. Now that Andrew's ability to act wasn't in question, the only thing that could make this blow up in their faces would be Angel's bloody brain clicking on and piecing together that the evidence didn't match the story.

Angel, however, was apparently in no danger of using his brain. "Of course, it could be worse."

"You're telling me," Andrew drawled, throwing himself onto the couch. "Most nights they never leave the house, just curl up on the couch and snuggle."

That did it. Angel went still. "There's snuggling?"

"For starters," Andrew agreed with a scoff. Then he sat up, pulling in his freshly earned thespian chops, and let the hammer drop. "Wait. Uh, you didn't know they were...together?"

Spike looked at Angel, biting back what he wagered would be the first of many snickers at the sod's face. "It's worse."



SPIKE HAD NEVER BEEN one for theatrics—that had always been more Angel's gig, whether it came to a kill or shagging or trying to school those he considered his lessers. Up until this year, Spike's experience as an actor had been more or less limited to that stretch of time when he'd been trying to pull the wool over the Scoobies' eyes to get them where Adam wanted them. It hadn't been all that difficult, mind, but he also knew his performance had been piss-poor. So much so that, when he looked back, he wondered how dizzy everyone had been that year to have bought a word of it.

The job that Buffy had him on was loads more complex and even more important, but he felt he'd done it proper up until now. The tactic that had worked on the Scoobies back in Sunnyhell worked on Angel too—being that his grandsire didn't think too much of him and expected even less, and he was the only one Spike really had to fool. The others—Wesley, Charlie, Lorne, and the bitch wearing Fred's

skin—had nothing to compare him to, so acting out carried no real stakes.

This little stint in Rome was going to be what really put him to the test, Spike realized. Because as frustrated as Angel was, Spike was just...tickled. So much so he could hardly believe it when none of that laughter leaked into his voice when he spoke.

"It's over. Just like that," Spike said, wondering if he could get Angel to start going again. They were in a fancy parlor now, in the company of an ugly tuxedoed demon playing the role of butler, waiting for the Gorans to present them with the deceased. As such, he wagered he had a few minutes to kill. "Not that I thought I had a chance anyway."

"At least *I* have a girlfriend," Angel replied as he paced around him with all the dignity of a twelve-year-old. He'd been singing verses of that song since they'd left Andrew's flat.

Put in mind a certain quote from *Hamlet*.

But Spike didn't roll that out, offered a shrug instead like the heart-broken chump he was supposed to be. "Still."

And there it was. Angel deflated, all that important air breezing out of him. "Yeah."

Spike swallowed a laugh and turned toward one of the immaculate, narrow tables in the hall. Angel stood to his right, still being too quiet for his taste. There was no bloody way the git would leave the continent without trying to hunt the Slayer down and shake some sense into her, and the second Angel sussed out that Buffy Summers was not actually in Rome was the second the tentative peace Buffy had managed to broker with this charade went up in flames.

As Spike figured it, there were two ways this could go—either Angel brooded until he burst into motion, ducking Spike in the process, or Spike made himself part of the process so he could bugger it up every step of the way.

Neither was a guarantee, but he knew Angel. And the smarter bet was to stick to him rather than try to head him off at the pass. At the very least, the older vampire didn't seem as together when Spike was around. Case in point—he hadn't noticed the lack of Buffy-smell at the flat.

Better to keep him thinking like a moron than the ace detective he'd allegedly been in some other life.

"The Immortal!" Spike roared with all the fabricated indignation he could muster.

And he wasn't disappointed. "I mean, come on!" Angel agreed.

"She's smarter than that."

"She'd never fall for a centuries-old guy with a dark past who may or may not be evil."

Spike nodded, pointing at him. "She's under some kind of spell."

"I was just thinking that."

Of course he was. "We're gonna pick up the Capo's body..."

"Find the Immortal and break his whammy," Angel said decisively.

Good. There was a plan—a plan involving the both of them.

Bloody hell, if Spike could manage to keep Angel moving *and* get this issue with the bloody Goran solved, there was one saucy little Slayer that was going to owe him a hell of a thank-you snog. But before his thoughts could take him down that rather pleasant route, another demon entered the room, balancing a cane in one hand and a bowling ball bag in the other. For someone who needed assistance to walk, she seemed rather spry.

"*Grazie, Signor Angelo*," the demon said. She placed the bag on the table, then continued in a thick Italian accent, "We are in your debt for attending to a delicate matter. *Grazie, grazie*."

Angel was certainly off his game, shiftier than Spike had ever seen him. He pointed at the bag. "Um, this is the—uhh—Capo di Famiglia of the Goran demon clan?"

"*Sì, sì*. The Capo di Famiglia."

"Must've been a wee fella," Spike offered.

Angel had already unzipped the bag to sneak a peek at the corpse. "This is just his head."

"*Sì, sì*. The Capo di Famiglia," the demon replied helpfully.

"What happened to the rest of him?" Spike asked, stealing a peek himself, wondering if he hadn't been offered a reprieve. If they were missing Goran pieces, tracking them down could tie them up until Gunn's disaster clock ticked right out of seconds.

But before that hope could take root, the demon was talking

again. “When a Goran demon becomes heavy with the age, his head sag and drop off like a ripe fig.” She concluded with a little harrumph.

“So his new body just hatches out of it?” Angel asked, still uncertain.

“If the rituals are performed by the family in time,” the demon agreed eagerly. “You must get the head of the Capo to Los Angeles *subito*. Eh? *Sì?*”

“*Sì. Subito*,” the older vampire replied in such a way Spike knew his thoughts couldn’t be further from Los Angeles.

Nope, the tosser was on his way back to the flat.

Hell, Buffy was going to owe him more than a snog.



ONE VISIT to Andrew’s later, and they were on the town, meaning to break up the Slayer’s date with a mutual enemy.

The club was, admittedly, a place Spike had no trouble picturing Buffy dominating. Loud music, full dance floor, all kinds of creepy crawlers masquerading as humans—like the Bronze that had been, only on an international scale. This Bianca bird was doing a decent job playing her role.

“Dancing,” Angel deadpanned. “Why’d it have to be dancing?”

Spike fought an eyeroll. Fuck, he’d never get over what a bloody drag the man was. Never mind that Buffy, his Buffy, was born for dance—always had been. It was a sodding wonder the two of them had been able to tolerate each other for any period of time, as different as they were.

Though he knew that the difference was sometimes the draw—had seemed that way for him for a time, until he’d realized just how alike he and the Slayer were. Both loyal to people who didn’t deserve it, both ready to throw in everything for a good tussle, both too forgiving for their own good, both starved for love and terrified of it at the same time.

He’d have to run that by her some time, just to see if she agreed.

In the meantime, he had a slayer to pretend to find.

"You speak English, love?" Spike asked the bartender he and Angel had bullied their way toward.

The bartender—a cute little number in her own right—favored him with the sort of look that let him know he'd not be short on company for the evening if he were interested. "*Sì, sì*. I love the English," she replied.

"We'll get along fine, then," Spike said.

"We're looking for a girl." Angel shouldered in beside Spike and rested his elbows on the bar. "American. Blonde hair. Blue eyes."

*Blue eyes?*

Somehow, Spike managed not to look at Angel, not even flinch, just nod as though that weren't the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard.

"Many blonde American coeducational," the flirty bartender cooed. "Spring break? The girls, they go wild."

"No, no. We—we're looking for a friend of ours," Angel said.

"She's in trouble," Spike added. "This ponce called the Immortal is—"

"Ah, *sì*. *Sì*. The Immortal's new *ragazza*. They come, while ago." She grinned, clearly enjoying herself, and turned her attention to the throng of partygoers behind them. A moment later, she fixed her gaze on a point in the crowd and the grin turned into a smirk. "There."

Spike made a show of bracing himself and looked over his shoulder, immediately zeroing in on the girl playing the role of Buffy Summers. To her credit, she was impossible to miss. A bit blonder than Buffy had been, at least to Spike's memory, though she moved just the right way, in full possession of a slayer's preternatural grace. The same that couldn't help but speak to the predator in him, soul or not, and beckon him into a dance.

"Your friend maybe go a little wild too, *sì*?" the bartender asked, all coy amusement.

But it was a mirage, a glimpse stolen in a house of mirrors. The longer he looked, the clearer it became that the girl was not *his* slayer.

If Angel didn't know now, he would the second he got close to her.

"Right," Spike said, drawing away from the bar. "Hold down the fort. I'll be right back."

There was no bloody way that was going to work, but hopefully



Angel would be sufficiently preoccupied with fumbling the capo's head to give Bianca enough time to realize she was in danger of being made. And if *that* was too much to ask, the sodding Immortal at least ought to recognize the pair of them and would hopefully have the wits to usher the girl away from a confrontation.

But then that was the gamble one took when working with the Immortal. The git loved drama and there was nothing more dramatic than a slayer confronted with a pair of her former vampire lovers, even if he'd only have a handful of seconds to enjoy the show.

"Huh?" Angel was at his heels, of bloody course. "Oh, yeah, here it comes. The part where you run off alone and play the big hero so Buffy'll take you back. Well, newflash, Blondie Bear. Never gonna happen."

Spike gritted his teeth and turned to face him, holding up his hands. "Look. I know I don't have a shot with her, all right? Probably never did, but I still care about her, and I'm not gonna let her end up with a jerk like the Immortal." He paused. "Or you."

He started toward her again, ready when Angel trailed after like a hapless pup.

"Hey, ours is a forever love."

Spike didn't bother holding back his scoff. *Forever*, so long as Cordelia was in the ground, it seemed. "I had a relationship with her, too."

"Okay, sleeping together is not a relationship."

Of course that was all Angel thought it had been. Must be what helped him get a decent night's rest. "It is if you do it enough times," Spike shot back.

"Spike."

He turned again, not having to playact his annoyance this time. "What?"

"The head."

"I thought you had it." Had counted on it, actually. Spike glanced back to the bar just in time to catch the butler that had kept them company at the fancy house making away with the goods. Good. Nice diversion—even a pining, pathetic Angel wouldn't chase the girl and risk a demonic turf war.

“Hey!” Spike yelled and bolted across the bar to grab the butler’s shoulder, Angel at his side. “Where you think you’re going with our head, Jeeves?”

“Anywhere he wants,” came the answer, though not from the right direction.

Spike and Angel turned as one and were greeted by a wall made up of large blokes with more bulk than brains.

*Hallelujah.* Another diversion.

“Don’t suppose we can talk about this over a nice amaretto?” Angel asked.

Spike braced himself, risking a glance at the dance floor before throwing himself into the fray. The Buffy look-alike was gone.

Thank fuck. At least *something* had gone right tonight.

And if it was a brawl these gents wanted, he might get to have a bit of fun after all.



“YOU BLOODY OWE ME.”

Though there was no venom in his voice—none at all. He couldn’t even keep up the charade with Buffy laughing as hard as she was. Hell, hard enough that he had the thought to worry that she might pass out for lack of oxygen.

Spike had been back in the States for a few hours, had begged off to nurse his wounded pride after he and Angel had made the same nonsense vow to move on. He honestly hadn’t intended to ring her before catching some well-earned kip, but the second he’d been entombed in his flat, he hadn’t been able to hold off.

Buffy had picked up at once, her voice already trembling with mirth, and he’d known it was no good.

“How much of it is true and how much of it is Andrew being Andrew?” she’d managed to ask.

“Slayer, I don’t even think Andrew could come up with something as bloody ridiculous as what I’ve been through.”

And that had been it. Buffy had dissolved into laughter and hadn’t emerged. Granted, the laughter would grow softer during the few clear

headed parts of the tale, but given that everything that had happened after they'd touched down in Rome had been a comedy of errors, she'd had few chances to catch her breath.

He told her everything—walked through every decision. How he'd known it was important to keep the Gorans placated and Angel oblivious, the lengths he'd gone to in order to make sure Angel wouldn't rush off to play hero on his lonesome, how petulant Angel had become the longer they'd been there, and about his bitter declaration that he was owed cookies, at which point Buffy had lost it again.

At that part, he'd joined her. It had been rather funny.

"Thank you," she said through her giggles. "Seriously, Spike, that was... In a thousand years, I never would have thought you'd have to go through any of that. I can't believe he never figured it out." She tittered again, then sobered. "You really think he never figured it out?"

"Not once, far as I can tell." Spike shucked off his duster—the one that had been practically incinerated only to be pieced together again. Or that was how he preferred to think of it.

He supposed everything else that had happened in Rome had been his own bloody fault, in a way, given he'd begged the universe for a distraction, and for once, the universe had delivered. The rest of the time in Italy had been spent running around town to find the head, measuring heroism in the number of averted apocalypses, and pinning the Immortal as the villain of the piece to cater to Angel's broken ego.

Aside from disabusing Angel of the notion that Acatlha had been his win, the eulogy Spike had given his duster might have been the most honest thing that had come out of his mouth since they'd boarded the bloody plane.

"Well, it paid off," Buffy said at length, her voice still ringing with laughter, though more subdued than it had been before. "Bianca and the Immortal send you their thanks."

"Bloody Immortal knows where he can shove his *thanks*," Spike muttered. "Got my duster blown up, didn't he? Self-righteous sod."

"Your duster? It's toast?"

"No," he said, casting the garment a bitter look. "Seems the Italian branch of Wolfram and Hart has some bloody talented tailors at their

disposal. Looks and smells right enough, at least. Got the same scratches the old one did, too. Still, principle of the thing, isn't it?"

"This being the duster you pulled off Robin's mom?" Buffy asked in a dry voice.

"One and the same. Got sentimental value, that."

"I should so find this more disturbing than I do, but I honestly can't picture you without that duster."

"Had a time of it last year, yeah? Didn't go hunt for the thing until you spoke that piece about needing the Spike with bite."

A sigh rumbled through the line. "I might have been way harsh."

"Reckon you were right. I had been holding back."

"Oh, I was totally right. But right in a very harsh way."

That was his Slayer, all right. Spike grinned and threw himself on the bed. He needed a shower and some nosh, but after pretending to chase the girl for a day, it was nice to have her all to himself.

Especially now. She'd said she loved him. Granted, she hadn't said it in so many words and she'd been hinting at it for a good stretch, pouting when he shut her down, but this was different. Maybe because she'd shucked off all the things he'd told her about waiting for the load of rubbish he suspected it had been. As much as he'd meant it at the time, Spike wagered part of him had been waiting for her to overthrow him and take command, as was her style. After all, kowtowing to orders had never been in the Slayer's nature.

"Wager something's coming," Spike said a moment later. "Whatever angle your ex has been playin' at. Bloody hopeless as he was in Rome, gotta think part of that was because he wasn't all there."

Buffy sighed again, longer this time. "Yeah. All signs point to that here, too. A seer in Willow's coven had an episode and consensus is that Angel's time at heading Wolfram and Hart is nearing its end in a big ole end-of-world fashion. We're getting the girls ready to go to war."

"War?"

"What can I say? It's apocalypse season." Buffy fell quiet for a moment. "You realize this means you won't be my international guy too much longer."

Spike's throat tightened. "Yeah?"

“Yeah. Think we’re ready for that?”

“Ready for what?”

“For you to be just my guy?”

At that, he warmed all over, again playing the confession that now seemed like it had been ages in the past rather than just a day or so. “Been your guy since the first moment I saw you, pet. Mighta taken me a minute to suss as much out, but I’ve known it for some time now. So the question is, are *you* ready for that?”

“To have you in person rather than in long-distance? A whole lot of yes.”

“Could get messy, you and me.”

“I *hope* it does. Means we’re doing it right.”

He chuckled. “I meant—”

“I know what you meant. And yeah...I think parts might be messy. But honestly, we’d have to really screw it up for it to be messier than we’ve already been.”

Well, that was certainly bold. True, yeah, but bold. “Thought you didn’t believe in chancin’ fate, love, having lived in Sunnyhell and all.”

“I guess that’s how confident I am,” Buffy replied, sounding a bit surprised, herself. “Or how badly we’re going to screw up. But I think it’s going to be worth it. Don’t you?”

“You’re just fishing now.”

“There’s an easy pun in there about one of us being a catch. I’m not going to pun it, just point it out.” She giggled again, lighting him up from the inside, and god, the prospect that he’d get to see her, touch her soon was almost too much to bear.

And there was fear. Not the sort he’d had before, but a distant cousin. They could get messy. Hell, odds were they would. But she was right too—there was the mess they’d been before and the messes they could make going forward. They’d already been through the worst together and were still here. That had to mean something.

Bugger, it meant the world.

“Better sign off for now,” Spike said after a stretch. “Need to wash off all things Rome and I still haven’t done the math on just how long I’ve been awake.”

"All right. Thank you again for everything in Rome. I can't begin to describe the headache you just rescued me from."

"Any chance to be your white knight's one I'll take." A pause. "I love you, Buffy."

It was the first time he'd said it since she'd given it back to him. And though he didn't have to wait long for her reply, it felt like a millennia.

"You too."

He arched an eyebrow. "You too, eh?"

"Hey, you said I can't say the words until I see you in person. This is the best you're gonna get. I'm just following your rules, Mister." She blew a raspberry, something she'd taken to doing when teasing him, and something he couldn't help but love. Playful Buffy was a delight he'd never thought he'd get to indulge in, and he wanted all of it that she was willing to give. Then, in a quieter voice, she said, "But me too, Spike. You know?"

He drew in a ragged breath, his eyes suddenly stinging. Throughout the euphoria he'd experienced when she'd said it last and up until now, Spike hadn't stopped to consider whether or not he believed it. And, he realized almost at once, that was because he did. God help him, he believed that Buffy loved him. It was large and exhilarating and everything he'd ever wanted, and it filled him up so much he thought he might burst.

Having Buffy's love might be the scariest thing that had ever happened to him, but it was a good fear. The kind that made him feel alive.

"I know," he said thickly. "I know."

A beat, and then she sighed. "Well," she said with such warmth he couldn't keep from crying now. "Took you long enough."

HE'D ALWAYS THOUGHT THERE WOULD BE TIME, FOR SOME STUPID reason. That he'd stumble onto the great sod's plan with plenty of days to spare, tell Buffy he'd finally succeeded in the thing she'd entrusted him with, and allow her the room she needed to figure out how to respond.

Should have bloody figured it'd go all tits-up.

"Whatever's happenin', pet, it's goin' down soon," he said the second Buffy picked up the phone. "Your bloody ex is off his rocker. Took a bit to suss out, even had me fooled, but he's lost his marbles about the good fight and is aimin' to be the next big power."

"Spike?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you calling me from a payphone?"

Spike looked around as though needing to verify just where he was. The world outside the payphone cubicle seemed so unconcerned, normal, even. Hurried LA nightlife with its horns and sirens and sounds of nearby squabbles—the noise and pulse of the city thrummed beneath his skin as though it were a heartbeat. But it wasn't a heartbeat—it was just the staging area for whatever game Angel was playing.

"Yeah," he said, the events of the last few hours slamming down on

him again. "Bloody useless I've been, pet. Can't say the flat's a safe place anymore. Left Blue there to watch over Drogyn—Deeper Well bloke who risked hair and hide to tell us Angel's gone off to the other side, but Wolfram and Hart's lackey hunted him down anyway. Could be they've had the place bugged this entire time, for all I know."

"You're sure about this?"

"About what?"

"About Angel. You're sure he's gone completely dark side?"

Yes. No. Bugger, he didn't know, and that brassed him right the hell off. All this time, Spike thought he'd been doing something. Had been bloody convinced of it. Otherwise, what the hell was the point? Why was he whiling away here when he could be in London, cozying up to the woman he loved and bugger the rest?

He'd wanted to do something important, and given the chance, he'd pissed all over it.

"Been thinkin' Angel was off," he said, shaking. "Told you as much. Thought it was somethin' to watch, not a bloody warning that he'd lost his head entirely. Drogyn apparently sussed out that Angel did offer up Fred for Illyria and nearly got the stuffing ripped out of him in order to keep that quiet. Came here to give us a fair warnin' and nearly got killed because of it."

Though where Drogyn was now... Fuck, Spike could stake himself. He'd thought leaving Illyria to guard the bloke would amount to something, even if she wasn't the powerhouse she had been just a few weeks ago. Turned out that much had been wishful thinking, and the odds were good that Drogyn had been offered up as another sacrifice on Angel's climb to the top.

It had all happened so fast.

"I'm sorry," Spike muttered, dragging a hand down his face. "Knew somethin' was off, just figured we were still in the thick of it. But we're handlin' it tomorrow—me and the others."

"Spike, slow down. Handling what?"

"Angel."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. What do you mean, handling?"

He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, willing his racing mind to slow down enough so he could be of some bloody use.



So he started again from the top. The questionable decisions Angel had made of late, as well as the slew of baby decisions that, by themselves, had seemed odd but understandable until they'd snowballed. Things that Spike ought to have thought more important, ought to have relayed to his girl, but honestly couldn't remember if he had or not. He *was* careful to go over the minutiae of whatever happened at the office every time they talked. He'd told her about Angel tracking her in Rome, about the whisperings he'd heard from personnel and any dissent among Angel's rank-and-file subordinates. Hell, he'd told her about being Illyria's punching bag and the day where he'd apparently dusted once only to be rescued by her honey-bear through some cosmic wormhole in time. And the fact that Angel had bloody swooped in to save his unlife had been a large question mark because he knew damn well the sod could have let Illyria cut him down and called it an accident.

He'd told her all of this, reported in like a good little boy, but hadn't bothered to slow down long enough to string the facts together or take a wide look at the big picture. Who knew what he had missed?

"So Angel let Fred die," Buffy said a moment later, after Spike had fed the machine a few more quarters. Odds were he was being paranoid, not using the mobile the Slayer had provided him, but his judgment wasn't something he was prone to trust at the moment. He'd taken too much for granted. "And he tried to kill Drogyn to cover it up, all to impress this Circle of the what?"

"Black Thorn," Spike replied. "At least accordin' to Lindsey."

"Not exactly someone I'd call reliable."

"No, but I don't think he's lyin', pet. Angel so much as told me he didn't feel it anymore—the reason to fight, go on." He pressed his eyes shut. "Had it all wrong. Bugged it up."

"You didn't. Spike, you really didn't. You got us the information we need."

God, the dizzy bird must love him to overlook just how badly he'd mucked this up. And he had no excuse—he'd been right there the entire time, watching as Angel accumulated more power and became less interested in maintaining the balance that separated the goody-good guys from the likes of Wolfram and Hart. And even though Spike

had been watching for something just like that, he'd thought it too subtle. Not at all to Angelus's taste—Angelus didn't do anything that could be mistaken or interpreted as something else. Angelus went for the big show, the artistry, and part of Spike had suspected that the souled half would do the same. The last two years had taught him better than ever that while the soul made a difference, made things clear to him that hadn't been before, it didn't change who a person was at the core. To hear the others talk, Angel and Angelus were two separate entities that happened to look alike. Might have been a deal easier for Angel to think of it that way, considering the soul had never once been his idea, rather his ongoing punishment. If he maintained that he shared nothing with Angelus except the unfortunate coincidence of occupying the same body, he didn't have to own any of what he'd done when he'd been less inhibited.

Spike didn't have the luxury of fooling himself. Bloody hell, he didn't want to. He knew he was lesser without the soul but also more than the average vamp due to the fact that he'd sought the sodding thing in the first place.

"Spike, listen to me," Buffy was saying when he pulled himself out of his recriminations long enough to focus on her voice. "This is important. You said you and the others are handling it. I assume that means you're taking out Angel?"

"Not askin' permission, pet."

"Did you hear me give it? I just need to know so we can coordinate."

"What's there to coordinate?"

She sighed and hell, he could practically hear her eyes rolling. "You really think I'm sitting this one out?"

Spike blinked, furrowing his brow. "Uhh, last I checked, you were on the other side of the planet. Unless Willow's into some mojo you've been keepin' mum about."

"No, doofus, this is what I was trying to tell you. You got us the information we need."

A pause, and in that pause Spike heard something he hadn't before—something he should have picked up right away, but hadn't, focused as he had been on the sequence of events that had sent him spiraling.

The Slayer was on the road.

"Where are you?" he asked. "Buffy?"

"Uhh...somewhere north of LA. We're going to pull over and rent a handful of rooms so the girls can get some sleep. Not sure *I'll* get any sleep, but—"

"What the sodding hell is going on?"

"I told you, you got us the information we needed. At least enough to confirm the particulars of Jessa's vision."

"Jessa—"

"The seer in Willow's coven—the one I've told you about. There have been all these signs or... I don't know witchy stuff, but all signs point to big boom in LA. And we're going to be there when it goes off."

Spike had started breathing again, harder now than before. She was coming here. *Buffy*. As soon as tomorrow, she would be more than a voice and a promise—she'd be flesh and blood. The scent that had teased him in Rome, that he'd attempted to inhale when she'd first sent him the phone that had been his lifeline these last few months, would be in his nose and throat and *bloody fuck*, the thought was almost too much to bear. Even in the midst of the world falling down around him—hell, perhaps because of it.

"You're comin' here," he said, unable to keep his voice from shaking. "Really?"

He thought she might snicker or scoff—more important things to worry about at the moment, after all—but she didn't. Instead, when she spoke again, she sounded as shaken as he felt.

"Yeah. We thought it'd be better to fly in somewhere else and drive into the city. A bunch of warrior women arriving at LAX with a big honking scythe to get through customs would probably blip on Wolfram and Hart's weird-o-meter."

"Smart."

"I have my moments." She went quiet again. "It'll probably be tomorrow afternoon before we're in town. Like I said, I want the girls rested. Some of them fought with us in Sunnydale, but this is the first apocalypse for most."

"Never forget your first, do you?" He swallowed, suddenly nervous

beyond question. The idea of Buffy being here, with him, beside him was one that had seemed intangible for a while now. They hadn't talked much about what would happen the next time they were face-to-face—did he get to pull her into his arms and snog her? Would she launch herself at him or was this thing they were doing, the long-distance thing, something she'd want to keep quiet until she could break it to the others? And yeah, part of him worried that it'd all be over the second it became real, but the rest of him knew that wasn't them anymore. Not after everything they'd shared.

"Spike?"

"Yeah?"

"Just for the record, you're not allowed to die in this apocalypse."

His lips twitched. "Same goes, you hear?"

"I make no promises."

"Woman, if you die on me, I will rip your throat out."

She giggled like he'd wanted her to, and he couldn't help but grin.

"Still cornering Angel tomorrow, you know," he said a moment later. "Others have no bloody clue about you so it'd be right awkward for me to waltz up and say my girl's on her way and could we hold off the arse-kicking."

"This, whatever it is, is bigger than Angel. I kinda doubt a big shake-up will make him talk, but if you get anything useful out of him, let me know."

"Always."

"And be careful."

"Where's the sodding faith, love?"

"Actually, Faith plans to meet us. She and Robin are flying in directly."

Spike snickered. "You think you're clever."

"You know you love me."

"I do. God help me."

There was a rustle in the background, a murmur of unfamiliar voices, and again Spike entertained that rush of panicked euphoria, realizing she was having this conversation in earshot of others. Others who had heard her call him *Spike*. Who probably knew everything—

the whole sorry plan and his part in it, ineffective as he had been. And he needed to see her so badly he ached with it.

"Me too," Buffy said softly. "See you tomorrow."

It was almost guaranteed, he figured as he set the phone back on the hook. One of them wasn't walking away from the fight, ultimatums aside. Blokes like him didn't get to experience what happened the day after the world didn't end. And all else be fucked, when the hammer came down, he was the one who would take the blow. Buffy had been to Heaven once and Heaven could wait a bit longer to have her back. She had a full life still to live, and he'd had his time.

This death would be a good one, though. A better one. Because when he went out, it'd be with more than just the words—he'd have really known what it was like to have been loved by Buffy Summers. Truly and completely.

Couldn't ask for more than that.



THE PAST FEW MONTHS—REALLY, since he'd picked up the phone and dialed Buffy's number—Spike had entertained an odd relationship with time. Neither he nor Buffy had had any concept of how long his stint playing super spy would last; it was something neither of them had ever talked about in definitive terms. How someday it would all be over, one way or another, and they'd be able to occupy the same room.

Still, even as quickly as everything had unraveled with Angel, Spike hadn't been ready for *someday* to be today. Fuck, he was still reeling from the slew of new revelations that had piled on since that morning, never mind the fact that Angel's little antihero act was just that. Though, truth be told, it made more sense than the theory that Angel had swapped his white hat for something a bit darker. Also fell in with the whole *Angelus doesn't do subtle* thought that had been nagging at him since Illyria had first suggested his old sire-by-fire had become corrupt. Putting the pieces into place to lead to a big ole finish was much more Angel's style, conscience or no conscience.

So the big battle was coming tonight—all of the king's horses and all

of the king's men fairly scattered throughout the city to take out the pillars holding up the Circle of the Black Thorn. For perhaps the thousandth time since being fairly evicted from his own basement flat, Spike wondered if he ought to have spilled about his secret back-up plan. But then Angel hadn't shared much of his own plan at all, so mentioning that Spike had one in his back pocket hadn't seemed the wise move just then. All he had now was to live the day as though it were his last, bolstered by the knowledge that it might well be. It wasn't too bad, he decided, dying. But he sure as fuck would miss all the living he'd been looking forward to.

He wondered where Buffy was, if she and her band of slayers had made it into the city yet and if so, where they had set up shop. If he knew her, she wouldn't have let her girls take the day off. She'd be giving the big speeches, like she had back in Sunnyhell barely a year in ago, talking about how important the upcoming fight was, talking about how not all of them would make it but this was the way of things. The life of a slayer, abrupt and violent and always disposable in the face of saving the world.

There was something to be admired in each approach. Buffy's girls, aside from those who had been in Sunnydale for that last fight with the First, likely hadn't tasted true battle before. Not like they were aiming to tonight. But Spike was a warrior of old, and so were the others, human or not. There wasn't much to do but show up and hope nothing went south once the punches started flying. No tricks he'd learn between now and then.

And while this dive bar with its poetry slam open mic event was a far cry from what Spike would rather be doing with his last handful of hours on earth, it would do in a pinch.

Too bloody bad he hadn't had a chance to come up with anything new. But then again, there was a perfect sort of balance to this. It had been read the last night of his mortal life. Perhaps this was what he deserved—to have his existence book-ended by useless attempts to be something greater than himself.

Oddly, he was all right with that.

*"My soul is wrapped in harsh repose  
midnight descends in raven-colored clothes  
but soft...behold!"*

*A sunlight beam  
cutting a swath of glimmering gleam.  
My heart expands,  
'tis grown a bulge in it,  
inspired by your beauty...  
effulgent."*

The next part he knew well. Had spent the better part of a century trying to outrun—the silence, then the laughter. At least he felt prepared this time, not harboring delusions of his own brilliance, and his mum wasn't around to pretend to give a lick. Still, when the silence broke with an enthusiastic, "Yeah!" right before the audience burst into what could only be called applause, Spike wasn't sure what to do with himself. He stood, startled, staring out at the sea of gnarly bikers and barflies, all of whom were on their feet and cheering for him. For his words.

Sod all. The world was *absolutely* going to end tonight.

"That was great, man!" someone from the crowd called.

The next few seconds were like something out of a dream. In a flash, Spike was on his feet, grinning like a loon. "Thank you. That was for Cecily. All right. This next one's called 'The Wanton Folly of Me Mum.'" He was still smiling when he opened his mouth to spit out the first verse, sweeping his gaze across the lively, eager crowd...

And then he saw her, and *dream* took on an entirely new meaning.

Time and distance could do a lot to a man's mind, make him think he remembered things wrong or distorted others. But hell, Buffy was the same. The same face, battle-hardened but still somehow soft, betraying years she hadn't lived, but also had in ways no one else could appreciate. The same eyes, burdened with knowledge and experience, with the weight of what was to come, yet somehow *also* soft, and full of something he'd only glimpsed twice before, and only in caves. The first time, when she'd shown up and cut him down from the First's little altar and taken him home—he'd seen it then. Then again when she'd threaded her fingers through his, pressed her palm to his, and watched as they'd burned together. The same mouth, snappy and commanding, the best tool in her bloody arsenal for the wounds he still carried, but when she smiled...

Buffy was the same but she wasn't. She was somehow more beautiful than she'd ever been, and she was standing at the back of the bar, those eyes fixed on him, and everything else in his world was suddenly meaningless.

Spike became dimly aware that he was standing on a stage, mic in hand, and scattered words of a poem breaking apart in his mind. And he didn't care, not when the crowd that had been feeding his ego started to stir with agitation, or when the first *boo* reached his ears. Instead, he reaffixed the mic to the stand he'd borrowed it from, set the glass of whiskey he'd been nursing onto the floor by the stool, and jumped off the stage without so much as a nod.

Then he was moving toward her, unwilling to blink lest she vanish, but she didn't vanish. And she was moving too, twisting around chairs filled with confused patrons that comprised the first fans of William the Bloody's poetry. She didn't blink either, and when she was close enough to breathe in, he caught a hint of salt.

But he didn't pause to consider the tears in her eyes or much register those in his own. One second she was near enough to smell, then touch, and he was reaching out to her, running his fingers along skin that was warm and real and *Buffy*, before breaking to yank her to him and swallow her hello with his mouth.

It wasn't like the last time he'd kissed her. Though neither had said it then, it had felt like goodbye. Tasted like it, too. That final night on Revello Drive, in the middle of the basement while the little Potentials attempted to catch their winks before the apocalypse, after Buffy had joined him downstairs. He'd stood and she'd stood and they'd been on opposite ends of the room, which had felt fitting at the time. Standing together but apart, separated still by all the things they hadn't gotten around to working through, Angel's shadow darkening everything, the looming weight of what was to come and the damn near certainty that had carried Spike to sleep that night—the deep part of him that had known he would go into the Hellmouth with her but he wouldn't come out. Some animals could feel when their time was nearly up and he'd wagered he wasn't much different. And Buffy had kissed him like she had a thousand years prior, back when things had seemed simpler but been more complicated than he could have ever appreciated. She'd



kissed him and pressed herself against him and he'd known what it was.

That kiss had been *goodbye*. This one was *hello*.

It was *I missed you*.

It was *god, is this real?*

It was *love*.

And it was. Christ, it was. He could drown in her and die a happy bloke. The familiar curve of her mouth, the sensation of her tongue against his, the way she tasted—bitter and sweet at the same time, all Buffy, making him feel whole in ways a thousand phone calls never could. She whimpered and sighed into his kiss, digging her fingers into the leather of his duster as she gave and took and said his name over and over as though lost in prayer. And the more he tasted, the more he wanted, the more desperate the ache in his chest became. Because it wasn't enough—with her, it never could be. He would always want more.

It could have lasted forever, well past the apocalypse, had they been anywhere but in a ruddy dive bar surrounded by a bunch of catcalling blokes who now seemed to be on Spike's side again. Not that Spike minded an audience, but he couldn't help but grin at the blush staining Buffy's cheeks when she pulled back and looked around as though only then registering exactly where they were.

"Not exactly discreet," she said, though her eyes were dancing, and god, she was beautiful. Glowing. It was a thought he'd had before—many times if he were being honest with himself, but Spike had never felt it as richly as he did right now. Looking at Buffy, who was flushed and sporting a kiss-swollen mouth, one that kept twitching like she couldn't fight her grin.

He'd been an idiot, thinking that moment in the cave was the best he could have asked for. This right here was the best. He'd die a thousand more times if it meant he got to keep it.

"Spike?" Buffy asked, some of the shine leaving her face. "Everything okay?"

"You're here."

There was that grin again. "Kinda noticed."

"How'd you find me?"

“Willow. She’s handy like that. No magic,” she said when his brow furrowed, and rested her hand on his chest. “Saving all the magic for tonight.”

“Then how?”

Buffy arched an eyebrow, then gave him a saucy little smirk and dove her hand into his duster pocket. “These,” she said, pulling out the cellphone she’d shipped him what felt like a lifetime ago, “are stupid easy to trace. And before Willow was a witch, she was a whiz. On the computer, that is.”

He was grinning again, couldn’t help it. Bloody *basking*. He dropped his gaze to her plump, perfect mouth. “You made a rhyme.”

“And it looks like I’m in the right place for it. Speaking of...” She planted her hand on his chest and pushed him back a pace. “Wanna explain what that was all about?”

Spike paused, then turned and cast a glance over his shoulder at the stage, now occupied by a bloke he’d seen anxiously reciting his lines by the loo earlier. And despite himself, he grinned. “Was a man once,” he replied, turning back to her. “Wrote the worst bloody poetry you’ve ever heard.”

“So...Cecily? That was a Spike original?”

“Wasn’t called Spike then.”

“I liked it.”

“You have bloody rotten taste.”

Buffy motioned to the crowd, and he saw that, despite the new blood at the mic, he and the Slayer still commanded most of the room’s attention.

“They seemed to like it, too,” she said.

“So they all have bloody rotten taste.”

“Have you written any about me?”

“None I’ll ever share.” Spike pressed his brow to hers and inhaled deeply, filling his lungs with all things Slayer. Her warm, earthy scent, combined with motel soap and a hint of coffee. How he’d gone a year without having her inside him like this would remain a mystery. “Buffy...”

“We have things to talk about.”

He nodded, dragging her along for the ride. “Yeah.”

“Notes to compare. An apocalypse to stop.”

“Tellin’ me nothing I don’t already know.”

“So...my place or yours?”

Spike fought a giggle, fought the urge to toss her over his shoulder or throw her onto one of the wobbly tables. There were things to do and say—a lot, actually, and they didn’t have too much time. In the grand scheme of things, they had practically none.

“Yours. Got a hellgod in mine.”

Buffy arched her eyebrows and leaned back to give him a look. “You are so explaining that.”

“I’ll do whatever you like.”

“If this is the same hellgod that wants you to be her pet, we’re going to have words.”

Again, he felt like giggling. Again, he shoved it down. “She doesn’t stand a chance.”

IT WAS THE SORT OF PLACE A FELLA LIKE HIM MIGHT THINK DECENT enough to hang his fangs at night, but a step or twelve beneath the Slayer. Something she seemed self-conscious about—or maybe that was everything else. The walk from the pub to her motel was a short one, and thankfully uneventful, given the vast amount of shade provided by LA’s many alleyways. Spike hadn’t had to worry about dodging the sun until it came time to cross a freeway, but by now this was all old hat to him. Granted, he wasn’t wild about the idea of separating from Buffy even for the time it’d take to navigate the sewer line—just on the off-chance he had lost his marbles or the world had actually gone on and ended and this was his last feverish fantasy as directed by Scorsese.

“See you in a mo’,” he said, prying the sewer cap out of its place. He jumped in without bothering to wait for a reply, but only managed a step or so in the appropriate direction before Buffy landed beside him with a grunt.

“Ugh. So did not miss this part of dating the undead,” she said, straightening up. When she caught him staring at her, she rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. “Yeah, because the last time I actually saw

you, you went up in flames. I'm not letting you out of my sight if it's not necessary."

Spike exhaled, and for a second, he could have sworn his heart gave a thump. He didn't know what to say, which just bloody well figured. He'd had months to imagine being with her again, to picture all the smooth nonsense that would tumble from his lips without effort. But the reality of having her here was something beyond anything he could have fathomed. Having her so close, having her looking at him the way she did in his dreams, smiling at him and snogging him and it being something he could hold and touch and see was more than a revelation.

It was real.

"Spike?"

Suddenly she was there, pressed up against him, the light from above hitting the green of her eyes. Then she extended a hand and touched the side of his face, palm warm against his cheek, and a small smile flitted across her lips.

"Me too," she said as though she had plucked his thoughts out of his head. And when she lifted herself up to kiss him, he wondered if she had. Stranger things had certainly happened.

He wasn't too proud to admit he was trembling when she pulled back, but he thought she might be, too. Like this could mean near as much to her as it did to him—any and all of it.

"I really don't wanna do this here," Buffy said with a small grin. "We can if you want and my room's not a huge step up, but I'm thinking it has at least fifty percent less yuck."

Spike grinned, stole another kiss in case it turned out he had lost his head, then nodded in the direction of the motel. "Let's go, then."

There was so much to tell her. The plan—this suicide run Angel had the lot of them committed to. The fact that Angel himself had been playing Wolfram and Hart for fools and his chums had been the pawns. Hell, that pretty much everything had changed from the last time they'd spoken. But the words wouldn't come. Not as they traipsed through the sewer toward the motel, nor as Buffy checked the corners to make sure no one was watching when they were above ground again. Not that this place was one where such precautions were necessary,

but because she feared Wolfram and Hart might catch wise at any moment, given the extent of their resources.

There had been spells involved with their travel, Buffy told him as she led him out of the rather shabby lobby and outside again, fumbling in her pocket for her key. Even Rupert had come out of magical retirement to bolster whatever mojo Willow had worked. Not that Willow was operating on her own—she had her coven with its seers, and they wielded enough power to put a good-sized dent into whatever Wolfram and Hart was preparing.

“A lot went into this, actually,” Buffy was saying as she fiddled with the doorknob. He didn’t miss the way her hands shook. “And Andrew, if you can believe it, came up with a really good cover story.”

“Cover story?”

“Yeah. I mean, it took a *lot* of magical coercion, but we were worried it’d look majorly weird if suddenly all these motels were full up with people.” She hissed a sigh when the door finally unstuck and shoved it open. “Inside before you’re extra crispy.”

No need to tell him twice. Spike ducked into the small, dank room. Not too much unlike the one he’d rented for himself back after he’d gotten his skin, though a step or a thousand beneath Buffy.

“That’s where the coven came in really handy,” Buffy said as she shut the door, then turned to fiddle with the drapes, which were already nice and shut but apparently not to her liking. “Forging documents, permits, getting this whole glamour thing set up.”

“What’s all this?”

“Andrew had the idea that there should be a reason for everyone being in town. So we kinda staged a convention.”

Spike arched an eyebrow.

“A *Doctor Who* convention. Or a knock-off one, not at one of the big venues because those are actually booked but somewhere not totally unbelievable but also not connected to a big hotel.” She turned and smiled at him. “So if Wolfram and Hart did any digging, the length of stay that we booked meshes with the fake convention thingy.”

He shook his head, not sure why he was amazed but amazed all the same. “You’re a marvel, love.”

“I’m not feeling very marvelous. More just...anxious.” Buffy ran her

hands down her sides, then looked around the room as though only then realizing they were alone. He heard the second her heart started thumping harder and wondered if she might share some of that mindreading ability she seemed to have mastered in the year they'd been apart. If she was waiting for him to pick up the cues, she'd be waiting a while. Just breathing in the air that smelled like her was enough to have him intoxicated.

"So, I guess this is where you fill me in on all things LA," she said a moment later, her voice shaking a bit. "Haven't had the chance to talk to you since before... Well, everything."

Spike nodded, his feet narrowing the distance that separated them all on their own accord. He wasn't in charge of anything at the moment. Part of him had always responded to her on a primal level, and it was that part that was behind the wheel. Still, he somehow managed to think clearly enough to remember that there were things she did need to know—important things.

"Angel was playin' his own game," he said. "Doin' what he could to get into the Circle of the Black Thorn."

Buffy arched an eyebrow. "So...evil?"

He shook his head. "Not that I wouldn't mind watchin' you shove somethin' shiny and wooden through his chest, pet, but joke's on them. Way he tells it, had to look like his crew didn't trust him."

"So he made you not trust him."

"One way to go about it."

"To what end, though?" But she knew. He saw it the second she stopped talking—her eyes went wide with comprehension. "He knows who the other members are."

"Yeah. And we're aimin' to take 'em out." Spike blew out a breath, his mind spinning as it took him back through the plentiful revelations of the past day. "Way he figures it, Wolfram and Hart have had the apocalypse on their to-do list for a minute now. Nothin' we can do to stop it, 'cept brass them off, make the wheel stop spinnin', even a bit, to make their jobs harder. Bloody suicide mission's what it is, but hell, at least I don't have to wear a fancy necklace this time around."

Buffy's expression shuttered and she pressed closer. "You're *not* dusting on me. Not again. Okay?"

“Well, since you asked real nice-like—”

“I mean it, Spike. I did not just haul ass across the globe to watch you die. That’s not how this ends.”

“Slayer, come on. We both know the better of it. I’m not the reason you’re here.”

“What?” She flinched as though he’d slapped her, then did what she would if he had—got mad. And god, it was glorious. Being with her, seeing her, smelling her was glorious, but that fire in her eyes was what he’d carry with him to his death tonight. That was his Buffy, through and through. She never stopped fighting. “Spike, you’re the *only* reason I’m here. Without you, I wouldn’t know, well, any of what you just told me. I would be completely in the dark over everything that Angel’s been doing this year. I wouldn’t know what we’re up against or how to fight it. Willow’s coven gave us the when, but you gave us the who and the what. Do you have any idea how blind we would have been if you hadn’t been a part of this?”

That was all well and good, even if he felt he’d let it all slip at the end. “Buffy—”

“Also,” she pressed on, even closer now—so close she was all he could see, “you’re a dope.”

“I’m a what?”

“I’m pretty sure I’ve explained this to you before. You’re a dope. And you’re shirty. And I love you.” Buffy captured his face between her hands, as though afraid he’d close his eyes or turn his head—as if there was anything else in this world worth looking at. “I love you, Spike.”

There was no fire. The world wasn’t ending for another few hours at least, and she was determined that he make it to the other side. He’d imagined this more times than he could count, and he’d known it—carried it with him for a few days now. The miracle that was Buffy’s love. And then it did feel like before because at once he could have sworn he felt his soul again—bright and bursting and ready to swallow the both of them, like his skin couldn’t contain it. He would open his mouth and soul would pour out, except, he realized a second later, it wasn’t his soul at all. Something just as bright and just as pure and just as powerful, but it wasn’t only his. It belonged to both of them.

Spike gripped her shoulders and pulled her to him. “Was told to



live the day like it's my last," he murmured, skating his lips over hers. "Bloody lucky you found me when you did."

"You gonna just let me dangle here?"

He arched an eyebrow. Buffy blew a raspberry at him, like she did so often on the phone, and fuck, of all the things to make him cry like a git.

"I mean, I came across the world and everything to tell you that I love you. It'd be nice to hear it—"

"You're infuriating," he said, laughing.

She grinned, the cheeky wench. "I know."

"And I love you." He took her mouth before she could reply, banding one arm around her waist and tangling his other hand in her hair to hold her to him. He'd often thought he'd never get enough of her and fooled himself into thinking he might get her to realize just how good they were together more times than he could rightly count. But the way she kissed him now was something beyond his wildest—it was enough of the passion he remembered, how she'd seemed desperate to consume or be consumed in the height of their affair but cushioned with something he hadn't known to miss at the time. Soft and yielding, and more than just the physical sensation of her lips and tongue—more like she was savoring him as he savored her. That the reality of them being together in this room, being together at all, had her humbled.

And god, he had to touch her all over. Taste her. Spike had no delusions about walking away from the battle tonight, no matter what she said, but he'd made himself a promise and he'd bloody well keep it.

"Spike—" Buffy pulled another kiss from his lips, and another, then laughed and jerked her head back. "Before—ahh. I better call Giles. Let him know *everything* you just told me."

He blinked, head still spinning. "That I love you?"

"No. He already knows that." She smirked, pressed her hands flat against his chest, and shoved him back a step. "But the plannage for the apocalypse. Angel's plan. So we can be there when the big fight goes down."

"Ahh." Spike sighed and rubbed along the back of his neck. "Don't rightly know, love. Beyond tellin' us we're bringing the fight to them

tonight and to go live like today's the last, pretty bloody sparse on details. Reckon he didn't want us worryin' over it until the time came."

Buffy stared at him for a moment, then rolled her eyes. "Of course. Can't do anything easy," she muttered and made her way to the nightstand, where she had her mobile charging. The next second, she had it raised to her ear. "Hey. Yeah, it's happening tonight. No time nailed down and the where is TBA but the girls need to get ready. Angel's taking on the Circle of the Black Thorn and anticipates this will have a side-effect of apocalypse. Yes, he's here." She frowned, listened, then shifted the phone from her mouth. "Giles says hi."

Spike almost laughed, and hid his reaction by shedding his duster to give himself something to do. What Rupert had actually said was, "Oh, well, yes. I suppose that was to be expected," but god, he loved her for trying.

"Kay. Just have everyone at their battle stations. No. *No*. Angel's taking the day off in case this is the last hurrah, and that's what I'm doing too." More squabbling on the other end and Buffy rolled her eyes again. "Giles, it's been a year. He's already talking like we're not gonna make it and in case I didn't mention it, *it's been a year*. I'm taking a few hours for myself with my boyfriend. If you have a problem with that, there are literally hundreds of other slayers you can complain to. I'll check in when it's time to move."

With a grunt, Buffy slapped the phone closed and tossed it onto the nightstand with likely more force than she intended. She breathed out, slowly, then turned around, a somewhat resigned look on her face. "It hasn't really been the same with Giles since... Well, you know."

Spike did know. He also knew how important Rupert was to her, and while he couldn't say he appreciated the Watcher's attempt to take him out, he could understand it. He'd told Buffy to do the same the moment he'd realized the First was mucking with his head and forcing him to kill. Trouble was, Buffy had done her heroic thing in the midst of it and given him a reason to believe in himself again. A reason to fight, not just to let his legacy be a series of failures—first as a man, then as a vampire, and finally as a redemptive sod with a soul.

"Even now?" he asked. "Trust him enough to head up the Watchers Council, yeah?"

"Because the options there were aplenty," she replied dryly.

"Slayer, you know—"

"I know. It's been a year and I've forgiven people for...well, not less, but the same." Buffy rubbed her arms, sighing. "But it turns out, I can hold a grudge with the best of 'em. Between what he did to you and the whole kicking-me-out-of-the-house thing, getting back to where I was with Giles has been...difficult."

"It wasn't just him on that, you know, pet."

"No. It was all of them." She sighed again, sinking onto the mattress. "Everyone just scattered after Sunnydale, you know? Well, I guess you don't. I haven't talked about them much."

This was perfectly true. In the many conversations Spike and Buffy had had over the last few months, very few had involved her friends beyond the occasional update or passing comment. She'd talked plenty about the girls she was training, about Dawn and her Italian education, about what Andrew was up to, but very little regarding the people that had represented the foundation of her patchwork family.

"I think we just needed time," Buffy said as he sat beside her. "But it felt like something broke between us with everything that happened. Xander went off on a mission and Willow got way into her coven. Giles dove into rebuilding the Watchers Council and I've just been putting out fires with the new girls and worrying about what comes next."

Spike swallowed, then placed a hand on her knee—a liberty that would have felt foreign the last time they were in the same room together, even as close as they'd gotten. She was warm beneath his fingers. Warm and strong and real. His Buffy.

"Thought the point of flippin' the switch on all the Potentials was to get this bloody weight off your shoulder, love."

Buffy turned to him a small half-smile. "That was one point of many. But when it's been just you and it's not just you anymore, it takes some adjusting. And I think I've been waiting for the other shoe to drop. It was more than a year before we found out the price for my resurrection was the First getting its chance at the crown. The apocalypse being tonight doesn't really instill a ton of confidence."

He squeezed her knee, not knowing what else to say, which struck him as funnier than it ought to, considering they'd done nothing but

talk for months now. And it was difficult, imagining a world beyond that night. Not because he thought the odds were particularly insurmountable—he'd been here before, after all—but because the *after* he wanted was the one he knew he'd never have. If he made it to the other side, it would be because she hadn't. That was just the way of it.

They'd grown rather good at interpreting each other's silences, so he wasn't surprised when Buffy threaded her fingers through his, pressing her palm against the top of his hand. "You really don't think you're gonna make it, do you?"

"Can't say I do. Don't have that kinda luck."

"What luck is that?"

Spike stared at her hand, small against his, her skin a few shades darker care of the sun. "The kind where I get what I want," he said hoarsely. "Where it goes right. Where any of it goes right."

"That doesn't mean it can't happen."

"Know that. But if I believe it, it'll just be that more crushing when I lose it."

She was silent for a moment, rubbing her thumb along his hand, her touch both calming and electric. Then she was moving, sinking to the floor before him and taking up position between his spread legs. "I'm not losing you again," she said softly, holding his gaze. "I'm not losing *anyone* tonight. I'm here right now because I do think we're gonna make it. I *want* to make it. We deserve a shot, don't we? After everything?"

The symmetry of the moment wasn't lost on him. How, on an evening preceding the apocalypse a year ago, he'd been the one on his knees, trying to reach her, tell her how important she was even if she wasn't for him. How much he loved her and what that love meant—both for who she was and how she had changed him. How she'd made him more—made him a man.

Now she was telling that man she wanted a life with him, that there would be an after, and as desperately as he wanted to believe it, he just couldn't. Angel might have his head up his arse about any number of things, but he was right on one score—creatures like them didn't get to live merrily ever after. Not with everything they'd done, all the futures they'd denied others.

“Spike?”

He released a trembling sigh, cupped her face. “You deserve so much, love.”

It wasn’t an answer and she was clever enough to see it. Some of that hardened Summers determination bled into her eyes, and he loved her so much. He’d loved her before, loved her from afar, loved her well, but he loved her now more than he thought it possible to love someone. All the versions of Buffy—the one who had hated him, the one who had clawed her way back to the land of the living when she’d earned her rest, the one who had forgiven him when he’d least deserved it, and the one who had filled his days with her voice these last few months all came together, and she was looking at him as he’d never thought she would.

“I deserve what I want,” Buffy said, sliding her hands farther up his legs, then pulling on the button of his jeans. “And what I want is us. So you wanna give me what I deserve? You give me you, and stop acting like tonight’s the end. Got it?”

Spike breathed out again, not trusting himself with words. Then her warm hand was on him, fingers encircling his cock and pulling him into the open. And it had been so long—lifetimes had passed since that last night in his crypt, the night she’d come to him and asked him to tell her the things she normally punched him for uttering. When he’d been daft enough not to see what was going on there, fool enough to believe it meant something between them had changed—or not to realize just what that something was. He’d thought often that, if he’d known that would be the last time, how he would have done it different. How he would have done the whole thing different, said something, anything to get her to stay. Kept his bloody gob shut the second her ex had shown up rather than running his mouth. And despite how their relationship had grown over these last few months, part of him had really expected to die without knowing this again. Knowing her, feeling her, as she stroked and squeezed and drove him out of his bloody mind—as she touched him like she cared.

He didn’t realize he had squeezed his eyes shut until he felt the first lick of her tongue along his cockhead. Spike gasped and looked down, shaking like a sodding virgin but not knowing how to stop. Buffy

pressed a kiss to the tip, keeping her eyes on his, steady and warm, before widening her mouth and sucking him in a bit deeper. It was deliberate—every move, every second. The fact that she hadn't looked away or screwed her eyes shut or done anything to make him think—*let him know*—that she wasn't in the moment with him. No, she kept her gaze fixed on him as she inched him farther into her hot mouth, until her nose was buried in the curls at his crotch and the head of his cock rubbed along the back of her throat.

"Fuck," Spike said, his voice uneven. He threaded a hand through her hair—or tried to. The fancy twist she'd done up made it difficult, but there was nothing he loved more than tugging it free. As golden tresses draped his fingers, Buffy began pulling back, applying just enough pressure to make a grown man—or a souled vamp—cry.

She released him with a wet plop, then began lavng her tongue along his cock. Just like the way she'd said that night on the phone, all the while keeping her gaze fixed on his face, whole and burning and her. All her, all Buffy.

"Watch me, Spike," she said, as though he were in danger of looking away. "I want you to watch me."

"Bloody hell, Buffy..."

She grinned at him, a wholly playful little smirk, and took him into her mouth again. This time at a pace, bobbing her head in long, languid movements that were downright decadent. And he watched as his cock, aching and slick with her saliva, slipped between those perfect lips of hers. Watched the way she sucked him in, how she seemed to relish every tug. Buffy enjoying him, enjoying this, was something novel—something he wasn't sure he'd ever managed to imagine without experiencing the inevitable fall that knocked any good fantasy off its pedestal of *possible* to *never happen*. She'd said the words and he'd heard her, believed her, had known for a while that what they had was real, but there was knowing and there was feeling, and he hadn't realized just how much he'd needed the latter until this moment.

Spike tightened his grip on her hair, dragging his fingers against her scalp. "Buffy... *Buffy*..."

"Do you remember what you said you'd do on the phone?" she

asked, then tongued the underside of his cock. "You wanted to fuck my mouth."

God, yes. He wanted that. Wanted to grip her and buck and shove himself down her throat. But not now. Maybe in the future he still doubted they could have, there would be a time when they could fall into bed and not worry about the world for a few hours. When he could have her in all the ways he'd always dreamed, uninhibited, unconcerned about what came next and unshackled from the past.

"Not now, baby," he said, releasing his grip on her hair to palm her cheek. "Next time."

The look she gave him said plainly that he wasn't fooling anyone—that she knew damn well that to him, *next time* might well never come.

"Spike, if you go into battle tonight thinking you're going to die, you could die. You realize that, right?"

He blinked down at her, cocked his head. "Was I supposed to follow you around that turn?"

Buffy sighed and rolled her head. "There's a difference between accepting death and expecting it. I'm all about accepting. It could happen. But expecting it to happen is... It's what gets you killed. So please...*please* don't do that."

"I—"

"I want to wake up with you tomorrow," she said, rising to her feet and toeing off her shoes, her gaze never leaving his face. "And the day after that, and the day after that." She tugged her shirt over her head in one, fluid motion, and then she was standing there before him, wearing a simple black bra that matched her black slacks. "I can't do that if you're so convinced you're going to dust tonight that you get careless. I need you to want to live. *Fight* to live for me. Please, Spike."

He just stared at her a moment, feeling every bit the fool. Because, fuck, she was right. She was right and he was a wanker. How many times had they faced down the end of the world together? How many times had they walked away? They'd both bled and sacrificed and died and come back, and here they were, ready to charge into the apocalypse again. And another thousand apocalypses could rain down upon them, but there would never be another one like this—this first time he went fighting knowing what awaited him on the other side of the

fight. Acathla, Glory, the First—each of them had been marred with uncertainty, a vague future comprised of half-baked hopes and desperate wishes. Maybe that was what made this one seem larger and more permanent—he had more than faint images of what he stood to lose.

Which meant he had to fight with everything he had.

“Yeah,” Spike said, his voice hoarse even to his ears.

“Yeah?”

“Yes. Buffy, yes.” He seized her by the hips and drew her to him again, turning up to meet her kiss as they wrestled over who got to strip off her slacks, who got to tear off her bra. She laughed into his kiss, making him laugh too, and something warm and bright swelled in his chest. Like the light that had flooded him just seconds before he’d crumbled away on the Hellmouth, only greater, more powerful, and it felt so good. Felt like her—like Buffy. Against him, over him, dragging his shirt over his head and maneuvering to shove his jeans down his legs, stealing kisses between each movement, as though she couldn’t get enough of him.

It was in that, in the way her mouth moved against his, in the breathy, giddy laughs that tore through her throat that everything hit home as it hadn’t before.

This was real. Buffy was here. She was here, and she loved him.

“We can do slow later, can’t we?” she asked, shoving him onto his back and straddling him. “When there’s more time?”

Then she was there, hot and slick and teasing the head of his cock. Spike nodded hard, digging his fingers into her hips and staring rather openly at her pussy—soft and plump, just like he remembered, searing him with her heat before she started lowering herself onto him. And *god*, he’d really thought he’d never be here again. Not with her, and certainly not like this. But there she was, her hands on his chest, his name on her lips, sinking onto him with a hard gasp.

“Fuck.” Spike’s head hit the mattress with a hard *thump*. She was tighter than he remembered—hotter too. Tight and hot and wet and *Buffy*. Almost too tight to be believed. Then something occurred to him, and he lifted his head again. “How long has it been, love?”

And hell, she presented a pretty picture. Flushed skin, tousled



hair, her lips round and her eyes rolled back. He'd seen her like this before, of course, but it was different now. So different, and in ways he wouldn't have known to expect. Buffy had never been shy to show just how much she enjoyed what he did to her, but it had always been under a layer of self-loathing that he couldn't quite force himself to ignore. In the soulless days, he'd taken whatever she'd given him but every time she'd staggered home, part of him had known she'd been worse off for what they'd done. He'd just thought the solution was that she needed to realize she loved him and get over it.

It wasn't like that now and he couldn't get enough of it. Of her. Watching her as she rode his cock, the small sounds she made every time she swallowed him whole. There was no reproach in her touch, or hesitation, however minute. Rather, she seemed to be indulging herself on him—drinking him in with the same desperation that he'd so often felt with her. That he felt now. When she opened her eyes and looked at him, there was only light.

If he hadn't already been sick with love for her, he would have fallen over again.

"What?" she asked a second later, seeming to come out of herself.

It took him a moment to remember what he'd asked, but then she clenched that wonder of a pussy around him again, hot and wet and so tight it might have hurt had he been anything but a vampire and the question returned to him.

"How long has it been for you?" He heard her heart start to thunder and the answer came to him almost at once. "Oh, Buffy..."

There was nothing else to say—nothing he could say, both stunned and not. Whatever else, Buffy had never been one for casual hookups or one-night stands. That she might have gone a couple of years without falling into bed with someone wasn't entirely surprising—that she hadn't wanted to purge him from her body was.

But maybe it wasn't. Maybe he just thought it was.

Then all thought blinked away, and she picked up her pace, lifting her hips, the repeated dance of her hot flesh dragging along his cock before he speared into her again, it seemed possible that he would come undone. Bloody good showing of their reunion, spilling like a

sodding schoolboy, but *fuck* she was perfect. Burning him whole in all the ways he'd missed—all those and then some.

"Tell me how it feels, Spike," Buffy said, taking his hands and placing them on her ass in wordless encouragement. He would have liked to have said he didn't need any, but with his brain blitzed out at the moment, he wasn't sure he could.

"Tight," he said, blinking his eyes open to watch her. Watch the familiar bounce of her breasts, of her hair. He squeezed her ass, guiding her in long, unhurried strokes that were quickly becoming short and very hurried. The shock of being inside of her again lessened by increments, taken over by need purer than any he reckoned he'd felt before. Then he was a slave to instinct, driving his hips up as he dragged her down, slamming her onto him at a rhythm that had the bed whining and the headboard ricocheting off the wall. "So bloody tight. Strangling me, you are. Fuck, I missed this. Missed you. Missed you so fucking much. Feeling you around me. Squeezing me. Your warmth. Your pussy. How good you grip me."

"Missed it too," Buffy replied and dipped her head to drag a hot kiss off his lips before he could respond. And he whimpered into her, gripping her ass harder and meeting the assault of her mouth with his own. Snogging had become something she withheld during sex over the course of their previous affair—not always, of course, and not wholesale, but something about letting him kiss her while he moved inside of her had been too much intimacy for Buffy to handle. And she'd rarely initiated—those times she had had been glorious teases of what they could be.

At last, Buffy pulled away from his lips, pressing her brow to his. "I missed the way you fill me up."

Holy Christ. Spike took her mouth in another kiss, then broke away to lave her neck and shoulders with his tongue and teeth. "More," he panted. "Tell me more."

"Missed...how you look at me."

He tightened his grip on her ass, pulling her down on him harder, the base of his spine starting to tingle and his balls tightening. "Tell me more."

She kissed a path to his ear, tugged on his earlobe with her teeth. “I missed the way you love me, Spike.”

Then she straightened her spine, pulled back, and smiled at him. And it was what did it. That smile, seeing it shine in eyes that were on him, that *saw* him, had him bucking and pulsing and he’d meant to last longer, so much longer, but he’d never been inside of her when she loved him and it was too much. Spike bit out something between a moan and a curse as his cock jerked and his balls emptied. He threw his head back again, somewhat embarrassed but mostly annoyed with himself.

Not that it would take much to get him going again—it was the sodding thought that counted, wasn’t it?

“Sorry,” he said, panting, “be back in a mo’.” But there was no reason she needed to wait. Before Buffy could open her saucy mouth and poke fun at him—because that was what she was going to do, he knew it, the minx—he seized her by the hips and flipped over so she was pressed to the mattress.

“Just need me a little pick-me-up,” he said, then kissed her hard before sliding down.

“Oh,” Buffy replied in a breathy voice that went straight to his cock. “Ohh...if you say you need it...”

He chuckled, nibbling down the smooth column of her neck, his heart seizing when all she gave him was another soft sigh. For obvious reasons, Buffy hadn’t been too keen on her neck being explored when they’d been together before. Never trusting him fully, or perhaps not trusting herself. Whatever barrier had been there was gone now, leaving nothing but the two of them. Buffy sighing his name and raking her nails through his hair, Buffy gasping and arching into him when he traced his tongue around one of her nipples, Buffy spreading her legs for him, giggling when he teased places on her that were ticklish, whimpering when he came close to stroking her properly but withheld at the last second. Buffy with him, her hands on him, her body under him, and love in her eyes when she looked at him—it was all so much. It was everything.

The second he was between her buttery thighs, Spike couldn’t help himself from burying his face in her soft, wet cunt and drinking in her

scent. She was slick and swollen and smelled just like he remembered, and drenched in him. His warm, needy Slayer, already wiggling her hips and lifting herself to his mouth with the same sort of single-minded forwardness that he'd come to crave. One thing he could say about Buffy without hesitation was she'd never lacked for knowing what she wanted. It was just the who she wanted it from that caused issues.

Now, she fisted his hair and rubbed herself against his face. "Spike, please..."

His cock was already back in the game, but he'd be damned if he turned down the opportunity to get her in his mouth again.

"Since you asked so nicely," he replied, and licked a line up her pussy from her opening to her clit. "Fuck, the way you taste..."

Buffy mewled and rolled her hips again, tightening the grip she had on his hair. "Spike, tease later. Eat now."

He answered with a low growl, plunging two fingers inside of her and drew her clit between his lips, and *god*, he'd missed this. The way she moved, the way she tasted, how his name sounded when she was desperate and wanting, when she needed him the way he'd always needed her. And he'd love nothing more than to drag this out, take his time and torture her properly, but time was not on their side and he was too greedy to taste her orgasm. He fell into the rhythm he remembered as her favorite, fast and hard, perhaps just a little too rough, though he'd never felt obligated to treat her like glass, which she'd loved, even if she hadn't admitted it. All the while he took careful, almost decadent laps of her clit with his tongue, alternating between licking and sucking, playing and loving. One second he'd be flicking her with airy touches that had her going bloody hog wild, then he'd flatten his tongue against her and press down, getting her to twist and writhe and shudder and she was so close, he knew, so close and he could get her there in a flash. In a blink, but there was something intoxicating about keeping her where she was. There on the edge, dancing near the edge but not quite able to fall.

The more desperate she was for it, the more strength she used, closing her legs around his face and squeezing him so tightly he'd likely suffocate were air a concern. This was how he liked her best—Buffy embracing her strength and her femininity and making them one,

pushing her pussy against him as he pumped her with his fingers, which were drenched in a cocktail of both her and his own cum.

“Spike—*Spike!*”

He twisted his wrist and pressed down on that magic spot inside of her, sucking her clit into his mouth at the same time, and she went bloody atomic. Bucking and panting and clutching and gasping, holding onto him tight enough it hurt in the best possible way. Spike kept his mouth where it was as her cunt tightened and pulsed around his fingers, taking in the vision she presented—covered in sweat, hair plastered to her face, mouth parted as soft cries broke for freedom, her tits trembling with her breaths and all of her looking little more than wrecked.

It was enough to make a regular bloke feel like bloody royalty.

And he wasn’t through with her yet.

She was still trembling when he pulled his fingers free and started shaking harder as he rose onto all fours and prowled up the length of her body. In the past, she might have begged off, claimed she couldn’t do it again, but perhaps she was feeling it too, because the second he kissed her, she wrapped her legs around his waist and tugged forward so his cock was again dancing a line up her folds.

“Spike,” she whispered against his lips, all hot and melty, his Slayer. “Make me.”

He grinned and danced his mouth over hers. “Say it first.”

“Say what?”

“You know bloody well what.”

Then Buffy was grinning too, because she did know what. And even though it was shining in her eyes, in that saucy smirk, she didn’t deny him. “I love you.”

Spike growled and slammed his cock inside of her, and she was still quivering from her last orgasm, gripping and pulling him deeper, so deep he reckoned he could get lost, but no one in their right sodding mind would begrudge him for it. Not if they could feel this.

Which they couldn’t—no one else could. Buffy was his. All his, and he was hers, and they were each other’s, and it was glorious.

“Oh god.” She rocked her head back, arching up into him, curling a leg around his waist. “So deep.”

He groaned against her lips as her cunt spasmed around him. "Buffy..."

"Do it. Fast. Hard. Do it."

There would be time, he told himself. They had decided that. An after when all was said and done, when he could spread her out and go as slow as he fancied, savor her the way she was meant to be savored. But the apocalypse was just hours off now so they were racing the clock. And with the way her pussy was strangling his cock, there was a brilliant chance he wouldn't last much longer than he had the first time. Spike braced his hands on either side of her head, swirled his hips, and gave her exactly what she'd asked for, keeping his gaze locked on her face, on her eyes, how she looked at him now. How all of this was his.

And sometime over the course of the next few minutes, as he pounded and she gasped and he nipped and she scratched and he growled and she bit, the hinges keeping the bloody bed together gave a final wail and died, sending the mattress careening wildly to one side. Buffy swore loudly, then moaned even louder, her cunt seizing and those miracle muscles of hers driving him out of his mind. And Spike roared and grasped her, buried his face in her throat as he emptied himself into her, and wondered, not for the first time, what sort of fool he was to think the world would reward him with a treasure like the one in his arms. The Slayer who, despite everything, loved him anyway.

But she was right. He couldn't go into tonight thinking it was the end. Not when he had so much to live for. Not when he had her.

Tonight would not be the end.



"WE COULD JUST NOT SHOW UP," Buffy had said, drawing artless patterns across his chest. The sun had been due to set any second, which meant he'd, at least, need to get dressed and head back to the real world. The one that might not be here in the morning.

"No?" Spike had replied before nuzzling her hair. She smelled so sweet. Sweat, sex, and Slayer, his three favorite scents. "What are your plans, then?"

“Well, between Angel and his gang and the slayers and the witches and, well, everyone...who would really miss us?” She’d lifted herself onto her elbow, given him the sort of look that had him believing she might actually mean it. “We could just slip off. You and me. It’s not like we haven’t earned it.”

Spike had smiled and rubbed her back, and Buffy had deflated, poking out her lower lip in the way that drove him wild. Then she’d leaned over, kissed him, and he’d rolled them over into a tangle of limbs that eventually wound up on the floor, care of the broken bed.

It had been the best bloody afternoon of his life.

And now he was here. In his flat, possibly for the last time, watching as the last of his makeshift colleagues filtered into the night air.

“What do you think all this means for that Shanshu bugaboo?” Spike asked, approaching Angel. “If we make it through this, does one of us get to be a real boy?”

“Who are you kidding?” Angel replied, not looking at him. “We’re not gonna make it through.”

It was at once stunningly apparent where his defeatist attitude had come from. Bloody hell, he’d been hanging around Angel too long.

“Well, long as it’s not you,” Spike said, and made for the door. He had a sprog to save, a demonic foster family to leave in pieces, and a phone call to make on his way to do his heroics. Buffy was waiting for news on where to direct her army and he wasn’t one to leave a lady waiting.

“Spike.”

He paused, didn’t bother turning around.

“How many does she have?”

A beat. Then another. And now he did turn, eyebrows arched. For half a second, he thought about playing dumb, but then he met Angel’s gaze and wagered there was not much point in it. The nose never lied. Hell, in truth, Spike was somewhat shocked that it had taken the enormous oaf this long to ask why he was covered in Buffy.

“Enough,” he replied. “Bloody army of slayers, witches, and warlocks, oh my. Even bloody Harris, though he’s gonna be mannin’ the

intake at the hospital along with Andrew and the Nibblet. Sorry. Forgot to hit the shower before we said our goodbyes.”

Angel didn’t so much as flinch. “How long?”

“How’s that?”

“How long have you and Buffy been playing your own game?”

“You mean you don’t know?” Spike studied him for a long moment. “Nearly since the start. Since I got my body back.”

“She loves you.”

It wasn’t a question. “Yeah. And I love her, and if we make it through, we’re gonna spend our days shagging and fighting and shagging some more, and it has sod all to do with you.”

“I know.” Angel took a step forward, then another. “I signed away my right to the Shanshu today. It was part of the deal. They needed certainty.” He broke then, pinched his nose and heaved out a sigh. “To answer your question... If it happens, it’ll be you. It’ll never be me.”

Spike stared at Angel, and Angel stared back, and for as many times as Spike had fantasized about this moment—not *this* moment specifically, but one close enough, one where he seized victory over his wanker of a grandsire—he found it oddly bittersweet. And that annoyed the hell out of him. He thought about telling him that the prophecy had never been his to begin with, that his magnanimous sacrifice meant nothing because he’d already given it up once, steal some of the righteousness from the wounded martyr, but he didn’t. Not just because they were short on time, but because it didn’t seem to matter anymore. Should they walk away from all of this, Spike would get the girl and possibly the big reward. That was victory enough.

“Right then,” he said, for wanting of something to say. Anything.

A ghost of a smile flickered across Angel’s face. “You were a better man than I was, anyway.”

“Save your bloody deathbed confessional for someone else, mate,” Spike replied dryly. “The Slayer took me to task for bein’ sure tonight’s the end, and she was right. Got me somethin’ to live for, don’t I? Means I aim to make sure I’m around to enjoy it. We’ve faced higher odds before.”

“I don’t know that we have, but I’ll try to keep that in mind.” Angel



took a step forward, shaking his head. "We better go. World's not gonna save itself."

"Would be a right treat if it did. Give the rest of us a sodding break."

Angel snickered his appreciation, then paused. "Wait... If you and Buffy have been working your own angle for months, then how does the Immortal figure into this?"

Spike somehow bit back a titter, shook his head, and headed out the door, not pausing this time. "Tell you what, Gramps," he called over his shoulder. "You wanna know? Gotta live to tomorrow. We'll tell you the whole story."

He didn't slow his steps, but he didn't need to in order to hear Angel's muttered curse.

That curse told him in no uncertain terms that Angel would, in fact, make it to tomorrow. Defeatist attitude or not, he was curious now, and wouldn't rest until he'd heard the entirety of how Spike had spent these last few months romancing the Slayer from a distance.

After all, he was nothing if not a glutton for punishment.

## II

THE IMMORTAL TOOK DOWN THE BLOODY DRAGON.

Of bloody course he did.

The great Italian wanker had flown through the air like he had wings, his hair billowing mightily and his muscles thrown into sharp relief by a timely crack of lightning. And Spike had watched, torn between horror and amusement, as the bane of his existence sliced through the dragon's neck with one elegant swipe of a sword he had seemingly pulled from nowhere.

*There* was a way to announce that the reinforcements had arrived. The Immortal could do nothing without showing off.

Now, nearly twelve hours later, stuck in a sodding hospital bed because no one would accept that he was fine, Spike allowed himself to relive that moment for grins. Specifically, the look on Angel's face when he'd realized who had beaten him to the punch.

"Let's go to work," he'd said, ready to play the dashing hero. Only to stop dead and watch with mounting horror as perhaps his other least-favorite bloke on the planet stole the one kill that might have solidified his place in history books as being something other than a world-class wanker.

Honestly, from what he'd seen of Angel the few times he'd swung

by to run his trap, Spike would swear that his grandsire was more sore on how the dragon had been felled than he was over the fact that he'd walked away from the fight a little less whole than he had gone into it. Nothing had worked out for him. Lost the girl, lost the prophecy, lost the dragon, lost an arm—but his son had made it to the other side and was currently chatting up one of the slayers who had saved him from meeting the business end of a disembowelment, and he had his girl Nina somewhere, waiting to hear from him.

Never would Spike have thought it possible to feel sorry for the miserable sod, but he did.

Didn't mean he was going to keep his yap shut, though.

"Lookin' bit lopsided there, mate," Spike said, pushing up in his hospital bed. Buffy was sitting in a chair beside him—well, slouched was more the proper word—her hand curled in his. He didn't mean to wake her, but the move jarred her from sleep. She sat up straighter, wiped away the little line of drool that had escaped her cracked lips with her free hand, and blinked tired eyes at her towering ex.

Angel didn't crack a smile. "How are you doing?"

"Askin' if I'm used to it yet?" Spike glanced down at his hospital-gown-covered chest. He honestly didn't know what the fuss was about—why Buffy had insisted when there were survivors in actual need of medical care. He'd never heard of anyone requiring looking after because they spontaneously grew a heartbeat, but one look at his girl had stayed his tongue. "Feel the cold now. Different than it was before. And if the swill they call food here is what I have to look forward to out there—"

"Oh good god, shut up," Buffy said, tugging her hand free from his and leaning forward to brace her elbows on her knees. "I told you, we'll get you some actual food as soon as you're discharged."

"Which will be when, exactly? Doc has given me a clear bill. Right as bloody rain, aren't I?"

Buffy rolled her head back, her neck creaking a bit. She looked as battle-worn as she had when she'd stumbled toward him in the aftermath—hair a mess, face covered in dirt, a nasty bruise forming under her left eye and a deep cut running down the length of her right arm.

It was the cut that had done it—clued him in. Not the dulled

sounds, or that he couldn't smell her, or even the rhythmic thumping inside his chest. No, it had been the cut—the blood—and how the sight had horrified him rather than stoked his hunger. Even with a soul, the demon's urge to steal a taste had always overpowered the man's sensibilities. And that urge hadn't been there.

He'd stopped short, slapped a hand to his chest, and gasped her name. And when she'd seen him, seen his face, she'd known too.

And she'd burst out laughing and launched herself into his arms with enough force she'd nearly knocked him off his feet. Then his face had been between her hands and she'd been kissing him and laughing and crying and telling him she loved him and that she'd known it—known that that destiny was his. That he deserved it. After getting her fill of listening to the sound of his beating heart, her head against his chest, Buffy had promptly marched him to the field medic the witches had on hand. There had been some poking and prodding, but most everyone agreed that he was fine, only Buffy wanted to be doubly sure, so she'd insisted he check in at the nearest hospital where the more severely wounded had been shepherded. Thankfully one of the many LA establishments that catered to the otherworldly, staving off the need for elaborate cover stories.

Buffy had consented to get herself patched up, though she'd demanded that she remain in the room with him. And though she made the rounds every few hours to see how the people with actual wounds were faring, she'd mostly stayed curled up in the seat beside him, dozing here and there and making sure he had everything he needed.

The first time he'd realized he had a full bladder had been a right trip. Spike had almost been convinced Buffy would insist on following him into the loo and had been prepared to scream for an orderly or a nurse to get the batty woman carted away by force. Not that he wasn't just as marveled by his new host of bodily functions, including an appetite for physical food that had to do with satiating actual hunger, but getting used to breathing for need and his somewhat dulled senses was overwhelming enough without being constantly worried over.

Of course, there was the flip-side. The part of him that loved how Buffy refused to leave him to himself.

"I, ah, thought you might want to know that we found Gunn," Angel said. "He... Well, you saw him."

Spike sobered and gave a nod. From the second the reinforcements had arrived, everything in that alley had descended into utter chaos. He wasn't sure he could retrace his own steps if he tried. Hell, he still didn't know entirely what had happened. A load of spells had hurdled through the air alongside the cries of Buffy's slayer army, somehow dwarfing the roar of the oncoming horde. The dragon had crashed to the ground and Spike had been swinging in every which direction, fangs out and ready to tear. Somehow, in the thick of everything, Buffy had found him and told him what the witches intended to do, which had sounded mighty barmy at the time—not to mention it put their plans to wake up together on indefinite hold—but he'd understood. Hadn't hesitated. It was that or the world, and the world was more important.

The witches were going to send all the demons in the alley to Hell—or at least a hell dimension. Every single one of them. One dimensional rip and the agents of the apocalypse would be stuffed back where they belonged.

"This is the important part," she'd said, panting. "You and Angel—get out of the alley before that happens."

Spike had shaken his head. "Gonna have a fair time convincing Angel of that."

"I know. You do it anyway." She'd kissed him, tasting of tears and fear and hope. "You owe me an after. Give it to me."

Then she'd been gone, and it had been on him. Not just to grab Angel, but to track down old Blue, too. No matter what a nuisance she'd been since taking over Fred's body, no matter that she'd done him in—according to Angel—when her powers had been on the fritz, Spike felt he owed it to her. So he'd searched through the crowd, unsure of how much time he had before everything in the alley went up but knowing he couldn't count on a lot.

He'd found Angel and Illyria more or less back-to-back, both covered in blood, dirt, and slime. His attempts to drag Angel off the battlefield had gone about as well as he'd expected, even after he'd indicated there was a reason—not fool enough to start shouting it at the

surrounding hordes. Bloody well begged him to trust Buffy, but the giant ponce had shaken him off, and Illyria, too, refused to retreat like a coward, still too full of rage and pride to turn her back on the fight.

But then she'd met Spike's gaze and seemed to see something there.

"This world is not for us," she'd said before slamming her fist against Angel's noggin. The big brute had crumbled to the ground, and Spike had swooped in to hoist Angel's hulking mass over his shoulders.

"Ensure he survives," Illyria had intoned, her expression ever-stoic. "I have no desire to feel more of this grieving pain."

Then she'd turned her back on him to face the wall of monsters, released a battle cry that seemed to shake the world itself, and thrown herself back into the fight.

There hadn't been time to suss out the particulars—wonder how Buffy could be sure this would work at all, never mind that the breach the witches intended to open would somehow be contained. And there had been no reason to think every sodding alley between here and the crater that had been the Hellmouth wasn't full of more of the same. Could be like trying to throw a single bucket of water on a burning house and hope it would do the job. But Spike had always put his full confidence in the Slayer and he hadn't been about to waver now, if these were his last seconds, he would die as he'd lived. Her man. Somehow, even with Angel slung over his shoulders, Spike had managed to fight his way to the edge of the alley, and bloody well shoved his hulking grandsire through the first pane of glass he'd come across. He hadn't been alone—demons on his tail, swiping at him and Angel and Spike wagered that was where the arm had been lost. But by then, a strange glow had started wafting up from the pavement and the air had practically crackled with the sort of energy that spoke of great power. Spike, standing over Angel, shoving back and beheading anyone who attempted to get too close, had realized he had a problem. Too many of these demons had been gunning for him and Angel alone, considered the other slayers and witches little more than distractions.

So when the alley had lit up, he'd bounded toward it, hoping like mad that they would follow the bloke in motion, not the one knocked off his arse. And either he'd been lucky or they'd been thick because it had worked. Spike had thrown himself into oblivion with a small army

on his heels—the world had gone white and his insides had boiled, and he'd been convinced that was the end. And he'd been sorry. So fucking sorry for breaking his word to Buffy, for not making it, for what she'd feel when she realized—

Then he'd hit the pavement, hard and with rasping breaths knocking their way to freedom out of his chest. He'd stayed there for a second, soaked to the bone in the torrents pouring down from above and ears ringing with all the things he *hadn't* heard. Snarls and screams and a thousand other things—all the nightmares he'd had of Hell come to life. But eventually, he'd had to move—his legs had started shaking too hard to remain crouched, and Spike was not one to take what was coming with his head hanging down.

No, he'd face whatever was next the way he'd faced everything else.

But when he'd opened his eyes, the alley had been empty. His stretch of it, at least. In the distance, he'd heard shouts and cries and someone screaming his and Angel's names, but it hadn't clicked entirely what had happened. Not until he'd seen Buffy. Buffy with her blood-soaked skin and the absence of the tingle where his fangs ought to be, how the smells and sounds around him had dulled, and the extraordinary sensation in his chest.

"What does it feel like?" Angel asked now, jostling Spike back to the present. "Being human?"

"Mite strange, gotta say," Spike replied, rubbing his chest. Not something he'd known to miss, his heartbeat, but having it back would take some getting used to. He glanced at Buffy, caught the concern in her eyes—the worry—and gave her a small smile. "I'll manage just fine."

"Yeah, because if you do anything stupid like get yourself vamped again, I will personally kick your ass, and not in the way you like." She glanced at Angel, but quickly looked away, sucking in her cheeks. "If super strength maketh the man, there are other ways we can go about it."

If Spike hadn't turned his attention to Angel, he might have missed his grandsire's flinch. And again the temptation was there, as it had been back at his flat, to rub his nose in what he knew. The improbable miracle the miserable wanker had given up. But this

wasn't his fight to have—if Buffy wanted to row with Angel about the decision he'd made, she'd do it without any prompting from him. The Slayer could be mighty passive aggressive when she had a mind to be and ruthlessly direct all other times—what she wasn't was reticent.

And it didn't seem necessary, gloating that he'd gotten the prize. Not now, at least. Maybe when there was a bit more distance between them and the apocalypse.

So instead, Spike nodded at Buffy with a half-grin. "You reckon so? Got any more juice in that scythe of yours to power-up yours truly?"

Buffy glanced to the scythe, which was propped against the wall by her chair. "Don't know about slayer power, but I imagine Willow can... Well, I was gonna say *work her magic* but that was a bit too puntastic, even for me."

Spike tilted his head, bit back a gasp when he literally felt his heart skip—bloody unusual sensation, that—then let his half-grin become a full one. "Get a heartbeat, get the girl, *and* get to keep fightin' her? Not doin' much to convince me I didn't dust in that alley, pet."

"Don't get your hopes up. It's a big ole maybe." Though Buffy was grinning now too. "I've seen her do it—well, to herself. Power herself up so she could take on a slayer with results that were hard to walk off the next day."

"Yeah? She and Kennedy like havin' goes at each other?"

At that, Buffy's grin wilted. "Kennedy—ahh. She didn't make it. At least we haven't found her yet, and at last check, the girls are still sweeping the area for any demons that didn't get sucked up. One of the witches did a spell to find any wounded and Kennedy wasn't among them." She swallowed and blinked. "Will's taking it...not great."

Spike sat up fast enough that his head protested—he wasn't used to it doing that unless he was well and pissed—and made to grab Buffy's hand. "She's not—"

"Believe me, if we were dealing with Dark Willow, we'd know." Buffy squeezed his hand. "This isn't a love-of-my-life-was-gunned-down thing, either. Kennedy and Willow were on a break and didn't leave things on good terms. *About* Tara, actually. Willow decided she wasn't done grieving and Kennedy didn't take that well. Willow thinks



it might be her fault, that Kennedy was distracted because it was one of the first times they'd seen each other since the split."

Ah, bugger. He settled back against the hospital bed, taking Buffy's hand with him. "Sorry to hear that," he said, lacking anything else.

Angel cleared his throat as though to remind them that he was still in the room. "So," he said when he had everyone's attention again. "You were going to tell me about Italy."

Spike looked up again, brow furrowed, then snickered. "Nothin' to say about Italy," he replied. "Immortal was there, Buffy wasn't. The girl he's with now was her stand-in. Which you woulda bloody known if you'd used that nose of yours. The Slayer has been in London for weeks now."

When Angel frowned and shifted his attention to Buffy, she gave a solemn nod. "What he said," she agreed. "One of the new slayers fell in love with the Immortal and there was a whole big thing with the Gorans and saving face and, long story short, it was better PR for me to be involved with him than Bianca. So she got a makeover and became Buffy Summers for anyone in the area who wasn't my sister or Andrew."

The scowl deepened. Angel turned back to Spike. "And you knew this the whole time?"

"Course I did. Was doin' everything I could to keep you from catching wise, wasn't I?"

"You could have told me."

"Right. Because we've been so bloody open about everything around here," Spike retorted. "Never mind the lot of us almost dusted you this mornin' because we'd all thought you'd lost your noggin."

Angel looked down and scuffed his shoe against the floor. "And... Buffy? You're cookies now? Didn't take you that long to bake."

Spike groaned, throwing his head against the less-than-comfortable pillow. "This bloody metaphor..."

Buffy snickered but squeezed his hand. "I decided that the people I love should be a part of who I am. So no, I'm not cookies...but I'm not baking solo, either." A pause. "And even if that weren't true, I'm not sure why you would expect to be a part of it. All the major calls in our relationship were yours to make, not mine."

Spike peeked an eye open in time to catch Angel's face falling.

"Buff—"

"I'm not going to have a fight about this," she said, sounding exhausted and resigned. "I'm not... I don't even think I'm mad anymore. I was. But we're not who we were—and honestly, Angel, I am pretty sure you're not asking this because you want to be with me. If that were the case, you'd have found a way. Maybe like when *you* turned human."

There was no condemnation in her voice, but it also brooked no argument. And for a moment, no one moved or spoke. Buffy just stared at her ex and he stared back and had Spike not known him as well as he did, he might have thought him at a loss for words.

"The Oracles told me that being with you would get you killed," he said at last. "It was the hardest thing I've ever done."

"Maybe," Buffy replied. "But you also didn't try. And, in case you didn't notice, I kinda died anyway."

"I didn't—"

"Look, Angel, when I said I don't want to fight about this, I meant it. There's no point in going over it now. It's been almost six years and... The way things went? Sitting here, right now, I can't say I'm not glad." She blew out a breath. "But maybe with your new girlfriend—what's her name?"

A burst of surprise flashed across Angel's face, characteristically understated, but there nonetheless.

Good to see him caught off guard.

"Uh, Nina," he said, and cleared his throat. "Her name is... You told her about Nina?"

Spike fought off a smirk. "Didn't know it was a secret, mate."

"Well, did you tell her about you and Harmony?"

And then Spike got his first taste of just how much stronger a slayer was than an average human for how tightly she squeezed his hand. The shock of pain was both intense and life-affirming, and brilliant because of it. "Bloody hell, woman. You tryin' to give the docs a legitimate reason to keep me here?"

Buffy squeaked and dropped his hand almost at once, then picked it back up again and brushed a kiss across his bruised knuckles. "Sor-

ry,” she said with a wince. “And...wow, am I ever going to make Willow give you a strength boost.”

“Sayin’ you don’t fancy the new breakability?”

“Saying I don’t want to leave anything to chance. I love you and I want to not worry about making with the ouchies.”

Spike smiled at her and brought her hand to his lips. “Best pain I’ve ever been in.”

“You are such a sap.” But she was grinning again. That was until she turned to Angel. Her expression went stony in a flash. “And yes, thank you for trying to drop a bomb, but Spike told me all about that. We’ve already had that argument.”

Angel had the good sense to look a mite chagrined, though not as much as he ought. Though Spike couldn’t say he blamed the wanker. If he’d been in Angel’s shoes on this side of the apocalypse—short one arm, down one prophecy, and minus all those perks that had come with his cushy, albeit morally ambiguous job—he’d be a bit sore, too. Throw Buffy in the mix and it was miraculous the big oaf wasn’t crying his sodding eyes out.

“I didn’t mean—” he began.

“Don’t,” Buffy said shortly, rising to her feet now. “Angel... I love you. I do. And I know you love me, too. But it’s not *that* kind of love. If we had a time, it’s gone. Or... No, it’s not gone. It just belongs to versions of us that aren’t who we are anymore.” She paused as if waiting for him to argue, but he seemed to know it’d be a waste. “I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know, either.”

Angel didn’t move, didn’t blink. “No, you’re not,” he agreed. Then he sighed and dropped his shoulders. “I guess I just wasn’t ready for *everything* to be over so soon.” A beat. “Even the things I’d already said goodbye to.”

“Not everything is over.”

“No, not for you. But for me? Angel Investigations is... It was me, Cordy, Wes, Gunn, and Fred. They’re all gone. The company is gone. Lorne...” He rubbed his chin, cast his gaze to the floor. “I didn’t expect to live through the night—not even after I found out you were coming in with the cavalry.”

Buffy arched an eyebrow and turned to Spike. “He knew?”

"The fact that Spike showed up reeking of you and sex pretty much gave it away," Angel said before Spike could reply. "The rest I put together on my own."

A slight touch of pink hit the Slayer's cheeks. "Ah."

"Except for what that Italy trip was really about, apparently. Or why the Immortal was here tonight at all."

"To kill the dragon," Spike supplied, just to see Angel's eyes darken. He wasn't disappointed and grinned in spite of himself. "Just couldn't stand the thought of you gettin' the glory for anything."

Buffy heaved a long sigh. "He was repaying the favor Spike did for him and Bianca while you two were gallivanting about Rome."

"Christ, love, gotta say it like that? Hate to think that I did anything for that sod."

"I'd at least think you'd have a *little* family loyalty," Angel muttered.

"Coulda told the Slayer you were mad as a bag of ferrets and had the pleasure of watching her stake you myself," Spike retorted. "Instead, told her that you were aimin' to take down the major players, fancy yourself the big hero. Consider that a token of family loyalty."

"All right," Buffy said, whirling to face Spike straight-on. "If you're well enough to be obnoxious, you're well enough to not spend the night here."

He favored her with a grin, sitting straight up. "Been tellin' you that from the start. As have any number of docs you've wrestled into submission on my behalf. Be a love and hand me my trousers?"

"You mean the blood-covered jeans that had to be cut off your body? Do you see those lying around?" She arched an eyebrow, holding his gaze for a moment before her expression softened. "I had Andrew run by your apartment and pack up a few essentials. Let me go see if I can wrestle them free."

"You let that little git into my flat? How'd you even know where I—"

Buffy held up a hand and gave him a narrowed look. "How do you think?"

"Bloody frightening, you are."

"Hey, I'm the reason you're not going to walk out of here naked."

She leaned over and dropped a soft kiss on his lips. "Play nice until I get back."

He winked. "Not likely."

Angel pretended to be fascinated with the floor until Buffy had made her way around him and into the hall, then lifted his gaze to Spike, his expression blank again. He opened his mouth, closed it, opened it once more, before sighing and twisting to study the array of medical equipment. When enough time went by and the wanker did little more than stare at the heart monitor, Spike heaved a sigh and kicked his legs over the side of the bed.

"Got somethin' to say, Gramps, this is your chance."

"Nothing to say," Angel replied, not looking at him. "Just... I expected to be dead."

"Well, you're not. So stop whingeing about it, all right?" Spike braced his fists against the mattress, drew in a deep breath, and marveled at how different the sensation was. How it felt to need the oxygen he pulled into his lungs, feel the way it filled him, kept his body in motion, kept his parts working. An amazing thing, humanity. Feeling the cold against his skin and watching that skin react. Even the tactile was different—not in large ways, but ways enough. Buffy's lips on his were still warm but not blistering hot. She tasted different too—a good different. There were so many things he was going to get to experience for the first time or relearn entirely. A whole world of things at his feet, bloody terrifying as the notion was, but there all the same.

And how easily it could have gone the other way—how, a few months ago, he would have sworn he'd be standing in Angel's oversized shoes. Watching from the sidelines as Buffy and Angel made googly eyes at each other, casually exchanged affections and made plans for a future of which he would have no part. Toss in that everyone Angel had relied on in his miserable existence was dead, and pity that he didn't want to feel curled his insides.

"Bet she can get you set up somewhere," he heard himself say. "If you're lookin' to start over."

"What?"

"Buffy," Spike replied, looking over his shoulder now. "Big ole

bruiser of a heart, that one, as you know. And loads of itty bitty slayers who need help, yeah?”

“I don’t need charity, Spike.”

“No, you don’t. Just like reminding you that you’re not as alone as you think you are.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“What? The kid made it out, didn’t he?”

Angel stiffened, then turned and looked at him headlong. “What kid?”

“Your kid, you big plonker. You really think I didn’t piece that together?” Spike rose to his feet, snickering. “Knew it from the scent straight off but when you didn’t mention it, figured it might be somethin’ you were keepin’ mum on for a reason, and askin’ after it has a way of puttin’ people on the alert. After Percy got his memories back, Blue filled in the blanks and you know the sort of filter she has. And even if I hadn’t had it figured by then, I would have after he showed up to help us tonight and immediately took to chattin’ up the slayers who saved his arse.”

There was nothing for a moment. “You think she’s still alive?”

“Who?”

“Illyria. You described her in the present tense.”

Spike rolled his eyes and waved. “Wager she’s makin’ herself a new kingdom, wherever the lot of them landed.”

Angel nodded. “Yeah, well... Maybe there’s a place to start. See if we can get her back.”

“The bird who’d just as soon watch the lot of us light up from the inside?”

“She’s dealing with something that she’s never had to deal with before—her entire worldview changed on a dime and she had no choice in the matter. Sound familiar?”

Yeah, it did. A bit too familiar, bugger it. “Well, you find a way to mojo her back that doesn’t bring the apocalypse rainin’ down on LA, you give us a ring.” Spike glanced to the window behind Angel, in time to see Buffy turn down the hallway, a duffle bag slung over her shoulder. “You know we’re always up for a good brawl.”

“Being human’s not going to be easy.”

"No, reckon not. Even if Willow does find a way to power me up." Spike kept his gaze on the Slayer. "Nothin' worth having comes easy, though. Love me a challenge." He looked back to his grandsire now, this time with a smirk. "And knowin' I'm gonna do what you couldn't helps too."

If he hadn't been watching, he would have missed the slight twitch to Angel's lips. "You take care of her."

"Wanker. She doesn't need someone to take care of her. She needs someone who knows when to stand with her and knows when to get the hell outta her way. And throw her a decent fight when she's wrong off her arse."

Buffy appeared in the doorway then, met his eyes, and flashed him the smile he'd traveled to the underworld and back again to get. The same he still wasn't sure he'd earned but would fight to earn every day for the rest of his days.

"You're missing the fun. Xander lost his glass eye and told Andrew he'd give him fifty bucks if he found it before one of the girls did." Buffy made her way to him and tossed the duffle bag onto the bed. "As you might imagine, hilarity ensued."

Spike snickered. "Harris has a glass eye?"

"Not anymore. This is the third one he's lost. Odds are good we're going back to eye-patches. Though, personally, I think it's in his pocket. It wouldn't be the first time." Buffy nodded to the duffle. "Grabbed a doctor to get the check-out stuff started. Wanna get dressed so we can get the hell outta here?"

"Woman—"

"Shut up, I have a right to be worried." She smacked his shoulder, then shifted her attention to Angel. "You gonna be okay?"

Spike tore off the hospital gown, twisted slightly so he could gauge his grandsire's reaction. Reckoned it'd be a minute before *okay* was anywhere on Angel's radar, and that was something Buffy had to know too. No one was just *okay* after an apocalypse. Which was right fitting, because apocalypse meant the end of things as they were now—also could mean the birth of something new. Goodbye to the world as it had been understood; time to build whatever came next.

The world they were leaving to explore wasn't the same one they

had fought to save. In that world, Spike had been a vampire, beaten down by fortune and fate, looking for meaning in his existence, not sure why he hadn't kicked it any of the times he ought to have. Saddled with the knowledge that his story wasn't his own—he was a pawn to be used to advance other, worthier people, because creatures like him only got to look at the prize, not touch it. Now he was a man, breathing air he shouldn't, on the arm of the one woman in the world who had more right to hate him than anyone else, and staring down the very real possibility of being happy for the first time in his existence.

He didn't know that world, the one where he got everything, but hell if he wasn't eager to explore it.

"I'll be fine," Angel said with a nod, then met Spike's eyes. "Don't be an idiot with it like I was."

He didn't elaborate; he didn't need to.

"Trust me, mate. This isn't the sorta thing a man just throws away."

While he hadn't intended the words to hurt, he knew they did anyway. And as long as he lived—whether to ripe old age now or until the next time the world tried to end—he'd never understand how Angel hadn't come to the same conclusion when it had been his turn. He'd also never stop being grateful that the man was such a thick git.

"Okay," Buffy said once Spike had finished lacing up his boots. She held her hand out to him, a soft, trembling smile on her face. "It's time."

Spike draped his duster over his arm and laced his fingers through hers. "Time for what, sweets?"

"To go walk in the sun."



A LIFETIME AGO, OR SO IT SEEMED, SPIKE HAD SLID A RING ONTO HIS finger then bounded gleefully into the sunlight. More than a century had passed since he'd felt it warming his skin, caressing his face, since he'd stood beneath it without hesitation or fear. Vampire instincts might have abandoned him along with his fangs, but a hundred plus years of conditioning had him flinching and itching to pull his duster over his head the second Buffy led him into the light.

But once he settled, once it became clear that the past few hours hadn't been a dream or an illusion, Spike allowed his arms to drop and turned his face to the sky.

He hadn't savored it before, thick git that he'd been. Hadn't known he ought to—hadn't seen what any ninny could have seen. That Buffy would kick his arse, as she always had, and the ring would be shipped off to someone worthy of wearing it. Or, in Angel's case, someone who would smash the bloody thing so no one could have any fun.

Angel smashing the ring was rather fitting, he had to admit. The bloke was the architect of misery—the only thing the soul had changed insofar as that was concerned was whose misery he focused on.

This time, though, as Spike turned his face toward the sunlight, he did savor it. He couldn't do anything else.

“Spike.”

“Mmm?”

Buffy squeezed his hand, pulling his attention from the sky to her. Standing beside him, golden hair glistening, skin flushed, and looking at him with a soft, tender smile and eyes that sparkled from the rays above. And it hit him again—harder than it had in the alley, harder than it had when the nurse had taken his vitals and felt his pulse. Hard enough that he knew part of him, at least, hadn’t really believed until now.

His throat tightened and his sinuses stung, and he worried he might just dissolve on the spot like a big ninny. The world was still spinning but it had been made new again. They had made it to the other side.

“Wanna drop our stuff off in our room?” She held up the scythe she had in her other hand. “Might be weird to be seen carting this around, at least.”

He nodded numbly, worked his throat. “Then what?”

Buffy cupped his cheek and swiped her thumb at something—apparently he hadn’t caught himself in time and a couple of tears had escaped. “Then I thought we could go for a walk.”

“A walk?”

“Isn’t that what you said you wanted to do, first chance you got? And that you wanted me there?”

Had he? All at once, the hours of conversations they’d had over the last year seemed eons in the past. Spike searched her face, mesmerized by both the love in her eyes and how his heart seemed to thump faster the longer he looked at her. He thought of all those times he’d felt his chest lurch when she was around, like the dead organ inside was vying for life in the only way it could. Now it screamed at him. All of his body seemed to scream.

Going on a walk and enjoying the sun on his face might be the best way to appreciate just how real this new world actually was.

So he nodded. Not much else for it.

With Wolfram and Hart licking its wounds, Buffy explained, there was no need for the cover story that had smuggled an army of slayers, a coven of witches, and a few other allies into the city under their nose.

As such, the girls who hadn't been assigned to patrol the area around the alley where the big fight had gone down had been volunteered to help cart the belongings of those in the hospital from the motels to fancier LA suites. The room Buffy had secured for them was a model of luxurious living, complete with a Jacuzzi tub, a spacious shower, and a fully stocked minibar.

Spike scooped up one of the bottles before Buffy could berate him about the cost, held it up to the light, and squinted at the label. Took a minute to suss out why the letters were blurry, and when he started chuckling, Buffy was at his side, peering at the bottle and up at his face with such sweet confusion that he couldn't help but laugh harder.

"Obviously I don't drink enough hard liquor to get the joke," she said.

"Just occurred to me I'm gonna need glasses."

"Glasses?"

He nodded, twisted the cap off the bottle and tossed back its contents, and was somewhat startled when he felt the beginnings of the warm, fuzzy feeling that usually came courtesy of being good and sloshed. Here just a couple of weeks back, he and Angel had drained the contents of a minibar without even the benefit of a buzz.

It also tasted different—better, worse, harder, and fierier than before. So many things he'd get to rediscover.

"I don't think getting drunk is going to help your eyesight," Buffy said, this time with a healthy amount of worry in her tone. "Are you okay?"

That was a loaded question. He felt like he could walk on air but also more fragile than ever before. The strength that had given him a false sense of invulnerability was gone, and it turned out, mortality was somewhat terrifying.

"Overwhelmed, I think," Spike said, and was pleased to find that his constitution wasn't so weak that his words were slurred from one measly mini-bottle. His legs didn't wobble when he stepped away, either. "Just...lot to take in. Never actually thought I'd... Well..."

"You're not regretting it, are you?"

Overwhelmed or not, Spike couldn't possibly miss the worry in her voice. He whirled to face her, took her by the shoulders, and shook his

head. "Not for a second, love. Means I get everything, right? Get to grow old with you now, if that's what you want."

"Of course it's what I want, dummy." She threw herself into his arms and didn't even pretend not to grip him with her slayer strength, and he loved her for it. Loved the thrill of pain that came with it as well, how he felt just how powerful she was in a simple hug.

"But I'm all kinds of nervous, too," she whispered into his neck. "The last time this happened, it didn't last. Being with me wasn't enough."

Sod it all, he was a wanker. Spike shook his head and clutched her tighter, then buried his face in her hair and inhaled. She smelled of smoke and sweat, dirt, and blood, and even though he didn't have his vamp senses, he could tell that well enough. The fighting had ended hours ago but not for her—she'd remained ready to launch herself into battle, all for him.

"Being with you isn't just enough," he said hoarsely. "It's everything. Your believing me is...everything, Buffy."

"But I want you to want this for you too." She pulled back and wiped at her eyes, smearing dust and ash across her beautiful face. "Because it's big. More than big—it's huge. It's not just me believing in you, Spike, it's the universe. And I know you liked being a vampire. I might not have the best memory, but that's one thing that I remember you telling me. How much better it was, being a vampire. How—"

"Slayer, it mighta been a minute, but I said all that before the soul. When the thought that you might want a creature like me was bloody impossible." Spike shook his head, laughing a little. "Yeah, I loved bein' a vampire then. Love that it brought me to you. Dunno how I feel about bein' human just yet beyond theory—still gettin' used to it. How my skin feels. That it'd just take a couple more of those little bottles to get me pissed outta my mind. Gonna take a bit to adjust is all."

"But you will adjust. You won't...give it up?"

Spike arched an eyebrow. "Seems I remember us havin' this talk already. Told you I wouldn't be daft enough to toss it away."

"Yeah, but...there's a difference between talking about something and having it. When you said that, you didn't think you'd get the Shanshu."

That was perfectly true. The times he and Buffy had discussed the prophecy, it had all been speculation. A dazzling *what-if* that had seemed about as likely as Harris becoming a Rhodes Scholar. And Spike was nothing if not familiar with the dramatic difference between wanting something and getting it. The first time around with Buffy had been a study in that—having her so close but not having her at all.

Now, having been human for going on twelve hours, he understood that it would not be the catch-all solution. But he also knew it was something he wouldn't give up. Might be hard to manage, to adjust, but he'd never shied from a challenge. Especially one where he had the opportunity to show up Angel.

Still, he remembered he'd asked Buffy something too, during that talk. His wasn't the only answer that might have changed.

"Would it matter if I did?" he asked at last.

Buffy shook her head at once, seeming to have expected this. "If you're asking if I'd love you any less, the answer is a resounding no. You're you, no matter what. It's just..." She bit her lower lip and looked away, drew in a breath, then turned her gaze on him again. "It would be because of me, wouldn't it? The Slayer thing. Too strong, too dangerous, too... Well, you get the point."

Yeah, he did. The point was they were both pathetic and for the same reasons.

"We're talkin' about building a life, here, yeah?"

"That's what I want. With you."

Maybe one day, when they'd been together for a time, he'd stop dissolving into a blubbing mess whenever Buffy said something like that, all earnest and looking at him with such intensity he couldn't help but feel it down to his bones. Would be nice not to have to worry about losing his bloody head on a whim and making an arse of himself in front of others. So far, he'd been lucky to keep his little breakdowns to himself.

On the other hand, though, he never wanted to get used to it—the miracle that was Buffy loving him, wanting him, wanting *them*. Because the way those words lit him up more than absolved every hurt that had come before. He'd been with her at his best and his lowest, seen the same in her, and that they were standing together after every-

thing was nothing short of extraordinary. He never wanted to let go of that.

"I'm done looking for quick fixes," he said a moment later, somewhat hoarse. "When I went off to win my soul, I thought that's what it was. Knew it'd be rough, yeah, but I had this image of it makin' everything okay. Makin'...what'd I'd done okay. So you could be with me. Outta my bleedin' head, I know. I just knew I had to do something to make sure I wasn't dangerous anymore to you. That's how I thought of the Shanshu, too, when I first heard it. A way to get back to you and—"

"Outdo your exit," Buffy agreed, sniffing too and nodding, then laughing. "You've mentioned that a time or twelve hundred."

"Right." He grinned back at her, wiped away another tear trekking down her cheek. "Still a quick fix, though. Let it do the work for me. Now I got it and... The soul, I tried to cut out. Couldn't bloody bear it at first. Let myself get all twisted...but I don't regret it. The choice I made, even if it was harder than I thought it'd be. Mighta been foolin' myself about the Shanshu, too, thinkin' it'd be easy, but if watchin' you has taught me anything, love, it's that if it matters to you, you fight for it. Every day."

Buffy's lower lip trembled. He somehow resisted the urge to soothe it with his own. It was important she hear this—important he say it. For so long, he'd viewed the place they were right now as the end goal, but that had been shortsighted. There was no end for them, just whatever came next, and no promise that the going would be smooth.

"So if you're askin' me if I'll pop off, get sozzled outta my head and take a bloody midnight stroll through the cemetery because bein' with you is too hard as a human, the answer is, *fuck* no. Know it won't be easy. That's what makes it worth it."

Buffy launched herself at him with enough force it sent him careening toward the bed, which was just fine with him so long as he had her in his arms. And he knew there were parts of being human he was going to bloody cherish, the foremost being the opportunity to experience her like it was the first time. The subtle difference in her taste, in how she felt—her inherent warmth, and how it no longer burned him up

but somehow kindled a fire that felt like it had been inside him all along, just waiting for the right person to light it. All of it and more was in the way she kissed him, in how she touched him, in the small whimpers scratching at her throat and the tears spilling down her cheeks. Like she didn't trust him to trust her when she told him she loved him and had to put everything she had into showing him just how much she meant it.

He knew that was what it was because it was the same way he'd kissed her for years.

When his lungs started to burn, Spike pulled back and inhaled deeply, laughing somewhat in spite of himself. Buffy seemed perfectly undeterred, pressing soft kisses along his neck and running her hand down the length of his chest and toward his straining cock, which apparently didn't need vampire-anything to snap to attention when she was around. She smiled against his skin when he didn't stop laughing—the sound light and airy and possibly the happiest he'd ever heard spill out of his mouth. Because this was bliss—pure, bloody bliss, and the moment he would come back to if ever he needed a reminder of what he was fighting for. Buffy crying and kissing him and stroking him and loving him as no one ever had.

He could have just done this, held her and snogged her forever, though he was keen to be explored all over, feeling like a sodding virgin, in many ways. And that seemed right—Buffy owning him body and soul was a given, but this body was newly made, a fresh start, and it belonged to her and her alone. Something he would have shared had she not suddenly gone stiff against him, her mouth frozen over the pulse point in his throat. The change was so abrupt, so dramatic, it took his lust-filled brain a moment to realize the delightful kisses and caresses had stopped.

“Buffy?”

Then she gasped and jolted upright, her eyes wide and fixed on something behind him. “Oh...*god*.”

Well, that didn't sound good. Spike scrambled up as well, bracing himself on his elbows, almost afraid to turn around.

He turned anyway to follow her gaze and was met with another of what would likely be an endless series of shocks.

The thing she was staring at was a mirror. A mirror that he was reflected in.

The coming weeks and months would have several moments like this, he wagered, where he felt himself taken aback by things most people would count as ordinary. Or things that shouldn't surprise him—he was human, after all, and reflections were things humans had—but after more than a century of glancing into mirrors only to see nothing looking back, catching his own eyes was more than a little odd. He'd gotten so used to seeing himself in only photographs or video recordings, captured moments of the distant or recent past. Not since he'd left his mum's house as a man for the last time he had an idea of what he looked like at the moment and he wasn't sure what to think.

There was the hair—bleached as ever, sticking in every which direction. He hadn't had time to fuss with it since the world hadn't ended, or gel it back the way he liked so it didn't sprout into the curls that had been the bane of his existence. He was bloody pale, especially in contrast with Buffy's golden skin, but didn't look like a bloke who had just climbed to his feet after surviving the apocalypse. All in all, he wagered he looked...normal. As normal as a man could look for being north of a hundred and forty years old and recently given new life from the bloody Powers That Be. It was such a small thing, his reflection, but when he blinked, he saw himself do it. Saw the way his lips twitched and his eyes widened. Saw everything in real-time—saw, for once, the space beside Buffy filled with someone else. Filled with him.

"I am a disaster zone," Buffy said, climbing off the bed and nearing her reflection. "How can you kiss me when I look like this?"

Spike blinked at her, then rumbled a chuckle and shook his head, his tension draining. He should have known that was what had snagged her attention—not the shock of seeing something that hadn't been possible twenty-four hours earlier, but catching a glimpse of how she looked post-battle. "Don't be daft," he said, edging off the bed himself. "You're beautiful."

"I am covered in yuck, my hair is a mess, and the bags under my eyes have bags of their own." Buffy whirled to face him, scowling.



"Seriously, I question your taste if you can find this anything but gross."

He laughed again and shook his head. "I'll say it again, Slayer, you're beautiful. Bloody stunning, point of fact. And that you can't see it means you're clearly off your trolley."

"Well, I'm about to get *into* the shower so that I don't accidentally catch what I look like while we're doing stuff and fall out of the mood." She turned and started for the bathroom, then hesitated and looked back at him, and he saw the moment when the general took back over, shoving the girl aside again. "Actually, you go ahead, if you want. I'll call Giles and see if there are any updates—if the girls have found anything, but I really think the battle site was more or less picked over. Still...if they found Kennedy, I'll need to talk to Willow, make sure she's okay. And see if... Well, a whole bunch of stuff."

Spike sobered immediately and nodded, dragging his shirt over his head. Now that she mentioned it, he did seem to have a layer of invisible *something* on him that needed attention. Couldn't say what it was, only that it was tied to the hospital and he wanted it gone. "Right."

Buffy offered a flat, apologetic smile as he shucked his jeans and the boots. "Sorry."

"What for now?"

"Well, we were going to go for a walk. Then we were going to have sex. Now it's shower-and-be-a-grown-up time." She poked out her lower lip—which was just not playing fair, far as he was concerned—and pulled her cellphone from her pocket. "You're newly human and this isn't exactly the most romantic way to celebrate it."

Spike arched an eyebrow and crossed his arms, watched the way her eyes followed the movement, then grinned when her attention ventured south. This would take a while to get used to as well—Buffy looking at him like he was a lolly to be licked and savored. His cock began to harden all over again, and bless her if she didn't run her tongue over her lips and stare with unabashed hunger.

"See something you like?"

She nodded, her eyes darkening. "A whole lot of something."

"Don't think anythin' down there has changed," he teased.

"I really, really hope not."

“And Buffy, bein’ here with you is celebration enough for me.”

At that, she snapped her eyes back to his before rolling them in perfect Summers form. “You are such a sap.”

“You love it,” he countered. “Think you can hide from me. Might not be able to hear the way your heart skips anymore, but I know it’s happening. You love it when your Spike gets sappy about you.”

Buffy swatted a hand at him and turned away, the phone pressed to her ear, but not before he caught the hint of a blush on her cheeks, even under the dirt. Satisfied, he smirked and turned on his heel and stalked into the loo.

Once inside, he flicked on the light and shut the door behind him, contemplated the toilet for a second—bloody bizarre, having a body that needed it—and decided it was better to try than ignore that particular impulse. Seemed the consequences could be right embarrassing, if not disastrous. And then, at some point, he was going to want some real nosh. The hospital food, Buffy insisted, wasn’t as bad as everyone made out, but it’d had him missing blood in a hurry, which was saying something since the thought of eating blood now made him feel a bit sick.

He went through the motions with the loo, tried not to stare at himself too hard in the mirror, then made his way over to the shower. Buffy had truly spared no expense in her room selection. The shower was one of those decadent pieces he often saw on the telly—large cascading showerhead, no proper curtain or what all, and sized well enough to give a man ideas.

Then again, it was fair to assume Buffy would be dead on her feet, the day she’d had. Hadn’t gotten any proper sleep since before the big fight, and had only dozed here and there in her vigil by his bed in between running errands for him and checking on the girls.

There was a lot to do after an apocalypse that he’d forgotten, or had just plain skipped out on in the past. Or maybe it was just this one—the size of it, the number of people involved, and the role of guardian Buffy had assumed over the girls. Maybe once the debris had settled and they had an idea of the scope of their loss, he could talk her into running off with him for a bit on holiday. Give them a chance to

just be together—no bollocks, no demons, no undercover job, just them.

Him and his newly human body.

Spike twisted the nozzle and stepped under the current of spray, noting with some relish the difference here, too. How the water felt against his skin, his scalp, how it seemed to treat the soreness in his back and shoulders—human soreness, most likely—and chase away tension he hadn't realized was there. He stood still for a moment to savor the sensation, then decided he ought to get on with it so Buffy could take her turn. She deserved it far more than he did.

Another thing that would take some getting used to—not immediately knowing when she was near. Not being able to hear her soft footfalls or the cadence of her heart, or smell her from a distance. He had his back to the door and the splatter of the water against the flooring was loud, so much so that he started at the feel of her arms around his middle.

"Fuck," he said, placing his hand on hers. "Give a bloke a heart attack."

"Was just testing your reflexes," Buffy replied before pressing a kiss to his shoulder. "Nothing new from Giles and Kennedy is still MIA, though... Well, Willow has given up."

He was sorry to hear it. Not that he'd been the biggest fan of Red's new girl, but going through that at all had to be difficult, even if they had been split. "She all right?"

"I didn't talk to her, but Giles says she's doing better." She kissed his shoulder again before resting her cheek against it. "I forgot to say this before...but thank you."

"What for, sweet?"

"For fighting like you had something to live for." Buffy sighed and tightened her hold on him, like he was in any danger of going somewhere else. "For giving us a tomorrow."

He was still for a moment, the words tumbling over in his head. It seemed forever ago they'd been holed up in her little room, Buffy on her knees in front of him, telling him what she wanted for him. For *them*. Begging him not to go into the fight believing it was his last, that he

wouldn't make it to the other side. And then before that, before at the bar, when she'd stepped out of the shadows—out of the bloody phone itself—and been there, solid and real, and everything they had talked about for months had become more than words exchanged from opposite ends of the globe. He'd told her he'd needed to see her when she told him she loved him in order to believe it, and while she'd brilliantly proven him wrong on that score, that moment when he'd met her gaze after nearly a year apart had solidified something in him. That and so much more.

Spike breathed out again, now fixing his gaze on the arms banded around his middle, how she had grasped her own wrist as a knot to tie them together. How the shower water beat down on him, warm and refreshing, easing the pain in muscles that hadn't felt real pain in more than a century. And he thought back to that first day after he'd made his farewells at Wolfram and Hart, Buffy's number written on a scrap of paper, and how he'd been all but convinced that she wouldn't want to hear from him. How she'd cried and asked him for a number to reach him at once she processed what she was hearing, and the utter bloody joy when his mobile had rung and he'd realized it was her.

The notion then that he might be where he was now, standing in a shower with Buffy, her holding onto him the way she was, kissing him and thanking him for anything, would have been bloody laughable. A fairytale for a hopeless man forever in love with a woman he couldn't have.

But Buffy had believed in him every step of the way. Even when he'd been at his worst. Even when he'd hurt her, made her cry. She'd believed enough for the both of them, and here they were.

"Buffy..."

He twisted to face her, suddenly desperate to see her, and when their eyes locked, his breath caught and he felt his heart give a thoroughly human lurch. She was still covered in evidence of the battle, the dirt and dust she'd worn now tracking rivers down her cheeks and over her shoulders, the water running off her somewhat discolored. Buffy as he loved her best—the one person in the world who never gave up on it, despite whatever it threw at her, wearing her strength but not wrapped inside of it.

And he knew then he would never understand it. After all the

bad that he had inflicted upon her, after a century of reaping joyous havoc on anyone unlucky enough to cross his path, that he had ended up here at all. With Buffy looking at him with warmth and love and all the things he'd never had, standing naked with him in any room, but especially this room. Feeling the echo of his own heartbeat in his throat because the universe had decided he was worthy.

"Sure I didn't dust out there, love?" he asked, hoarser than he would have liked.

Buffy grinned and nodded, wrapping her arms around his neck now. "As sure as sure can be. Because I haven't kicked your ass yet, and that was the plan should you dust."

"Just not sure how I got here."

"Well, we were at the hospital, and then—"

"Got *you*, you cheeky wench." He pressed his brow to hers, breathing her in, and missing that he couldn't drag her in as deeply as he had before. There were definitely things about being a vampire that he would mourn, just as there had been things about being soulless that he'd mourned, and the ability to experience Buffy with heightened senses was at the top of that list. But then, those senses had served their purpose, allowed him to keep more of her with him when they were apart. When the idea that he might have her for real had been part of that fairytale, leaving him only with the bits of her he could steal. Now he had her here, pressed against him, looking like she wanted to devour him whole...

The trade-off was more than worth it.

"You love it when I'm cheeky," Buffy replied, her grin widening. Then she dropped one of her hands from his neck and gave his arse a rather firm pinch. "Don't you?"

"Minx," Spike replied, cupping the back of her head and drawing her to his mouth. She gasped and clutched at him as though for balance, then threw herself into his kiss with that same enthusiasm as before, and it was glorious. Standing here, holding her, feeling her warm and wet and pressed against him, her lips and tongue tangled with his as though she couldn't get enough. Which was more than fine with him—god knows he couldn't.

After a few blissful seconds, though, Buffy pulled back, breathing hard. “No sex until I am clean.”

“Seems a waste,” Spike replied, dragging a hand up her side until he had one perfect breast cradled against his palm. “Just gonna dirty you up again.”

“There’s sexy dirty and apocalypse dirty. I am definitely the latter.”

“Reckon there’s no rule out there that says you can’t be both.”

Buffy rolled her eyes—though she looked rather pleased if he did say so himself—then negotiated her way around him so that she was directly under the spray. “You have the weirdest fetishes,” she said, running her hands through her hair and over her face, scrubbing away the worst of the grime before reaching for the complimentary packet of soap.

“Pretty sure you’re my fetish. Always have been.” He snagged the bar from her and tore the wrapping off with his teeth. “What about you?”

“Have I been my fetish?”

“No, we both know what your fetish has been.” He slid the soap free and tossed the useless wrapping out onto the bathroom floor. “Go on about how you want me to give all this a chance. Are you forgettin’ you like your men to sport fangs?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “You’re the one who said the monster is still there. That the fangs were smoke and mirrors.”

“Said it while thinkin’ it bloody unlikely that I’d ever be anything but.” Spike tried to grin, but now that he’d voiced the possibility, it couldn’t do anything but balloon into a concern. That would be the rub on this, wouldn’t it? Get the girl, get the prize, lose the girl because of the prize. “Want you to have what you want too, Buffy.”

“Well, good. Because right now, I do. And I’ll keep having it so long as you don’t do something stupid.” She grabbed the soap back from him and began lathering her hands in a fury. “And really? I think that monster thing is kinda crap.”

“Uh huh.”

“I liked Angel before I knew he was a vampire. I didn’t like him any *more* when I found out he was. It just made it harder. And I damn well remember how I felt when I learned he’d turned human. It was

the happiest I'd ever been at that point." She paused, worked her throat. "His lack of vamp strength didn't bother me. It was always my fight, not his. And as I've learned, a sacred calling isn't a prerequisite to fighting demons."

"Right. So that's him. What about us, when you threw yourself at me the first time?"

Buffy groaned. "You already know the answer to that."

"Do I?"

"Spike, I did everything I could to push you away. You saw the ugliest parts of me and loved me anyway. You let me be weak, be violent, be *evil* at times, and you're still here." She sniffed, her eyes suddenly bright with what he knew wasn't shower water. "That I could take my strength out on you was a plus, but it wasn't what made me fall in love with you. I don't want to have *that* relationship again, either. Maybe the sex part but not the hating-myself-and-using-you-as-a-punching-bag part. And that would be true whether or not you were still all fangy." She sniffed again and wiped her cheeks, then met his gaze. "Would you still love me if I wasn't the Slayer?"

"What kind of daft question is—"

"Exactly. Now stop looking for reasons this won't work or I'm going to get cranky." Buffy stared at him a moment longer, as though daring him to contradict her, before her expression softened. "I love you because of who you are. A good man, William. Fangy or not."

Bollocks. Now he was going to cry again, and he'd done enough of that already. Spike ducked his head and let the water run over his scalp and down his neck, trying to give himself a few seconds before he looked at her once more.

When he did look, though, he didn't stop. The final remnants of the fight had been washed away, all except for her hair, which she seemed to be saving for last. And it hit him again, where he was standing. How completely improbable it was that Buffy would be with him like this, open and vulnerable, bearing him her body with her rosy dewdrop nipples and deceptively soft skin. If the words ever did come to him, the ones that would allow him to articulate exactly what she did to him, what she made him feel, he would chase them down and wrestle them into submission. Until that day, all he could do was hope

that she understood the miracle she was, and the greater miracle that was her choosing him.

"Can I?" Buffy asked softly, placing her soap-covered hands on his chest.

He nodded, his throat tightening, and nudged his cock against her stomach. "Though be a dear and be *very* thorough."

"I intend to," she replied, then proceeded to drive him right out of his sodding head. She trailed her fingers over his shoulders and down his arms, drew circles against either wrist before roaming back toward his neck. Then down his chest, over his pecs, teasing his nipples with small flicks that went straight to his cock. And down farther still, over his stomach and pelvis, then along the inside of his thighs and around to his arse and back again. And fuck, each stroke was pure electricity, so much so that by the time she finally took pity on him and closed a hand around his cock, he couldn't help but cry out.

"Bloody hell, pet." Spike dropped his brow against hers again, relishing that he could, his hips thrusting forward of their own accord. "What you do to me..."

"Does it feel different?" she all but whispered, giving his cock a firm squeeze.

Spike wasn't sure how he heard her, loud as the shower was, piss-poor as his hearing was now, but he did anyway. He released a shaky breath and when he dared to look at her, found her gaze fixated on what her hand was doing. Up, down, and up again, her thumb running over the head of his cock on every pass.

"Different?"

"From when you were a vampire."

Did it? He wasn't sure—the part of him that had been busy cataloging the differences had gone on bloody sabbatical, and he wasn't too keen to call it back just yet or think about much of anything beyond the way she felt. She was still hot against him, though a different sort of warmth, and of course he was an addict immediately because it was her. It was her and him and everything was new but familiar and if she stopped touching him, he might just curl up and cry.

"Dunno," he managed after a beat. "Buffy... Fuck, that feels... How can you do this in *here*?"



That he hadn't meant to blurt out, hadn't realized he meant to until it was out there. But hell, they should talk about *that* too, shouldn't they? They'd chatted about everything else. He'd rather have it out now than make the wrong move sometime down the line. Shove that bit into the part of the world that had ended last night and not the one still turning today.

He didn't open his eyes again until he felt her breath on his face, then her lips were on his in a soft, sweet kiss that he knew he didn't deserve.

"I don't want any place to be off-limits for us," she said and kissed a line along his jaw. "Not even this one."

"I—"

"I'm not saying it's...something I won't think about or... It's a part of me, who I am now. And a part of us."

Bugger, that was a downright depressing thought. So much for leaving it in the world that had ended.

"Hey, I told you once. The good and the bad. I take all of it. It got us here, didn't it?" A pause. "Spike, look at me."

He sighed again but did as she asked, flooded with the usual contradictory emotions that she couldn't help but stoke. In over a century, he'd never met anyone who could keep him on his toes the way she could—not even Dru, whom he'd once thought wildly unpredictable. Turned out there was always method to her madness, and the truly mad thing had been his ability to ignore it.

"I take all of it," Buffy said again, unblinking. "There will be bad days—days when I might not be able to do this, and when that happens, we'll deal. But that's not right now. Right now, I just want to be with you, wherever you are. I feel safe with you in every room."

"Buffy." It was all he could say. Any more and he might truly lose his head. "Bloody hell, I..."

She gave him a watery smile and kissed him again, then reached for the shampoo. "Me, too," she said, squirting a dollop onto her palm. "I might not always be good with words, but—"

"Dunno. The ones you've used so far have been bloody brilliant."

"Yeah?" She rolled her head back and finally turned her attention to her hair, slathering it with the shampoo and immediately setting to

work up a good foam. The angle had her breasts thrusting forward, had her looking more like a water nymph than she ever had. “Good. I’ll keep using them.”

“You do that.” He watched the way she worked her fingers across her scalp, delicate but firm, and found himself reaching for her before he could suss out his own intent. But when he grasped her wrist, she yielded without a fight, dropped her arms to her sides, and let him take over.

It was that she didn’t need his help, he decided. Of everyone he’d ever loved, Buffy needed him the least. Not to wash her hair or do her makeup or grab her nosh or sing her a lullaby before bed. While caring for the woman in his life was second-nature, there had always been a level of expectation. She would dote on him for doting on her, rely on him in ways that made him feel indispensable. In his mum’s case, he was confident that had been true—she’d loved him and needed him in equal measure. In Dru’s... Well, he didn’t fault her. Not now, at least. Not anymore. What he’d wanted from her was something she hadn’t been able to give, and bless her black little heart, she had been more or less honest with him about that. As honest as she could be, at least.

Buffy didn’t need him. She wasn’t with him because he was providing a service or fulfilling a role. She was with him because she loved him. Standing here, letting him massage her scalp and lather up her hair and touch her... Being with him out of pure want, need not part of the equation. It was heady in ways he wouldn’t have known how to articulate once upon a time—still wasn’t sure he did—but made him feel warm in places that had never been warm.

Made him *hers* as he’d never been and would never be anyone else’s.

Spike exhaled long and slow, dipped his head to caress her shoulder with his lips, as she had his when she’d joined him. “I love you.”

She hummed and rolled her head back, letting the shower spray wash the suds away. “I love you, too.”

“Love hearing that.”

“I would’ve said it a lot sooner if you’d let me.”

“I was an idiot.”

“Duh. I think you were also waiting for me to call you on your crap.”

“Sounds about right.”

“Well, consider your crap called on.” Buffy turned in his arms, wrapping her own around his neck and swallowing his mouth in a kiss that nearly sent him to his knees with the passion she threw behind it. Like it wasn’t enough just to kiss him, she wanted to consume him whole. Like she was desperate for it.

She’d kissed him like this in the other room, too. Hard and hot and with everything that he’d missed before. And like it had before, Spike found himself torn between melting into her, throwing back as good as he got, and just bawling like a sodding infant.

“Mmm,” she hummed against his lips. “I’m trying to do this the way you want.”

Spike grinned and kissed her again. “What’s the way I want, pet?”

“Sunlight walk just you and me.”

“You wager the sun’ll be there tomorrow?”

“Unless there’s another apocalypse tonight, in which case, I officially quit.”

He chuckled and hiked her into his arms. “Let’s skip the walk. Got plenty I want to do with you.”

She batted her eyelashes. “Like what?”

“You know I’ve never shagged as a human before. Wanna pop my cherry?”

Buffy gasped and nodded, then gasped again when he pressed her up against the shower wall. “I’ve never deflowered anyone before. What if I’m not good at it?”

Spike laughed again, dropping little kisses down her neck. “Well, if at first you don’t succeed...”

“That’s the kinda thing I can try again?”

“Over and over. Practice makes perfect, after all.”

“Spike?”

“Mmm?” He nibbled his way across her collarbone, then up the other side of her neck until he had her earlobe caught between his teeth.

“Might be...ahhh...*slippery* in here.”

He dropped a hand between them and teased his fingers up and down the silken folds of her pussy. “I like you slippery,” he rumbled,

grinning when she sighed and bucked into his touch. "Prefer you drenched."

"Oh." Buffy let him explore a moment longer, then seized his shoulders and squeezed hard enough to get his attention. "Wait. I want to do something."

"Me too."

"Spike—"

"Hmm?"

"There's a mirror in the other room." She blinked into his eyes, her breath coming faster now. "Right across from the bed."

Spike stared at her for a long beat, his thoughts in a tumble, not aided by the fact that his blood was indeed rushing and not in the direction of his brain. But then he understood what she was saying, what it meant, what he could see if he wanted, and *hell* if the thought didn't have his balls aching. "You wanna watch me fuck you, Slayer?" he asked thickly. "Wanna catch the whole show?"

"I...thought you might."

He groaned and dropped his brow to her shoulder. "Bloody hell, I love you."

"Hey, it's your celebration day. I'm just ideas girl."

"Brilliant is what you are." Spike lifted his head so he could kiss her again, reached around, and shut off the water. "Gonna drive me wild."

"Going to?" Buffy teased, easing around him now and grabbing for a towel. "I thought I already did."

She had no bloody idea.

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO, DURING THE HEIGHT OF THEIR AFFAIR, Spike had mounted a large antique mirror across from the bed in his crypt. Quite the find, he'd thought. Likely worth some dosh, and it had been in decent shape, too. He'd positioned it just right so that she couldn't miss it the next time she popped by, and when he'd whispered all the dirty things he wanted to do while she watched—while she watched herself being pleased by nothing at all—she'd trembled and melted under him.

That first time had been brilliant. Buffy astride him, both of them facing the mirror, watching her succulent cunt contract as she rode him. The more she'd watched the more she'd wanted, the harder she'd bucked and bounced, that brilliant hair of hers swishing in his face, his hands around the perfect globes of her ass, and them both transfixed on the visual they presented.

Or rather, *she* presented.

The next week had been full of the same. Buffy being rather insistent, upon her arrival, that they do nothing upstairs or in any other dark corner of the crypt. She'd wanted the mirror. At first, he'd been delighted that she'd taken to it so enthusiastically, and ever the slave for her, he'd done exactly what she'd asked.

He didn't know exactly when it had occurred to him, the reason she fancied it so much. And they'd never talked about it once the mirror had been dragged back to the rubbish yard. She'd simply shown up one night, asked about it, and when he'd told her it was gone, she hadn't done much more than give a little sigh before throwing him onto the rug. She'd fucked him with the same animal drive as always, but some of the shine had been missing from her eyes. Eyes she closed more than she kept open, like she could pretend she was somewhere else.

It hadn't been what she saw in the mirror that did it for her, but what she hadn't seen.

Now, Buffy was on the floor, perched between his spread legs, one hand around his cock and the other stroking up his thigh. Her eyes weren't closed, either. They were fixed on him, and full of so much shine he could have dusted.

Except he couldn't now. Not anymore. He had a reflection.

"Watch me," she whispered. She lowered her head and kissed the tip of his cock once, twice, then parted her lips and took him in deep.

"Buffy..."

She moaned around him and pulled, and he watched. Both her as she sucked him in, inching her way down his shaft, and the image reflected in the mirror. Buffy on her knees, her damp hair splayed across her back, and her head slowly descending. So slow, in fact, he wondered if her aim wasn't to make him spill like a sodding schoolboy. It had been like this in the motel room they'd been in before, Buffy's hot mouth on his cock, her tongue dragging along his skin with slow, almost painful indulgence.

He felt less in control of himself now, though, and he didn't know why. Perhaps because this truly was a first—pleasure on a human level was different from that on a vampiric one, and though he couldn't say exactly what that difference was, he knew it was there. He felt it, how hot and wet her mouth was, how when she pulled, there was more strength behind it. Almost too much but not enough at the same time, and he wondered if some things had carried over—if the Shanshu Prophecy made allowances for vampires who had forgotten how to be human.

Or if it was just Buffy for him, no matter what form either one of them was in.

"Buffy..." He threaded his fingers through her wet, silky hair. "Fuck, that's good. Such a hot mouth."

She drew her lips back up his length, ran her tongue over the dip in the head, then released him with a wet plop. "You said next time," she murmured, squeezing her hand around the base. "Now's next time."

It took a moment for the synapses in his brain to fire in the right order. Then he shuddered, a thrill of excitement shooting down his spine. "That what you want, little girl? Want me to fuck your mouth?"

Buffy just smirked and swallowed his cock again, no slow seduction this time. Rather, she drew him in until her nose was buried in the curls at the base, the tip of him striking the back of her throat, which she promptly put to good use.

*Fuck*, if that was what she wanted, he'd give it. Spike tangled his other hand through her hair, gripped her head tightly and began pumping up, dragging her along for the ride. For the first few seconds, he remained gentle, wanting to give her plenty of time to pull away if she changed her mind. If he'd misread her or the situation and was making an absolute prat out of himself. But then she moaned, and the vibrations went straight to his balls, and he lost all reserve. He bucked and thrust, guiding her in a fury of up-and-down strokes, his heart thundering and pulse racing and his gaze on her, on the way she looked at him, kept looking at him, as his slick cock slid back and forth between those luscious lips of hers. Then at the mirror behind her, at the picture they presented together, his skin flushed and eyes wild, how tightly he had her head gripped between his hands and the raw, almost animal intensity with which he shoved himself into her mouth.

"This what you wanted, baby?" he panted, his chest tight. "That time on the phone? You got yourself off thinkin' about me doing this?"

Buffy made a sound that he supposed was an agreement—he didn't slow down long enough to ask. But then she lowered one of her hands between her legs and began whimpering in earnest.

"Oh, that's it. You feel hot, love?"

She nodded best she could.

“Keep that pussy nice and wet for me. Gonna make you feel so good.”

She answered with another moan, her eyes rolling back. Then she looked at him again with fixed determination, her hand working harder between her legs. He heard the slick sound of her quim sucking her fingers in—though maybe it was his imagination, he didn’t know. All he knew for certain was she was driving him out of his bloody head and he wasn’t going to last much longer.

“Fuck, you’re pretty. So pretty. Pretty little mouth. Look so sweet, stuffed full of me.” Spike rolled his head back. “Buffy.. I... Not gonna...”

She dug her nails into the sensitive skin of his inner thigh, surprising him enough that he jerked and struck harder into her than he’d intended. “Bloody hell, Slayer.”

Her eyes remained on him, warm and full of love, and that was it. That struck him—the balance between hard and fast and frenzied and soft and tender and sweet, the monster that was still inside of him, would always be inside of him, roaring its approval as the man he’d become reached his pinnacle. Spike watched her watch him as his balls tightened and his cock began to pulse, and then he was spilling into her, and it was glorious. *She* was glorious. Holding onto him, swallowing and pulling and running her tongue over and around him, and the love he felt for her seemed to press against the inside of his skin, like he would burst into dust after all. It certainly seemed possible at that moment. Everything did.

She kept her mouth around him long after the last jet had left him, the sensation somewhere between fucking fantastic and too bloody much. When she did release him, it was with a satisfied little hum that had him twitching again. He knew humans didn’t recover as quickly as vamps did—been told that a time too many to take it as anything but gospel truth—but at the moment, he didn’t think it’d be too long before he’d be aching to sink inside of her. Might be that was a bit of carryover, too. Fuck, he hoped so. Now that he had her, he wanted to relive those days when they’d done nothing but shag for hours. Experience firsthand the difference between being with someone he loved



desperately and being with that same someone when she desperately loved him back.

"You alive up there?" she asked after a moment, her head resting on his thigh.

"More than I ever have been." Spike still had his hands tangled through her hair, and gently used his grip on her to get her to look at him. "Come up here."

"Why?"

"Cause you got somethin' I wanna eat."

He hoped she never stopped blushing around him—that she never became so jaded that hearing how much he wanted her failed to bring that innocent shine to her eyes. Buffy rose to her feet, all in her naked glory, with her battle wounds and her perky nipples and miles of skin he wanted to spend hours mapping with his tongue. He edged back on the bed, then reached forward and tugged her to him.

"All the way up, baby," he said, taking her with him when he reclined. "Give me that delicious quim."

"What if you don't like the way I taste anymore?" she asked as she crawled up his body. "Maybe that was just a vampire thing."

"Then we'll find out right quick just what it'll take for me to want my fangs back."

"Not funny."

"Not kidding." But he didn't think she had anything to worry about. The second she was above him, her wet, pretty pink flesh hovering just over his mouth, he breathed her in and had to fight a growl. "God, I've missed this view," he said, spreading her open, grinning when he felt her shiver. "So soft and slick. All for me."

She bit out a curse and rolled her hips. "Spike..."

"Mmhmm." He licked a line from her opening to her clit, which he drew between his lips. And when her flavor exploded in his mouth, he couldn't hold back his moan of approval. Like everything else that had been made true over the past few hours, he thought this might be even better than what he'd had the day before. There was some difference, yes—she was both richer and tangier, like his earlier senses had been somewhat muted, like he'd just come to life. Or hell, maybe it was all in his head.

Thinking there should be a difference and creating one where none actually existed. All he knew was he'd been an addict before and he was an addict now, and there was nothing he loved more than the way she sounded and quivered when he had his mouth on her. That hadn't changed at all.

"Oh god." Buffy shook, so much so he grabbed her hips to still her. "Oh god."

He rumbled his agreement around her clit, sucking gently enough to keep her on edge. Then he let her go, ran his tongue over her once, twice, and began lapping at her flesh. Tentative at first, testing what she could take, then with increasing enthusiasm. He loved this, too. Determining just how much she could stand before she got impatient and claimed control. Buffy riding his face was one of his favorite pastimes—when she got bossy and told him exactly where she wanted his tongue and how she wanted to come all over him. He didn't know if that Buffy would show up now—might take a while before she was as comfortable being demanding with him as she'd been once upon a time—but he'd do anything he could to get her to understand the more explosive encounters of their past were nothing he regretted.

The pain of the past had been the purchase price for where they had landed. He understood that now.

"Spike... Oh god, please."

He became bolder, adding some suction behind the strokes of his mouth, growling his encouragement when she began to undulate her hips again, attempting to direct him where she wanted him. Still, he was an ornery bloke, so every time she nudged her clit toward his lips he ducked away and kissed another part of her. Her labia, the curls at her mound, the mouth of her sex, until she was growling too and her strokes became less gentle suggestions and more angry writhing.

"Please. *Please*," she whimpered, bathing his chin in a fresh wave of juice. "I need it."

He nibbled on her inner thigh. "Need what, baby?"

"Touch me."

"Figured that's what I—"

"Spike!"

He dipped his tongue inside of her with a hearty groan, digging his fingers into her hips to hold her just where she was. Buffy whimpered

again, the sound somewhere between relief and dismay. And yeah, he was a tease, but she was too, so it was only fair she get as good as she gave. Something he'd tell her when he wasn't otherwise occupied plundering her pussy. In easy seconds, he had her riding him the way he wanted, the way he knew she could when properly motivated. Desperate for him, for what he did to her, and on the precipice of something bloody spectacular. And he loved it, loved the sensation of needing the air that he breathed in, the air that smelled and tasted of nothing but her, the way sweat gathered at his brow and dampened his forehead, making the ride even slicker. He loved the sounds she made, the mewling little gasps and moans, and how her breath seemed to come faster with every second. He couldn't hear her heartbeat anymore but knew her well enough to know what it was doing, knew when to give more and when to pull back, when to tease and when to soothe.

There had never been heat like this—heat he wasn't just borrowing, but making. If asked, he would have said nothing could be so invigorating, but this was. She was. They were.

"Be a love and squeeze me hard," Spike whispered against her pussy when he pulled back, sliding a hand over her thigh and lower until he had two fingers poised at her opening. "Don't hold back."

Then he slipped them inside of her and swirled his tongue around her clit before drawing it into his mouth again, and Buffy went to pieces. He felt her clench and squeeze, those muscles he'd been teased about so long ago doing exactly what he knew they could, only...*more*. More in every sense. Tighter than she'd ever been, tighter than he'd ever had, so much he could tell it'd smart just a bit, but in the best way.

And god, he couldn't wait to get her around his cock, which was in full agreement, straining toward the ceiling once more and aching in ways both familiar and new. He kept pumping his fingers into her long after the last shudder subsided, then left her clit with a parting kiss and helped ease her shaking body down the length of his own. Buffy collapsed against his chest, panting and pliant, offering little laughs between breaths that sounded somewhere between incredulous and giddy.

“So...taste was okay, then?” she asked after a minute. “Please say yes, because if that was the last time—”

Spike fisted a handful of her hair and tilted her head back so she was looking at him. “See for yourself,” he replied, then took her lips in a hot kiss that—thank *fuck*—she responded to with the sort of enthusiasm that told him she wasn’t ready to roll over and catch some kip. Not that he could blame her if that were the case, running on fumes as she must be, but he wanted to feel her so badly. Hell, he was desperate for it. “Delicious,” he whispered when she broke away with a gasp. “You couldn’t be anything but.”

Buffy grinned, ran a hand down his cheek, dragged her thumb over his lips. “Good,” she replied before kissing him again. Her hands slid so she was cupping either side of his neck, holding him to her as she nibbled and explored and did whatever she could to drive him out of his bloody mind. Somehow, she managed to shift so she was astride him properly, the heat of her soaked cunt licking the underside of his cock, rocking her hips with unmistakable intent.

“So,” Buffy said against his mouth a moment later, “ready for your cherry to be popped?”

“Fuck, yes.”

“And you’re sure *I’m* the one you want doing the popping? It’s a big step, you know.”

Spike growled and gripped her hips again, tugging forward, his cock sliding between her folds and nudging her clit. “Only one, love,” he replied. “Only one I ever want. You hear me?”

She nodded, some of the silliness leaking from her eyes. The silliness, but not the warmth, or the love.

“Me too,” she whispered, the way she had that night on the phone. And like that night on the phone, she didn’t give him too much time to sit with what she was telling him. The next thing he knew was pure physical ecstasy as Buffy lifted herself on his lap and sank onto his cock. If asked, he would have sworn it was impossible for her to feel more perfect than she always had, and he would have proven himself a liar. She’d always been tight around him—tight and hot and bloody perfect—but the sensation of being inside of her now was something beyond pleasure as he’d known it. There was the heat, not as intense as

he'd felt it before but it didn't need to be. There was the way her muscles clamped around him, how she squeezed and held and teased without moving at all.

Spike sucked in a deep breath, one that almost made his chest hurt, and let it out again, looking up as Buffy looked down at him, her lips parted and some of that bliss reflected back to him. Like this was as revolutionary for her as it was for him.

"Sit up," Buffy said softly. "You'll miss it."

The words didn't make sense—granted, they didn't need to in order for him to obey. But once he was upright, Buffy in his lap, starting to pump him in languid strokes, he understood. Sitting up, he had a glimpse of the mirror over her shoulder, of them tangled together. Of the roundness of her perfect arse rising and falling, giving him peeks of his wet cock. Of his own face as he'd never seen it, flushed and awed and warped with pleasure. Of the graceful curve of her back, the rhythmic movements of her body, how her hair swished this way and that every time she took him back in.

"What do you see?" she asked, her voice a gasp in his ear.

"Us," Spike replied, unable to draw his eyes away from it. How the Buffy in the mirror would whimper as the Buffy in his arms whimpered. How, when the Buffy in the mirror lowered her mouth to nibble at his neck, he felt each little nip and nuzzle. Mirror Buffy rolled her head back in tandem with real Buffy, bouncing quicker, moving with increasing need. For him. For this. "Bloody hell, Buffy..."

She released a heady little breath that was half gasp and half giggle and entirely intoxicating. Just like the rest of her. "You feel the same," she whispered, her voice barely audible over the wet sound of their bodies coming together. "Just warm. My Spike."

"All yours, baby."

"How does it feel...for you?"

Spike squeezed his eyes shut, then popped them open again just as quickly, not wanting to miss a second. He wasn't sure there was an answer to that question, though. Not sure he could verbalize it, make her understand just what this was. Being inside of her had always been an experience unto itself, completely separate and untouchable from anything that had come before or since. And if he'd been asked yester-

day, he would have said nothing could compare to that, those stolen months that had been hell on his heart but *fucking* heaven on his body. Full sexual decadence that would put the sodding Romans to shame, more intense for the fact that it was her, it was forbidden, and he'd hoped if he fucked her just right, she'd understand all the things she seemed deaf to whenever he put his feelings into words.

He would have said nothing could have compared to being with Buffy as he had been before. And maybe that was still true, but then there was this. A heartbeat to match and answer her own, his skin slick with sweat and burning hotter still, hotter than he'd thought possible, because it was combined with hers. And then the picture she'd given him—a picture of *them*—so he could see once and for all that the heartbeat was attached to a face and the face was his. He could see her with him, truly and completely.

There were no words for this.

"Can't tell you," he replied at last. "Better show you." He gripped her hips tight enough that she understood, after a beat, that he meant for her to stop. At the questioning, needful look she gave him, Spike grinned and kissed her, then nudged her head with his. "Ride me the other way so you can see, too."

Her eyes darkened and she nodded, slipping off his cock just long enough to twist around. Then her back was to him, her damp hair tucked over one shoulder, and he was guiding her onto him again, his attention fixed on the mirror. The sight of his straining cock nudging her silky folds before disappearing inside her swollen cunt, of Buffy's gaze wide and open mouth, first on where they were joined, then on his face. She stared at him in the reflection for a few long seconds as though seeing him there for the first time, herself. Then something in her eyes seemed to break, and tears spilled down her cheeks.

"You're there," she said, starting to move again. "You're with me. Oh, you're with me. Stay with me, Spike. Please."

Spike nodded hard, kissing her shoulder, his heart performing some sort of acrobatics he wasn't yet used to. "Right here, baby. I'm right here with you."

"And you'll stay."

"Never any hope of gettin' rid of me, love."

Buffy laughed again—that joyous sound he’d so seldom heard her make—happy tears still scaling down her cheeks. Then she whimpered and looked back to the mirror, to them. Not that he could blame her—they were a pretty sight. As much as he’d enjoyed the show when it had just been her, seeing himself in the picture, completing it, was something out of this world. He’d never get enough of watching his own hands cup her breasts, or the fact that he could see her strain and thrust her chest out to draw his attention to her nipples. Or how she ground her pussy on his shaft every time she sank back down, or how her shaking intensified when he traced his fingers down her taut stomach, and she began bucking harder, the sounds tumbling from her throat quickening and her muscles clenching around him every time she took him back inside. He watched his fingers dance over her mound, stroke through her soft curls, caress along her folds and that perfect, drenched flesh of hers, here, there and everywhere except where he knew she really wanted him. Where he really wanted to be.

“Spike...” Buffy rested her head against his shoulder, a little strangled sob working its way through her throat. “Spike...touch me.”

“You close?” He nudged her head with his, a tingle shooting down his spine and his balls starting to throb with that familiar ache. But he wanted to feel this first—feel all of her, clenched and perfect and squeezing him with all those glorious muscles so good it hurt. “Use your words. Tell me what you want.”

Sometimes she played coy. He loved it when she did.

“God, Spike, touch my clit. *Please.*”

But he also loved it when she didn’t.

He bit back a smirk. “Since you asked so nicely,” he replied, then moved so her clit grazed the pad of his finger on every downstroke—soft and flirty—and then swallowed a moan when she gasped and clamped around his cock, moving quicker now, the bed whining and Buffy panting and thrusting and trying to get more, take more, and finally seizing his hand with her own to force out the sort of contact she wanted. And he watched it all, his shaft, shining with her juices, plunging in and out of her, her smaller hand on top of his, fingers threaded all except one, which she pressed down upon so he pressed down upon her, her clit hot and slippery under his skin, and then Buffy

went over. Shaking and crying and spasming around him with wild abandon, and it had never been like this. The pressure that had existed before, that had driven him out of his head more times than he could count, that he would have sworn would never improve, had him all but shattered. A primal sort of growl tore free from him and he sank his teeth into her shoulder, and Buffy screamed again and just kept clenching and squeezing, like her orgasm was never-ending, and he spurted hot into her, and *fuck, fuck, fuck* he could have roared or cried or both.

In the end, he just hugged her to him, her back to his chest, her scent in his nostrils and his throat—hell, even some of her hair in his mouth. He shook and she shook and the bed shook and the only thought that managed to climb above the mass of others flooding his head was the one on repeat.

*Real. Real. Real.*

He didn't know how long they sat like that, his arms around her middle, their bodies rising and falling together as they breathed. The air somewhat cool against his skin now, which seemed bloody strange considering he was covered in sweat, his own heart thumping hard enough that he might have worried about it had he had the presence of mind. After a moment, as the bliss that had whited-out his mind began to dissipate, he realized it was bloody criminal to have her against him and not be exploring her with his mouth, so he kissed a line down her throat, laved the mark he'd left on her shoulder—*no fangs necessary*—with his tongue, and hugged her tighter when she started to stir.

In a flash, Buffy was off his lap, which would have disappointed him had she not immediately tackled him back to the bed, wresting fiery kisses from his mouth.

"If I haven't mentioned it today," she whispered against his lips, "I love you."

"You've mentioned it," he replied, grinning.

"Well, now I'm repeating myself."

"Not a thing wrong with that."

"And... I know you're not a vampire anymore or anything, but..." Buffy sat back, drew a line down his chest, worrying her lower lip between her teeth. "Can we do that again? And soon?"



Spike chuckled. Already, he could tell earlier assessment was on the money—this body might be human, but it was still his, and it knew damn well how to respond to her. Holdover or blessing, he didn't know, but he wasn't about to question it or think on it too much.

"I'm yours to command," he said. "Always have been."

"Are you calling me bossy?"

"Are you sayin' you're not?"

"Are you saying you don't like it?"

"Wouldn't even dream of such a thing."

"Well, that's a relief," Buffy said, pushing back a bit. "'Cause, in my experience, most guys have a problem taking direction from their girlfriends."

"Most guys aren't me, love."

At that, the tease in her eyes softened, and he felt consumed, swallowed by the warmth she fed him. By her, as he always had been. As he would always be.

"I think that," she replied, "makes me about the luckiest girl in the world."



WHEREVER THEY ENDED UP, Spike decided they needed a shower like the one in their hotel room. Fancy and spacious, decent water pressure and a smooth enough surface to shove the Slayer against so he could help her get thoroughly clean. Still, he'd hesitated a tick after she'd suggested they revisit the area while they waited for her room service order to be delivered—something she'd placed after bursting into delighted cackles when his stomach had heaved a mighty growl, reminding them both that he hadn't eaten since whatever they'd force-fed him at the hospital.

"Come on," she'd said, tugging him off the bed. "We got all dirty again."

"Not really seein' the problem here, sweet."

"Well, you said we could put the walk off to tomorrow, but I think there's still enough daylight left to sneak it in today." Buffy had

grinned, looking a bit bashful. "I want to make sure your first day as a human is all hitchless."

Spike had cast a look at the window, where sunlight was still spilling in, and it had hit him that he had no idea how long it would be before it set for the day. The internal timer that had kept him alive for more than a century had run out of batteries, which had the equilibrium of his new reality tilting again. In pieces, it was easy to swallow. A reflection here, a heartbeat there, skin that was warm to the touch and prone to sweating—all together, though, it seemed too large for his brain.

Buffy wanting him to have what he'd mentioned that night on the phone meant more to him than having it. So after they'd showered for a second time, after Spike had experienced human food that left him wanting more, they had dressed and left for a walk around the block. She'd kept her hand in his, squeezing every few seconds as though knowing he needed some grounding.

When they returned, Buffy had begged off for a few seconds to check in with her crew. Learned then that Kennedy's body had been found, and the coven was preparing a send-off for her and those other slayers and witches who had fallen during the fight. There was a bit of cleanup to do in Los Angeles but allocating all resources to one place seemed like a great way to end up having a spot of trouble down the line, so those slayers who weren't badly injured would head back to London with Giles first thing, Bianca and the Immortal among them. Willow, Xander, Andrew, and Dawn were going to stick around for a while—at least until they were sure the situation in LA was under control.

Only then would they have any sort of idea about what came next.

Afterward, Buffy sighed and sat on the edge of the bed, the general once again.

"It'll be like this for a while, probably," she said. "Maybe forever. I'm not sure where we'll land. And there will be another thing. Another apocalypse, another bad guy. It'll just keep happening and I say I want out but—"

"But you're the Slayer, Slayer. You'll never be happy if you're not in the thick of it."

"Is that what happy is? Always worrying?"

"Reckon happy's whatever we make of it." He sat next to her, tucked an arm around her and drew her into him. "Happiest I've been these last few months are the times I could steal away with you."

She softened a bit at that, then looked up at him. "Same here."

"So we'll have that, yeah? Only with more actual shagging." Spike paused, tilted his head. "Wanna be in the thick of it too, pet. Wherever you are is where I'll be. Just might be a smidge more breakable now."

"No. Power-up, remember? I might be the most callous friend in the world for bringing it up now, but I did talk to Willow about that. She thinks she can work something." Buffy shifted, nudging his shoulder with her cheek. "Actually, she sounds pretty excited about it. I think she wants something to focus on right now that's not... Well, any of this. There's a spell or something she did to herself when she was Dark Willow that enhanced her strength—that's what I was talking about at the hospital, by the way. The slayer she fought was me. And she packed a punch. She mentioned focusing it into a talisman or something."

It was odd, feeling his heartbeat quicken. One of those things he knew would eventually lose its novelty, but for the moment seemed unnatural. The thought of getting to keep the strength that had built him was a bit too good to be true—the thing that shoved what had happened over the past couple of days from the realm of reality to fever dream.

"Pinch me," he said.

Buffy didn't hesitate before doing as he asked—a mite harder than the situation warranted, but hell, he wasn't going to complain. Pain was one of those things that kept him grounded.

Still, didn't keep him from pinching back as hard as he could, which naturally led to Buffy taking a swipe at his head with one of the fluffy pillows near the headboard. He retaliated in kind, and in easy seconds the hardened general was ushered out the door again, leaving behind the playful girl who had earned her day off after saving the world.

"What sort of glasses will you need?" Buffy asked a few minutes

later, naked now, and arching up as he kissed his way down her stomach.

Spike stilled, his mouth fixed on the spot just below her belly button that he happened to know for a fact was one of her favorite places to be kissed. He looked up. "What?"

The girl had the decency to blush. "Earlier...you said that you'd need glasses."

"That's what you wanna talk about now?"

"Do not judge the brain of Buffy. It thinks random things at random times."

"I'll say." Spike shook his head, chuckling, and continued the trek he'd started until he was perched between her thighs. "Already growin' bored with me, love?"

"One thing with you I'll never be is bored." She hooked a leg around his shoulder and used that considerable strength of hers to drag him forward until his face was damn near flush against her pussy. "I was just thinking...of you being human, and the things that will be different." A beat, then she wiggled her hips. "And all the things that'll be the same."

He laughed again, nudged her clit with his tongue, and favored her with a few long laps before sinking a finger inside of her, then another. "Well, glasses. Mostly for readin'. I can see this just fine..." He kissed her clit again. "And you didn't notice me walkin' into any walls while we were out, did you?"

Buffy's answer came out half-gasp, half-sigh. "Nope..."

"Guess we'll just need to make a list, yeah? Things that human blokes need to think about." Spike leaned in to give her another nibble, then froze. "Fuck."

"Mmkay," she agreed breathlessly.

"Wager birth control's one of those things, yeah?" A thing they hadn't used earlier. It hadn't even occurred to him, right dolt that he was. And not that the thought of knocking his lady up was necessarily terrifying—though it sort of was—Spike knew damn well that the time to start popping out babies was not now. Not with everything so new, both with them and with him. Hell, he wasn't even sure she wanted sprogs of her own, weight of the world responsibility and all. Toss in a

kid and the fear and worry that kept her from catching winks would explode beyond reasonable proportions.

But then her fingers were combing through his hair, soft and reassuring. Not the sort of way a girl would touch a bloke who might have just gotten her up the duff.

"I was wondering when that might occur to you," she said, her tone now a bit dry. "But it's okay. All with the handled. I'm on some sort of mystical anti-oopsie thing that Willow made for me a few weeks back."

That news might have knocked him over had he not already been lying down. As it was, Spike arched an eyebrow, slowly withdrawing his fingers from her pussy and forcing himself to ignore the frown that flickered across her face. As much as he'd like to lose himself between her thighs, this seemed a conversation they needed to have, and with all of his parts engaged. "Yeah...?"

"Yep," she replied.

"So you've been on birth control for *weeks*. If I were the worryin' sort..."

Buffy rolled her eyes and lightly slapped him upside the head. Then she lifted herself off the bed, edged back until her back was pressed to the headboard, and let out a breath. "Doofus. I just...had a feeling."

"A feeling." He sat up as well, enjoyed the way she ran her eyes down his body. God, he would never get tired of the way she looked at him now. "That you'd be shagging someone who could put you in the family way, then?"

"I assume that means pregnant." When he nodded, she blew out a breath. "Yeah, I had a feeling. And if I was right... Well, I kinda just wanted to fall into bed and not worry about things like runs to the nearest drug store." She went quiet, furrowing her brow. "I don't know, Spike, I... I felt like I couldn't be the only one who believed in you. And we'd been talking so long that... Well, like I said, I didn't want to have to worry about it one way or another. This was a one-and-done thing, so no daily pills at the same time and no need for prophylactics. If you were still a vampire, I was out nothing. If you weren't, then, tada. Birth control—check."

He stared at her, heart in his throat. "You really thought this was gonna happen."

At this point, Spike was repeating himself, or asking her to repeat herself, but he couldn't help it. There was belief and then there was *this*. This thing he didn't have a word for. Buffy had thought him worthy before to be a Champion, her Champion, yes. Had given him her trust, her body, and her love—but what she was talking about was something beyond that. Something beyond them.

He thought again of the moment she'd realized it. How she'd thrown herself at him, laughing and crying and holding him to her.

*"I knew it. I knew it, Spike. I knew it."*

He blinked fast before he could dissolve once more, focusing instead on how she looked now. The smile on her face, the slightly bed-rumpled hair, the soft glow in her eyes.

"Yeah," Buffy said quietly. "I thought it was a distinct possibility."

"And if it didn't..."

"Then I keep my vampire until the next apocalypse when you got a shot at it again. Or if you didn't want... It was whatever you wanted, Spike."

"Whatever I wanted," he said slowly, the ringing in his head dulling a bit. "Just turns out you pulled out all the stops for me becomin' human. Mystical birth control, and that power-up you keep mentionin'. Sure you weren't holding out that your man would lose his fangs?"

"Really?" Buffy arched an eyebrow. "In the shower, you were all worried that I wanted a vampire. Now you're worried that I want a human?"

"Well, didn't know you'd gone to so much trouble, did I? A fella learns somethin' like this, he's keen to wonder."

"But that wasn't it at all," she said, then stuck her lower lip out in a pout that was just bloody unfair. "Though I concede that's how it might look."

"Doesn't matter, does it? We're here, aren't we?"

"Spike, I'm over the vampire thing. Like completely over it. If you were still all room-temperature-y, we'd still be here."

"I know that." She'd said as much, and he believed her. But he still felt like he was missing something.

And he was. Buffy confirmed it the next second when she wrapped her arms around her legs rather than groaning and muttering some-

thing about dropping it, which somehow made him feel more of a wanker. But maybe it was better they talk this out now. Get everything out in the open so that when they fell into each other again, there was nothing left separating them at all.

"This is hard for me to explain," Buffy said a minute later. "I love you. And that's...big for me. I haven't been in love with anyone else in my life except... Well, I was a kid then and I'm not now, but some things about me apparently haven't changed. I would have given him anything, done *anything* to get him to stay with me. To make him... well, *happy's* not the best word because that way leads to badness, but as happy as he could reasonably get without going all homicidal on me. He left because he was a vampire and that broke my heart, and then he broke my heart all over again because he *wasn't*. He never even tried."

Spike nodded, his throat tight. Didn't seem a good place to interrupt.

"And you would try," she went on. "Human, if you thought that was what I wanted. But I do know you too, Spike. I know how much you love the fight—how much it meant for you to have strength you didn't before. And how much it'd suck to stand back and watch. I also know you'd do that for me." She licked her lips. "Some of it is about being enough for you, and I know that's not fair because I know I am, but insecurity is part of the Buffy Summers package."

He nodded again. It was part of his package as well. And likely nothing either of them would ever be able to reassure away. Rather, something time would heal. Spike wasn't sure how to convey that, so he settled for dropping a kiss on her knee.

"But it's also about...giving you what you want," she continued. "Whatever that is. And after Willow did her research, I was convinced that you were the vampire in the prophecy so the human-thing was going to be inevitable. Maybe not this apocalypse, but the next one. Because, as we've established, the world isn't going to try to stop ending itself anytime soon. And when the day came that the prophecy came true... I just wanted to make sure you had what you needed outside of me to be happy with it, hence the power-boost. Because... I mean, we talked about you going out and getting yourself vamped and I didn't see you doing that—not after everything. Not after what you

went through to earn your soul. And I'm not sure the way Angel was able to undo his thing would work for you, but if it's what you wanted, I would ask Willow to research that too. I just... From the way you talked about the Shanshu, I just kinda assumed this was the outcome you were hoping for, so that's the one I prepared for. Birth control, brainstorming ways we could keep you in the fight—the things I could predict we'd need. You've given me so much... I wanted to give back to you, and maybe this wasn't the best way, but—”

Spike growled and jerked forward, seizing her by the wrists. He had a moment to enjoy the surprise that flashed across her face before the worry there melted and she favored him with that blinding smile he'd somehow managed to earn. Then she was on him, tackling him back to the mattress and wrestling hot, desperate kisses from his lips that tasted of her, brilliant and pure, and he loved her so much it hurt.

The best kind of hurt.

“We through with the talkies?” Buffy asked, reaching between them and taking his cock into her hot hand. “Cause I really want to skip to the part where we have sex again.”

“Fuck.”

“Yes, that's the idea.”

Spike lifted himself onto his elbows, panting. “Right then. Have at it.”

“Have at it? Gee, romantic.”

“Want romance? I love you. Now pretty please ride my cock.”

Buffy snickered and shoved him back to the mattress, casting her leg astride his hips and lifting herself to tease her slick flesh with the head of his prick. “You'll tell me how much is too much? I didn't ask before and I should have. I want—”

“Give me all of it,” he replied, gripping her ass. “All of it, Slayer. Squeeze me ‘till I pop.”

“And if it hurts?”

“I'll come harder.”

She rolled her eyes, leaned over and stole a kiss off his lips, then slowly—*god, yes*—began lowering herself onto him, watching him as he watched them, his newly human body becoming one with her.



"You have a thing for pain," Buffy said, and *fuck*, began clenching those muscles of hers from the start. Baby wasn't playing.

"I have a thing for you," Spike replied, digging his fingers into her hips and gritting his teeth as she lifted herself again, her molten flesh dragging along his cock and then back again. Deeper now, then back, and deeper still. It occurred to him a second later that he ought to do something other than lie there like a prat, but she felt so good and it was still all so new but not. Sort of like them—new, but not. "Buffy..."

"This time might be fast," she said, and began rolling her hips in that way of hers. "Spike, touch me."

She didn't need to ask twice. He found her clit with his thumb, trembling when she trembled. "I've got you, love," he whispered. "Got you."

"Good. Don't let go."

"Never will." It was the most honest thing he'd ever said. Whatever came next didn't matter a lick to him, so long as he had her there to share it.

Buffy shook her head, her eyes shining, and his heart seized, the blood in his temples pounded harder.

"Me neither," she swore.

And when she kissed him, he felt how much she meant it. How much she meant everything. Every second they'd spent together, here and on the phone. Everything she'd told him, even when he hadn't wanted to listen.

He had the world in his arms. A world he'd fought and died for.

Now was his chance to live.

## EPILOGUE

“HEY,” BUFFY SAID, HER VOICE WARM. THE SOUND ALONE WAS enough to relieve some of the tension that had ridden with him from the airport. “I didn’t know if I’d hear from you before the thing.”

“Just walked in,” Spike said, wedging the phone between his shoulder and his ear as he turned to kick the door shut, his overnight duffle falling to the floor. “Can’t stay here long if I aim to meet this bloody deadline, but it didn’t seem right not ringing you straight off.”

“Feeling nostalgic?”

“Dunno if that’s what I’d call it.” He gave his surroundings a good look. Not much had changed. Same furniture—awful red couch included—same narrow bed, same basic kitchen set-up. The video game console had gotten an upgrade—some fancy new system he hadn’t had a chance to try yet—and there were a couple of lamps that hadn’t been here before, but otherwise, it was much as he remembered. Like stepping back in time. “Never figured I’d be back here, though. That’s for bloody sure.”

For a few months four years ago, the flat had been home. Now, it was just another piece of property owned by the Watchers Council, used by any number of folks passing through Los Angeles. Whatever warding Lindsey had done on the place had made it an ideal piece of

real estate, requiring few adjustments by Willow's crew to be completely repurposed for the goody-good guys. It just happened to be empty at the moment and being that Rupert was a bit miserly when it came to expenses, there had been no point in searching out alternatives.

"What about you, love?" he asked a moment later. "Feelin' nostalgic?"

"Big no on nostalgia," Buffy said dryly. "Though Bianca and the Immortal send their regards. And no, I didn't tell him where he could shove them."

"That wanker didn't make a pass at you this time, did he?"

"Implying, of course, that he's ever made a pass at me, and we both know the answer to that."

"One of us does," Spike replied, and even he could hear the sulk in his voice. "You at least learn what the big crisis was? Another Goran lose their head?"

"Actually, there wasn't much of a crisis. It was more of a formality."

Spike rolled his head back, groaning. "Don't tell me..."

"He asked to marry Bianca."

"Asked *you* if he could marry Bianca?"

"It's apparently tradition for...whatever kind of demon he is." Buffy paused, and he could almost see her wrinkling her pert little nose as she searched for words. "Information he still refuses to share, though apparently Bianca will learn on their wedding night."

"What a sodding prince." Spike pinched the space between his eyes. There wasn't a lot of time—this ritual Angel had practically begged him to come and do a dance for relied heavily on the positions of the stars or what all. A bunch of nonsense that sounded as reliable as a horoscope reading, but Willow had done all her checks and it seemed to be on the up and up. Only chance to make contact would be for a period of seventeen minutes sometime close to ten that night, and each of those minutes would count if they aimed to do the thing proper.

Still, he had time enough for this.

"How's it you're the one to ask for the girl's hand? Don't her folks live in Florence?"

"Ahh, yes, but according to whatever-demon tradition, permission only counts if granted by the grand warrior...or something. It sounded very fancy in Italian."

Somehow Spike didn't see the Immortal as being too keen on tradition—or at least, not so much it would have mattered a lick had he not received Buffy's blessing. But he didn't say as much, didn't really care to get into that fight when they couldn't make up the fun way. There were certain things they would never agree on, and that the Immortal's interest in Buffy was purely professional was one of them.

Not that Spike worried at all. If the Immortal tried anything, Buffy *and* Bianca would kick his egomaniacal arse all the way to the bloody Colosseum. But Spike wouldn't put it past the git to fabricate a load of traditions that had him in close proximity with the Slayer, requiring all sorts of casual touches that he'd hope would lead to touches of the less casual sort.

"Spike? You're doing that growly thing again."

He frowned and cleared his throat. "Sorry, pet."

"How you can growl like that even now..."

"Heard this one a time or two."

"Yeah, yeah." She blew a raspberry at him, and his heart melted. "So, when's the big thing? Ten, right?"

"Right." Which lent him pause. "Wait a tick. How's it you're up?"

"You called me, doofus."

"It's not even seven in the bloody morning there." And given that Buffy had a tendency to either smash or chuck her mobiles into the nearest wall whenever anyone called before nine, this was just odd. "Why the hell did you answer?"

"I knew it was you. Of course I answered."

"Sound mighty chipper for as early as it is," he said slowly. "Wanna tell me what's goin' on?"

"Can't it be I'm just happy to hear from you?" Buffy replied with a little, incredulous laugh. "Or maybe I was out all night partying it up, Rome-style. Maybe I haven't been to sleep yet. Maybe I met an exotic Italian stranger and—"

"That's it. I'm headin' back to the airport."

"Spike!"

"Nope. Sorry. Angel can muck up this ritual all by himself. Wasn't too fond of the bitch, anyway. She's probably livin' it up and'll be right brassed to hear from the lot of us."

"I didn't meet any exotic stranger, Mr. Insecure. I'm awake because, on the off-chance you called before the thing, I wanted to be up so I could hear your voice because, for some strange reason, I miss you."

Spike grinned, dropping the pretense. Hard to keep that up when she'd just handed him a win. "Checkmate, love."

"What? What checkmate? There was no checkmate!"

"Got you to say it first. Pretty sure that counts."

There was a pause, then Buffy groaned loudly—the sort of groan that might put a fella in mind of something else entirely. "Checkmate is stupid," she said a moment later, in full pout mode. Too bad he wasn't there to snog the frown right off her gorgeous face. "It's a stupid thing and I don't even know why we do it."

"Oh, so last Sunday when you pranced around the flat in your knickers for ten bloody minutes 'cause you caught that rhy'nock demon first—"

"That was different." She sniffed. "It's not stupid when I say it."

He chuckled. "No, it's bloody adorable is what it is."

"That's not patronizing or anything," Buffy replied dryly, though there was no edge to her voice. "Will you call me when you get in?"

"Won't be able to catch any kip if I don't hear your voice. Hard enough sleepin' without you hoggin' all the covers."

"I am not a cover hog."

"And yet they end up on your side, anyway."

Buffy made a grumbling sound that he also couldn't help but find adorable. "You're lucky I love you."

"Believe me, sweet, I tell myself the same thing every day." He released a small sigh and cast another look around the place that had once been home. "Best be off. If I'm late, this whole thing's for rot."

"Yeah. Remind me why you didn't go straight there again?"

"Cause if I showed up at Angel's with a bag over my shoulder, the wanker would offer me a bloody room."

"How underhanded of him."

"He wouldn't *want* to," Spike retorted, heading now toward the door once more. "Had enough awkward moments with your ex to last me several lifetimes, and seein' as I just have the one lifetime now, I'm not too eager to add any more to the list."

"Fair enough, I guess." She fed him a sweet little sigh, the sort that made his heart do that funny double-time thing. It was something he hoped never to get used to. "Call me when you get back, okay?"

"Gonna worry?"

"You know I will."

"This isn't that kind of ritual, pet. Least as far as I've been told." Spike dropped his gaze to the band wrapped around the index finger on his left hand. "And even if it goes sideways, I got my insurance policy, don't I?"

"Well, obviously you have that because you know just how much I would kick your ass if you left that on the nightstand again," Buffy replied, a bit terse, but fuck, he loved it. "But seeing as the doo-hickey doesn't make you unkillable, I'd still like you to not do anything stupid that might get you killed."

"Always spoilin' my fun, Slayer."

"Not even a little sorry."

"Of course you're not, you brassy bitch."

"I'm gonna make you pay for that later, just so you know."

"Why the hell do you think I said it?" He grinned as he listened to her fume—something he swore he could still hear, even without vampire senses. "Love you, Buffy."

"Love you, too. Call me when you're done."

"Like you need to ask."



LIKE MOST THINGS, it had taken some trial and error before they'd settled on the ring. Buffy hadn't fancied the idea at all—too easy to yank off, she'd said, and cited the time she'd done just that when he'd been wearing the Gem of Amara. While no one was going to blab anytime soon about where Spike got the strength to match the Slayer's, Buffy was willing to take no chances that some wannabe Big Bad

wouldn't just suss it out for themselves. But the ring was the most discreet of the options, and once Willow was able to whip up a little something extra to prevent forcible removal, his lady had relented. Granted, not before she first exhausted her class of mini-slayers proving that the mojo worked, but she was going to do that no matter what.

"It's good practice," Buffy had protested when one of the girls limped up to her after being tossed across the training room. "Lots of demons are that strong. You need to be prepared."

"Dunno, love," Spike had replied, admiring his new jewelry. "Don't think I packed this much of a wallop when I came with fangs."

She'd glared and he'd grinned and that had been the end of that.

At Buffy's behest, Spike wore the ring near constantly. In fact, the only times he took it off were when he was putting himself through the training regimen they had devised for the girls—best way to keep in shape and build his natural strength—and on certain nights when he wanted her to squeeze him just a little harder. Willow was still working on ways to make the shift permanent, no talisman needed, but there were considerations and consequences. It wasn't exactly natural, making a human bloke super-powered.

Still, Red thought she could pull it off, being that Spike wasn't altogether natural to begin with. After all, there was nothing too natural about a vampire whose heart started beating after a hundred and twenty-some years, prophecy or no. Spike was content for her to take her time to get it right. What he had now worked just fine—all the perks of being a vampire and none of the weaknesses.

Something he was keen to demonstrate the second Angel smarted off about him not being able to land a punch anymore. Which, yes, Spike might have goaded him into saying just so he could make just such a demonstration, but no one had asked the wanker to play along. But play along he had, giving Spike the much-cherished visual of his miserable grandsire crashing into the front check-in desk at the hotel where he lived.

"Aimin' for a good thrashin', mate, I'm happy to give it to you," Spike had called. "Between trainin' baby slayers, fightin' demons, and

sharin' a bed with Buffy, reckon I could do some real damage to that melon you call a forehead."

Angel had climbed to his feet, dusted himself off while carefully avoiding eye contact with those around them, then pretended to not have heard a word Spike had said and grumbled something about getting the show on the road.

In the years since the showdown with the Circle of the Black Thorn, Angel had managed to rebuild his old detective agency. He ran it nowadays alongside his son, who had apparently decided normal living wasn't for him—though he kept in close contact with his adopted family. Other assorted staff included Nina the werewolf, some chit who could manipulate electricity, and Robin Wood, who apparently had lost the coin toss after he and Faith had split.

The ritual itself was one Nina had worked out—seemed the werewolf fancied herself a bit of a witch on the side, or was on the path. The only ingredients needed, beyond the herbs and what all, were the two people who had any sort of connection to Illyria. Voices she might recognize and know to follow.

By the time Spike had booked the plane ticket, the decision of whether or not to go through with this had already been made, the arguments for and against debated and exhausted more than once. He'd be lying if he said his own misgivings were satisfied—time worked differently in hell dimensions, after all, and Illyria was volatile enough when she hadn't been languishing for centuries in a never-ending hellscape. But what she'd done there at the end meant something, and she was owed her second chance.

Besides, he'd made a promise.

So after the initial pleasantries were exchanged and egos tended, Spike and Angel had taken their seats in some woo-woo circle painted on the Hyperion floor. Words were chanted, herbs were burned, and they'd called out for the once demon-goddess who had carved out the insides of their friend, made a home in her skin, then gone and sacrificed herself for a bunch of creatures she claimed to hate.

Remarkably, when Illyria had clawed her way through what looked like a ripple in the air, she was more or less unchanged. Stoic and hardened, yes, but the monster they'd prepared to fight wasn't there. She'd



landed on all fours, her fists balled and her blue hair shrouding her face. For a long stretch, it had seemed no one moved. Then, in that unnerving way of hers, she'd twitched and looked up. First at Angel, then at Spike. There had been no flicker of recognition—no flicker of anything—but then, that was Illyria, too. At least how he remembered her.

At length, she'd risen to her feet. "This pleases me," she'd said. "I tired of that world."

There had been some talk following, of course, trying to pry just how long it had been there and what the lasting repercussions would be, if any. Illyria hadn't been too interested in chatting, though. She remembered everyone just fine, it turned out, and was rather disaffected by everything that had happened on the other side of the veil. A consequence of her being an Old One, Angel had decided. The time spent in the hell dimension hadn't impacted her at all.

And that was that. One quick trip to the Hyperion, a little ritual to rescue a hell-bitch, and Spike was back at the flat in no time at all. He tried not to think about how bloody weird it would be, crawling between the sheets on that bed, staring at the ceiling, and holding a phone to his ear. In so many ways, it felt lifetimes had passed since those days. Working alongside the Slayer kept him in damn near-constant motion. There was the school for the new recruits, the various crises that had them volleying across the globe, and a few cataclysmic events that inevitably spiraled into apocalypse territory. Dull moments were sparse, even when they had the odd rare stretch of time where they could do something just the two of them.

But he wouldn't change a lick. Even their fights felt good. Felt right. Might look like chaos to those on the outside—probably did, at that—but things were brilliant. More so than he could have ever dreamed during the stretch of time he'd called this place home, even at his most optimistic. The part of him perpetually waiting for the crash and burn, convinced that the life he had wasn't one he deserved, would never go away entirely, and he wasn't sure he wanted it to. It was defeating that voice every day, fighting back, fighting for her and them and each other, that kept him on.

He knew he ought to call her the second he was inside, but also

knew that he'd want to do nothing but listen to her until he passed out and there were a few things to do ahead of that. Like wash the stink of the ritual off his skin and find somewhere nearby that would deliver to this neighborhood. After scrubbing down in the shower, Spike pulled on a pair of sweats and crashed against the red couch, a phone book in his lap and his mobile at the ready.

There had been a Vietnamese place a few blocks up, if memory served, which sounded as good as anything else. And if the listing in the book were anything to go off, the joint was still open. It'd likely be quicker to go place an order for pickup, but he didn't much fancy the idea of getting out again.

Which was just as well. The second after he'd placed his order, the phone started vibrating, Buffy's name flashing across the screen.

"Couldn't wait, could you?" he drawled when he answered.

"You were supposed to call me as soon as you were done."

"Oi. How do you know I'm not still at the bloody hotel? The ritual coulda lasted a bit."

"Because Angel already called Willow and asked her to do a spell to make sure the rift between that hell dimension and our world was closed."

Spike rolled his eyes. Of course he had. "Wanker."

"Yes. People who don't follow through on their promises to call their girlfriends are, in fact, wankers."

"Was just gettin' comfortable, pet. Got a long night in a bed that doesn't have you in it to look forward to." A knock sounded on the door. Spike paused, then frowned at it. "That was quick."

"What was quick?"

"Little joint up the corner from here. Called in an order before you rang."

"Oh, what'd you get?"

Spike smirked and pushed to his feet. "Just chicken pho," he said, making his way toward the pile of discarded clothing he'd shucked earlier to pillage the pockets. "Reckoned anything else might keep me up. Though I do have a hankering for some spicy buffalo wings. Might need to get me an order before I head out."

"And definitely before you kiss me again."

“Sayin’ you don’t want spice when I snog you?”

“I’m saying you don’t need to borrow spice. You bring enough of your own.”

He chuckled and moved toward the door, cash at the ready. “Bloody right I do.”

“Why do I insist on stroking your ego when it so clearly doesn’t need it?”

“Because you love me,” Spike replied, throwing the door open.

And promptly dropped the phone.

He should have guessed—should have seen it coming—but somehow he hadn’t. She was there, staring at him with those waggish green eyes and a sparkling gotcha-smile. Buffy snapped her own phone closed and stuffed it into her pocket, then took a step forward and burrowed herself against his chest. “I really do, ya know,” she said.

“Fuck.” It took a second longer than it should have for his brain to click back on. Spike wrapped his arms around her, buried his face into her hair to inhale her scent. “You’re here.”

“You noticed.”

“Didn’t think... What are you doin’ here?”

Buffy didn’t reply at first, just hugged him a bit tighter before pulling back far enough to meet his eyes. “Well, aside from the fun that was making you wonder why I was wide awake and perky when I answered the phone...”

He barked a laugh. Couldn’t help it. “Cheeky wench.”

“I would’ve told you right off but I didn’t wanna spoil the surprise.”

“So what happened? You catch a red-eye or—”

“I never went to Rome.” Buffy grinned impishly, her eyes sparkling. “After your plane took off, I called the Immortal and threatened bodily harm if he didn’t tell me what was so important. Once he ‘fessed up, I gave my permission or whatever, told him I was skipping the ceremony, switched flights and...*voilà*. Here I be.”

Spike drank her in. The fact that she was here was still not quite real. “But why?”

“Why?” She had the audacity to pout at him. “Are you not happy to see me?”

“Of course I’m happy!” He cupped her cheeks and kissed her,

fighting back a growl when her familiar warm taste invaded his mouth. They had only planned to be apart for a couple of days, but after four years of sleeping beside her, the prospect had felt endless. “Fuck, I’m bloody ecstatic. Just tryin’ to keep up. Here I thought you’d be in Rome until Tuesday—”

“Well, I thought about it and I decided that two nights just wouldn’t work for me.”

“Wouldn’t work, eh?”

“Yeah. It served us well while it needed to, but I am so over you being my long-distance guy.”

“So you just...” Spike laughed again and shook his head. “Bloody hell, Slayer, I love you.”

“Checkmate.”

“Worth it.” He kissed her again, and again, and in easy seconds, they were stumbling back toward the bed—a bed much too narrow for the both of them, but things like space hadn’t stopped them before. By the time the backs of his knees hit the mattress, Buffy’s shirt was on the other side of the room and his sweats were around his ankles, and he didn’t give a fuck if he woke up with every muscle aching, as long as she was tucked against him.

“Think we can squeeze one in before the food gets here?” she asked, wrapping her hand around his cock and giving it a firm tug.

“Fuck the food.”

“I’d rather fuck you.” Buffy grinned and pulled back to survey the bed, happy and flush and *here*. “How often did you imagine us doing this here?”

“Every bloody night for months.” Spike seized her by the wrists to tug her up as he finished kicking off his sweats. “Hell, still sometimes have dreams about it. Wakin’ up here and findin’ you with me.”

If possible, she brightened even further. One of those looks so radiant that he was certain it had the power to dust. “Well,” she replied, shoving him back to the mattress. “Here’s my chance to prove that even really good dreams can come true.”

He threaded his fingers through her hair. A thousand nights, it had seemed, spent in this place, talking to her, wishing she were with him, missing her so much it hurt but also having her in ways that had

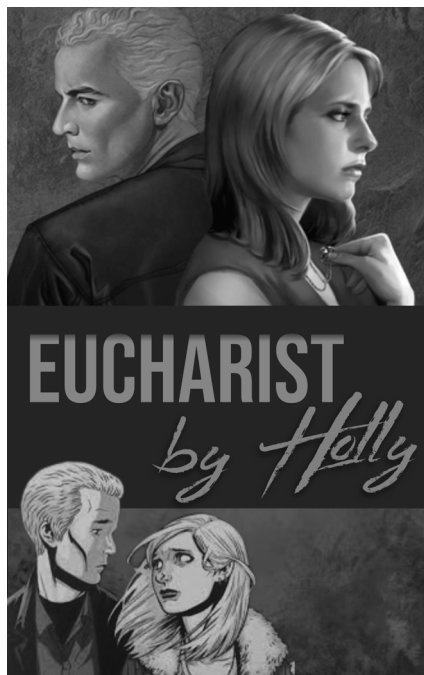
seemed impossible. Every step taken, every word shared, bringing them to where they were now. To a life he didn't deserve but would fight to keep every day.

"Hate to break it to you, baby," Spike muttered, dragging his fingers down her cheek, "but you did that already."

She parted her lips, undoubtedly to call him a sap, but he tugged her down and kissed her before she could manage.

Fuck, life was grand.









## EUCCHARIST

It was almost an accident, the way they'd found out about Buffy. *Almost*. There had been intent behind action, a reason to perform the tests that had changed both their lives again, but no one gave a bloody fuck about that intent once the damage was done. Or not damage, Spike was forced to remind himself. Nothing was hurt but everything was redefined, and wasn't that always the way with them? Just as soon as they found their footing, started building toward something, the circumstances bloody flipped and forced them to reconsider.

In his case, reconsider the plans he'd been making for the parts of the future he'd thought safe to assume immovable. While nothing was guaranteed in this life—and bugger if he didn't know that better than most people—there were certain absolutes he'd come to wholly believe in, and she was at the center of them all. Not that they wouldn't have their rows, not the time they had left, and definitely not that their last seconds on this earth would be anything but violent. That was who they were, after all. Warriors till the bitter end. The only thing anyone could count on was their luck eventually running out, and the clock with it.

That was fine, he'd always reckoned. Part of the perk that came with the prophecy he'd managed to snag from under Angel's nose. The

body that had once been fashioned to be the lasting sort would one day run out of tomorrows. Should he live for any meaningful stretch, there would be sacrifices along the way. His vision. His hearing. His strength. Maybe his memory, too, depending, and maybe more that he hadn't even considered. All a part of the natural process when you were a natural sort of fella. Spike couldn't say he'd been looking forward to it, but the prospect hadn't frightened him much. Way he figured it, he'd already lived more lifetimes than he ought to have been allowed. If the price of living with Buffy was also dying with her one day, then he'd take it and never look back.

He didn't start looking back until they found out. He'd had no reason to.

The day they'd found out had been a normal one. A few months back, one of the baby slayers—a girl whose name escaped him even now, despite how much trouble she'd caused—had been on the tail of some demon in Beijing. The demon happened to be the sort of breed that spat as a defense mechanism, sort of like the dinosaurs in that Spielberg film, with a mind to blind whoever was after it so it could either go in for the kill or make a handy getaway. Somehow, the spit itself had somehow made it into the girl's blood stream, which, while not ideal, hadn't been cause for alarm. There were any number of documented demons whose various body fluids caused all sorts of nasty side effects, but not this one. Its function was to blind and nothing more.

Or so they'd thought. Twelve hours after the encounter, the girl had come down with a mystical fever. How they had deemed it mystical, Spike had sod-all idea, but Buffy's staff of experts had weighed in and the answer had been definitive. Whatever was in that demon's spit had caused the illness, and what was worse, it was the sort that could be transmitted from person to person. Only it seemed selective in who it jumped to, which meant more tests, more analysis, and more mindless yapping from so-called experts trying to predict something they had never seen before.

Turned out the pattern was easy enough to parse once they slowed down long enough to look. The watchers who had tended to the girl hadn't gotten sick, but the girl's slayer friend had. And that slayer had taken it home to her family, who also hadn't come down with any

mystical illness. Same couldn't be said for the girls at the Beijing academy, all of whom had symptoms within days. The effects of the illness ranged from mild to severe—some rebounded in a week or so, and others not at all.

Spike hadn't wanted to go—hadn't thought it worth the risk, but try telling that to Buffy Summers, the woman who carried the burden of the whole bloody world on her shoulders. She and Willow had been keen to investigate, the plan being that the witch would take the afflicted and Buffy and Spike would, together, hunt down the beastie responsible. See if they could bring in its head once and for all to get to the root of the problem.

What Buffy had gotten instead was a faceful of demon spit. Well, that and an angry rant from Spike, something to the tune of *what did I bloody say would happen?* right before he'd snapped the demon's neck.

Buffy had wiped off, said she'd be fine. Spike had rolled his eyes and told her that she better be fine, 'cause he certainly wasn't going to be cheated out of the chance of wringing her neck himself. They'd traipsed back to the Beijing headquarters, Spike watching her like a bloody hawk the entire time, waiting for the first symptoms to kick in. They hadn't, though. Not on the walk back, not during the debriefing with Willow's team of sorcerers, and not that night. They'd shared a shower—Buffy had let him fuss and scold her, which in itself had told him that she wasn't as confident as she wanted him to think—ordered dinner, and decided to catch their kip early. Brace themselves for whatever came next.

Whatever came next turned out to be nothing. Buffy didn't come down with symptoms that night. Nor the following day. Nor the day after that. Willow didn't get excited until she officially passed what she called the *incubation period*, which was estimated at around thirty-six hours. When a full week went by and Buffy remained healthy as the proverbial horse, the conversation shifted from *what's making the girls sick* to *why is Buffy not on her deathbed*, and a whole new branch of study broke off from there. For, as Willow had observed, if they found out why Buffy wasn't sick, perhaps that would lead them to an antidote. Or a vaccine. Or whatever it was humans did these days to stave off illness. Bugger. He couldn't keep up.

And perhaps, if they had found out anything other than what they'd found out, he would have seen to correcting that, being that he was technically human himself.

But that wasn't the way the story went. Nothing nice and simple. Never could be with them.

Turned out the reason she hadn't come down all sickly was the venom or whatall that comprised the demon's defense spit was toxic specifically to the sort of otherworldly predator that had an expiration date. Slayers and demons could all fall ill, but not vampires. Not creatures who healed fast, never aged, and if left to their own devices, never died.

Buffy hadn't had a reaction to the venom because she fell into that category.

And with that discovery, everything had gone to sodding hell.



There were things Spike hadn't known—things she'd never talked about, and for good reason. Revisiting the past was not something either one of them was keen to do if they could help it, particularly all the stuff they had already made their peace with. It wasn't that they wanted to ignore what had come before but rather shared a mutual determination not to let it define who they were either as individuals or to each other now. They had come too far, lost too much, and done too much rebuilding to get to where they were. Going back always came with the risk of lancing old wounds wide open again, regardless of intent.

But she'd had to tell him about the morning after the bathroom, give him the missing pieces he'd never really tried to find and set right. How it was that Tara had died at Warren's hand. Who the bastard had been there to kill, and how close he'd come to doing it. Or, to hear Buffy's take, how he'd succeeded. She'd flatlined at the hospital before the witch had shown up with her new box of magic tricks, and maybe, yeah, overlooking that miraculous recovery would have been easy had she not followed it up by getting a blade jabbed into her gut during the final big battle with the First. Not only had she survived what should

have been a slow, agonizing death, but she'd been fit enough to bloody sprint across the rooftops of Sunnydale's crumbling infrastructure to get to safety.

He hadn't been there for that, of course, having already taken his bow, and enough time had passed that everyone's memories had dulled. There had been the rush to Los Angeles, conferring with Angel and his crew, giving the newly minted slayers room and board for the night as the lot of them tried to suss out what their next steps would be. All Buffy knew for certain was when she'd thought to look at her injury later that night, it hadn't been nearly as grave as she'd thought.

And that had been the end of it. Buffy hadn't had time to let herself get swept up in wondering why her mortal wound had turned not-so-mortal. She'd had a Council to rebuild, girls from all over the world to round up, and her own grief to tend to. Fast forward to where they were now, a few years removed from the crater that was Sunnyhell and the showdown with the Circle of the Black Thorn, and here she was again. Only this time there was no shiny distraction to take her eyes off the prize. There was just the understanding of what it meant. For her. For them. The Slayer and her cushy human partner who, with or without the power-up ring Willow had provided, would eventually start to age the way he was supposed to. The way Buffy never would.

It had taken Spike all of five seconds to decide what he wanted to do. A bit longer to figure out how in the world he would ever get her to agree with him.

And it *had* to be an agreement, whatever else it was. He wasn't riding into this half-cocked when she was the reason he was here at all.

The first talks had, to the outside observer, likely not resembled talks at all. Fuck, getting her to stay in one place, not just immediately leave the room whenever he brought it up, had been half the bloody battle from the start. For that was something that never changed about her, regardless of what she'd seen or been through, what she believed to be true about the state of the world and everyone who lived there. She still thought of humanity as the superior condition—the one to which all other forms of life ought to aspire. The idea of Spike having won it, snagged himself a second chance at an actual life just to piss it all away, was untenable.

But that didn't mean he'd stop trying. Even if talking to her like this was only slightly less infuriating than trying to get somewhere with a brick wall.

"But I don't want it if this is the cost," he found himself yelling at her retreating back now, after having tried to bring it up again. "What don't you understand about that?"

She stopped in the middle of the hall, breathing in that way he knew meant she was struggling to hold onto her temper. To not just start screaming or crying because she hated losing control like that—hated it more when she did it with an audience. Even if the audience was him. Fuck, for all he knew, maybe *especially* when the audience was him. Buffy understood she had nothing to prove or hide where he was concerned, but that didn't mean it came easy for her. Being open and vulnerable was one of those things they both struggled with, even now. And there were things she was sensitive about doing—things they mutually tried to avoid out of consideration for what had come before. For instance, Buffy knew that Dru's method of winning a fight had often been having a meltdown, whether genuine or staged, it hadn't mattered. Seeing her in tears would melt Spike's resistance and he'd do whatever he needed to get her to stop. Buffy had vowed to never do that, manipulate him with her emotions. Put him in the place of believing their relationship was on the line if he didn't kowtow to her way of thinking. It was one of the things he loved most about her, about the *them* they had built together. That she wanted it to be even, fair. That they would never weaponize their love for each other to get their way when the going got rough.

So those times they were at an impasse, Buffy would struggle to maintain her hold on her emotions. Not break down. Not show him tears. Whatever disagreement they had was worth discussing like people who truly loved each other, not people who wanted to own each other.

"It's the part where you do it for me," she said at last, her voice shaking. "The part where...you give it up. Everything you worked so hard for."

"Fuck, Buffy, we've been over this—"

"And it *would* be for me, Spike. You can't tell me it wouldn't." She

turned, tears flashing in those brilliant green eyes of hers, bringing with them a sucker punch he tried to ignore but felt anyway. Knowing that, at least in part, she was miserable because of him. “You did this thing. This amazing... It still, even now, when I think about it... You went and you got a soul and that was *everything*. It was just everything. I know it changed you, but it changed me too. It changed everything I thought about vampires. About *me*. Do you get that? You changed the way I thought about *myself*. It took me a long time to figure it out, but I did. Until you did that, I thought I was the worst thing that could happen to a man.”

Let no one ever say Buffy Summers didn’t know how to make it hurt. “Slayer—”

“No, it’s true. I thought—I thought I was just...toxic. I stole Angel’s soul—”

“You bloody well did not—”

“Hey, I didn’t say it was rational,” she shot back, wiping stiffly at her eyes. “I didn’t say it was *right*. I’m saying that’s how it felt. I stole Angel’s soul. I took someone like Riley—someone who was good and nice and loved me—”

“Pillock,” he muttered, but she ignored him. She’d had to over the years, or they’d just fight every time Finn’s name came up. Easier that way.

But then sometimes, like that day, she’d say something he couldn’t let her get away with. Something truly barking like, “—and look what I turned him into. A cheat. A vampire chew toy. He couldn’t connect with me so he decided to go connect with half of Sunnydale’s undead—”

“For the last bloody time, that had sod all to do with you,” Spike snapped. God, it would be worth it to be a vampire again just so he could scoot by the whole human justice system when the day came he eventually hunted down and popped Finn’s head off his beefy neck for ever putting that rot in her head. “He was a right—”

She held up a hand and practically exploded on him. “I know what he was! I’m telling you what it *feels* like, Spike. You don’t get to decide that for me. You don’t get to say how I feel is wrong. It’s how *I* feel and it’s all I have. And it’s how I felt until you told me about the soul. God,

it's how I felt for a long time *after* the soul. Loving me was so... so *dangerous* it either got people killed or made men put themselves in danger or made them want to hurt themselves so much they'd do something completely crazy, like go across the world and do a bunch of tests that should probably have killed you in order for you to win the one thing I always said you needed to be the man you already were."

The air fell into the loud sort of quiet at the end of that, filled with her heavy breaths and his, Buffy looking at him, pleading with her eyes for him to understand. To hear what she was saying and *get it*. And he did. And it broke his bloody heart as only she could.

"You made me believe that maybe I was someone worth... I dunno, this all sounds so stupid." She sniffed and wiped at her eyes again, but didn't back down. Of course she didn't. That wasn't who she was—who either of them were. "You made me believe that maybe I wasn't the worst thing that could happen...that it was possible for someone to love me without it costing them everything. You made me believe that because of what you did because of me. And now, because of me, you want to take it all back. Be a vampire again. Give up everything you fought so hard to win. And I'm supposed to just be okay with it because...because, what, it means I don't have to be alone? How selfish do you think I am?"

A different, soulless version of himself might have snapped back at that last thing without taking in the whole of what she'd said. He knew that because that was his immediate reflex—point out that she'd just done a fair job of making it about her without taking what *he* wanted into consideration at all. But he didn't snap, managed to hold his tongue and calm himself before letting his mouth run away with him. Because, skewed viewing aside, it wasn't like she wasn't right. To some degree or another, everything he'd ever done since she'd come into his life had been about Buffy. The motives had varied, as had the approaches, but he'd gotten where he was today by following the feelings she gave him. His love for her had inspired him to be better, both selfishly and selflessly, sometimes one at a time and sometimes simultaneous. He wouldn't be where he was, wouldn't have a soul, much less a pulse, were it not for the path she'd sent him on. It had all been for her...just happened to have also been for him. Turned out he wanted



what she wanted. He wanted everything she wanted simply because he knew it was worth wanting if she had her heart set on it.

So if he aimed to make his point, he had to be careful in how he did it. Make sure she understood exactly what she was asking him to leave behind should he drop it like she hoped.

In the end, he settled for honest truth. The most powerful weapon in his arsenal.

“I didn’t want the bloody Shanshu.”

Buffy’s mouth dropped open. Closed. Open again. Her eyes rounded, brightened. “What?”

“I didn’t want it.”

“But you—”

“Or, fine, I didn’t want it for the reasons you wanted me to want it. The reasons I should, yeah?” He drew in a deep breath—oxygen in his lungs that he needed to breathe after more than a century of doing it for show. Like his body had known it was just taking a break between stints at this humanity gig and needed to keep the habit so it didn’t feel so strange when it became essential again. “I told you once, bein’ killed made me feel alive for the very first time. You think just because I didn’t have a soul when I said it that it wasn’t true? Can only think of a handful of times I ever lied to your face, love, and none after I realized I was bloody lost for you.”

Buffy started to blink, once more battling down the swell of emotion that she didn’t want him to see. “But...that’s not what you said. You wanted it—the reward. You said so.”

“Did I?” He honestly couldn’t remember saying anything of the sort. Didn’t mean he hadn’t, and nor did it mean he’d been lying when he’d said it. A man could fool himself into thinking he wanted something when he believed that having it was the only way to having everything else. And he definitely remembered thinking that. That snagging the Shanshu from Angel, being the one the mystics had written bloody prophecies about, the special boy who’d won the award at the end of the apocalypse, would be the way to prove to himself and to Buffy that he was worthy of whatever came next for them.

“Yes.” She was nodding now, hard, her eyes shining. “I asked you about this. I specifically asked you about it. Because Angel... He had it

and he took it back. Remember? It was when you were my undercover guy and still in LA. I found out about the day Angel had erased and it... I asked you. What you would do if you got it. You said you'd go for a walk with me and I asked specifically if you'd give it up because it was harder to be with me as a man than as a vampire."

Spike dropped his head, which was starting to pound, thoughts swirling and pulling him back to a time that hadn't been bad but also hadn't been *this*. When he'd had her without having her—the prelude to the life they had managed to build despite all odds and against all expectations. There had been a lot, then, in the early days. He remembered what it had been like to learn of the Shanshu, how Angel fancied it his ticket out of the curse he'd been fitted with and into the arms of the girl he'd repeatedly spurned, knowing she'd take him back in a not-so-proverbial heartbeat because that was the way it had always been. Angel's way on Angel's terms when Angel said so. And the thought that it might have been real, that after everything he'd done to Buffy, to Spike, that he might collect the toy prize in the box had been too much to stomach.

There had also been just Buffy herself. Knowing what it would mean to her—the only thing that could top the exit he'd pulled off in Sunnydale. Even after they'd started talking again, even after those talks had graduated into something meaningful, something real, it had been there in the back of his mind that even if Buffy could love him, she would always want what he could never give her. The normal she'd spent the bulk of her life chasing—even a facsimile of it, knowing full well the real thing would always remain out of reach. Whatever Buffy wanted was what he wanted her to have, and that want had always usurped his own. And sure, there were relationship experts and other gits who got paid to tell hopeless saps what they were doing wrong who would probably have had a field day with him, but Spike hadn't minded. Not then.

And maybe he had even wanted it a bit for himself. Try it on, see how it fit, identify the parts that didn't work as well and try to adjust or, at the very least, temper expectations. At the time, the prospect of getting the Shanshu only to reject it would have been to reject her. He'd needed the chance to show her that he deserved good things just

as much as her much-lauded first love. He'd needed to prove that he was worthy too. That Angel wasn't as special as he believed he was. That not everything was about him. Some things could be about Spike.

It hadn't been the best reason to want the Shanshu, but he hadn't had a lot of time to come to that conclusion on his own. Everything had been so frenetic and charged; he'd half-expected the whole romance with Buffy to blow up on him for any number of reasons. Something he said, something she said, something hitting her on the head and making her realize just how much better she could do. It had all been there, that possibility and more, and though they'd spoken often, there had been a lot of bloody quiet in the hours between those phone calls. Times when he'd needed her and she'd been an ocean away, and she'd needed him and he'd been doing a job. Waiting for the moment when they would be in each other's space once more. When the future they wanted together became something real.

"I'd never give it up for the reasons he did. Fuck, Slayer, I'd never give it up if I thought it'd give us what it was supposed to."

"But you're giving it up now."

"I'm tellin' you I wanted it because it made me...special." Spike couldn't help it—he winced. God, he sounded like a pillock. "Knew you'd see it like a big prize, so I did too. If I could have it, maybe you'd—"

"Oh god." She took a step back, her face falling.

"Buffy—"

"So it was all for me. All of it."

"It was for me too, at the start. Needed it to feel like I was... Bollocks, like I deserved any of what I wanted."

Buffy stared at him for a moment. "I am not something anyone *deserves*, Spike!" she said, smacking her hand hard against her chest. "I'm not something you earn. I'm a person who loves *you*. Who chose to be with *you*. It had nothing to do with the Shanshu—"

"I know."

"Then—"

"It wasn't about you decidin' I was worthy. It was about me feelin' like I could be. The mess I made of everythin', all the times I'd bugged up, all the times I'd hurt you, more than a century of wrong

bloody calls.” He stared at her, chest heaving with those deep, needed breaths. His heart pounding the way it had now for several years, all reminding him of how tenuous his hold on this world truly was. How fast it could be gone. “I knew how you felt about me. I didn’t know how I felt about myself. I was a bloody wreck then. Would’ve taken anythin’ to feel like...like I could trust myself to be the man who got to go to sleep next to you. It was about wanting absolution, not about wanting to be human. And fucked as it is, I got that.”

Another beat. More staring. Her lower lip started to wobble, and his pounding human heart began to break.

“I thought you wanted it,” she whispered, her voice hoarse. A scratch of sound against the empty air. “I thought we were in this together.”

And that was it—he couldn’t help himself anymore. Had to move, had to touch her, had to do something other than stand there like a git and watch her break. Spike stumbled forward, his hands going to her face, catching the tears as they started to fall over his thumbs. “We are,” he said, pressing his brow to hers. Drawing in another breath. Drinking her in with all his human faculties while he could. There would be no redoing this. No turning back. “We have been.”

“No, you’ve been in it for me.”

“Still what I chose, though. Still what I wanted.”

“How can you say that when you just told me you never wanted the Shanshu?”

He laughed. “I dunno. It’s not one or the other, love. Not cut and dry. Would I have chosen it on my own? No. With you, I’d choose it every time. Reckon that’s what a relationship is, yeah? Makin’ sacrifices for the one we love.”

“I never wanted it to be a sacrifice.”

“And I never saw it that way. Dunno that I properly sussed out how I felt about it until we started talkin’.” He pulled back far enough to brush a kiss across her forehead. Then the corner of her eye, her cheek, before his lips were finally over hers. Warm to warm. “Was never somethin’ I regretted. But now that we know...”

Spike let the sentence linger, the rest unspoken. He wagered a good part of what she was feeling now was owed to the reason they were

having the conversation in the first place. The idea that she was immortal, and Willow's spell had mucked up her chance of normal far better than any calling ever could. She'd been happy in the normal she'd carved for herself, and now she had to start over again. Find out who she was if she wasn't just the last slayer to be the only slayer. She hadn't had a death wish in an age, but she also had never been in a place where she was staring down an eternity of fighting the same battles. Suffering the same losses. Watching those she loved age and die as she remained forever the warrior of the people.

But she wouldn't be alone. Not if he had anything to say about it. And as endless as life could seem, there was a lot of good in it, too. Freedom in knowing you weren't tethered—that all situations were temporary, and soon enough, something would come along to change it up. The only thing that remained eternal was what they were to each other.

"What about your soul?" she asked at length, sniffing.

"I'm keepin' it. Earned it, didn't I? It's mine."

"So, what, we just have Willow curse you?"

Spike barked out a laugh before realizing she was serious. "No," he said, shaking his head and taking a step back. "Bugger that. No sodding point in having it if I'm just gonna lose it every time I look at you."

Buffy frowned at him, not following. And god, he loved her for that. It was one of the things he'd learned over the years with her. Really being with Buffy, getting to live inside all her daft insecurities, and realizing that she was as terrified of losing what they had as he was, and with good reason. Neither of them was used to winning this long—living in harmony without some sort of personal tragedy to shape their lives in dramatic and unchangeable ways. It wasn't all domestic bliss but it was as close as he reckoned a man who had carved a bloody path through Europe for more than a century could ever deserve.

For her, though, the struggle came in understanding just how remarkable she was. How he could feel that being with her wasn't just enough, but everything. She was the sort of person that could convince a monster to seek out a soul just for the chance to be more like her, but she didn't understand that feeling never went away. It wasn't a one and

done. It was forever. Every day he woke up the happiest man on earth. And every day, she was the reason.

"The soul wasn't a curse," he said. "If it were as easy as that, I would've found some witch to work her mojo without ever settin' foot outside the country. Never wanted that. It had to be mine because *I* earned it."

"But the trials almost killed you."

Spike offered a one-shouldered shrug. "Worth it."

"So that's what you want to do. The trials. All over again."

He held her gaze for a moment before dropping his to the floor between them. "Not especially. Things are different now, aren't they? I had nothin' to lose when I went in. Not as keen to put it on the line." Though he would, if it came down to it, and he'd win all over again. Of this he had no doubt—he might have been willing to die for it before but this time, he'd be fighting to live. To keep what was already his. Not just for Buffy anymore, however much it had been the first time. It would be for both of them.

But it was one thing to float becoming fanged again to her—it was another to ask her to watch him suffer on nothing more than the belief that all would turn out the way it was supposed to. More than that—to gamble with something as precious as the life they had built on the belief that all would go as it had the first time around. She wouldn't just lose him if something went wrong, she would lose everything. And no matter how much she believed in him, or how much he trusted that he would make it to the other side, it was too much to risk.

And having too much to risk was the price they paid in not living crisis to crisis. Chasing down apocalypses might have been exhausting but it had instilled that nothing was permanent, and everything could disappear in a blink. It had taken a lot of courage on both their parts, a lot of belief they hadn't really had in a future they could call their own, to hope that what they were working toward was something that could not only exist but stood a chance of lasting.

They understood how fragile it all was. How easily it could be taken away.

"Courtesy of your ex, we know there are a number of ways a soul

can be taken out,” Spike said after a beat. “Should be just as many to put one back. Ways we’ve never thought of.”

“Don’t you think Angel would have—” But she didn’t finish that sentence, rather caught what she said and looked away with a little snort. “Well, no. Of course he wouldn’t.”

“Not any fun bein’ the martyr if he’s not givin’ anythin’ up, is there?”

The ghost of a smile tugged on her lips, and that felt like a small victory. “Be nice.”

He brought up his hands. “Just makin’ an observation, same as you.”

“So we find someone to work a spell.”

“Not sure I’d trust just anyone with that. Needs to be someone we know—who understands how important it is.”

Buffy nibbled on her lower lip, nodded. “Willow,” she said. Then hesitated and met his eyes, her own revealing all. Her worry and fear. That concern he doubted she would ever outrun that she was allowing this to happen for selfish reasons, that she was making the wrong call and she knew it. The parts of her still shaken from what everything they had just discussed, trying to piece together how she felt about what he’d told her, and all that was yet to come.

But most of all, love. That pure, honest Buffy love that had somehow become his. The same he hoped he never took for granted, never just assumed would always be there or he could stop trying to earn, because he knew how precious it was. How much it was worth. And how much it would hurt them both if he ever gave her a reason to doubt that she’d been wrong to trust him with the rawest, most vulnerable parts of herself.

“Tell me this will work,” she said, barely above a whisper. “Tell me we’re not making a mistake.”

Spike trembled, cupped her cheeks again. “All I wanted was this, love,” he replied. “Just this, for as long as we can have it. Turns out that’s longer than we thought, so I aim to stick around, if it’s all the same to you.”

“You won’t get to go to Heaven.”

“Bollocks. I’ll go when you go. Not a minute sooner.” Never mind

that he thought it unlikely he'd get into Heaven anyway. That was one thing that he and Angel *did* have in common.

"And if I never do?"

He shook his head. "Not an option, love. Might take us a minute to suss out how it works, but we will. World'll end eventually. And if you're still here after, I will be too. Like a bad penny in that way."

Buffy smiled, but it cracked. "I almost forgot what it was like to be scared," she said, sniffing. "How... How will you want to do it? Become a vampire again? Angel—"

"No," Spike said before he could give it much thought. Not that there was a whole lot to consider. The less they involved Angel, the better. Call it pride or what all, but he didn't want to leave anything to chance by changing up the factors. "Dru. We'll find Dru."

He expected her to blanch and wasn't disappointed. "Dru?" Buffy echoed dully, stepping back. "You... *Drusilla*? You want Drusilla to do it?"

"Why not?"

"Uhh, don't you think that'll give her the wrong idea?"

"That idea being..."

"Oh, I dunno. Last time you saw her, she wanted you to kill me and get back together with her." A flush had started to creep up Buffy's throat, one Spike couldn't help but find charming. It didn't happen often anymore, and maybe it made him a bad man, but fuck, he loved it when she got jealous. "You haven't seen her since then, have you? She didn't show up in LA while you were my undercover guy and—"

"No," Spike said, trying not to grin and failing miserably.

Buffy glared at him. "You could try not to enjoy this."

"Doin' my best."

"Is it crazy to not want her anywhere near you? What if you wake up all soulless and decide you want to stay that way and bye bye Buffy? It's not like you have the chip anymore. You and Dru—"

He reached for her but she stepped back again, still glaring, and he sighed, dropping his hands. "Slayer, you know that won't happen. You know I loved you when—"

"I know you loved me, but it's been a while since you didn't have a soul. How am I supposed to know how that'll hit you?"



"Because I was lost for you then and I'm still bloody lost." His amusement was starting to wear off. "I chose you, remember? Kept doin' it too. Nothing will ever change that."

She sniffed, not convinced, though also not seriously concerned. Spike knew her well enough to suss out the real fears from the irrational ones, regardless of how real the irrational ones could feel at times. She was scared and so was he. A little irrationality was to be expected.

"This is what you want," she said a moment later, her voice rough. It wasn't a question.

"It is."

"And it's not for me."

"Course it's for you, love. But it's for me, too. It's for us both."

Buffy licked her lips and nodded, keeping her gaze on the floor. "I might not be the most pleasant person to live with until this is over."

"Just until then, you wager?"

"Funny joke to make when you're about to become the thing I was destined to slay all over again."

"Don't tease me. You know how much I like it rough."

The corner of her mouth twitched, and she finally looked up again. "I love you," she said. "Even when you piss me off, I love you."

Spike sighed and made to close the space between them again. This time, she let him. "I know, baby," he said, pulling her against him, relaxing when she came without resistance. Her arms around his neck, her fingers funneling through his hair, her tears—the same ones she'd tried so hard to keep hidden—dampening the front of his shirt. "I love you, too."

"I might've gotten that memo."

"Get used to hearin' it until the end of time."

She tensed all over, but only for a second, then melted into his arms again. And that was when he knew—when the doubt and the fear and his own concerns met with hard understanding that whatever came, they would be okay. It wasn't something he worried about all too much anymore, himself, but enough of that old niggle remained. The part of him that remembered the way things had been before, and the long road they had traveled together to get where they were.

What came next wouldn't be easy, but it would be met just like every other challenge they had faced.

"Promises," she said.



People became vampires every day, mostly due to a case of being in the wrong place at the right time. It was a fact of their world, and one that Spike knew Buffy had accepted, if not happily. Still, she'd never before been in a position where she was trying to turn someone into the thing she had been called to destroy. Spike hadn't understood just how much he was asking of her until she started trying to put it in motion and the resources she had at her disposal were suddenly aimed at finding a vampire neither of them had seen since before Sunnydale fell. All at once, the world felt like a bloody large place. Large like it had in the days when he'd been living in a spartan apartment in Los Angeles, on the other side of the world from the woman he loved, forcing himself to get through each miserable day just for those moments he could talk to her at night. Fool himself into believing the space between them wasn't as vast as it was. That she was close.

It hadn't worked then and he didn't expect it to work now. Drusilla was a pill to predict on the best days and being that it had been an age since he'd seen her, he had no idea where to begin turning over stones. The most he'd felt he could do with confidence was laugh heartily at the suggestion posited by one of the baby-face watchers that Dru might have bitten the dust without anyone being the wiser. She was erratic, after all, and had a history of wandering into places and scenarios beyond her control, especially if she was on her own.

While it was true that Dru had only survived Prague because Spike had been there to do some quick thinking and quicker killing, that had been the first and only time he'd ever seen her in a situation where she'd needed the help. Ever since she'd first come upon him, the hapless sod he'd been in life, Dru had always been in complete control. People underestimated her, took the madness to mean she was daft and needed coddling—and yeah, he'd been happy enough to indulge her when they'd been together—but mistaking her lunacy for helplessness.

ness was how a good many folk had ended up on the wrong side of her fangs.

Furthermore, Dru couldn't be dead because he would know. Simple as that. Didn't matter if he was a human now or not—there were certain things, connections, that didn't abide by the laws of nature or even supernature as they were understood. He had faith in that. And as he expected, his faith was rewarded.

When he learned where she'd been living, he couldn't help but laugh.

"She always did say she missed Prague," he'd told Buffy, who had looked at him askance.

"The...place where she almost died?"

"Part of the fun for her, I'd wager. Less so for me at the time."

Buffy had nodded in the way he knew meant she didn't understand but accepted without question. One of those things that being in a real relationship had helped them perfect.

And then before he'd known it, one of the many teams she had stationed around the world had leaped into action. It hadn't been an easy grab—despite Spike's warning the lot that Dru was hardly the wilting flower she acted at times, some of the girls had been too bloody cocksure and nearly lost their heads for the effort. Thankfully, they managed to get the thing done rather tidily aside from a broken collarbone and a fresh set of fang marks that might never heal, if the scar on Buffy's neck was any indication. No matter how many years removed she was from the incident, Angel's ugly mark remained prominent against her skin.

Though Spike was hoping that Buffy might let him take a nibble there once the thing was done, replace the stain of the past with something better. Given everything they'd been through together, and given what they were to each other now, it seemed fairly criminal that he'd never gotten that particular privilege. And if the tale was anything to go by, he'd make it far better for her than her wanker of an ex had.

He decided, however, to wait before he made that particular suggestion. The entire ordeal of getting Dru wrangled in for the thing left Buffy in a sour mood, something not aided by the knowledge that the girls who had almost snuffed it had done so in service of a personal

errand rather than the clear line of duty. It also didn't help that Buffy intended to let Dru go after this mess was over, something her girls couldn't begin to understand. Something, Spike knew, she was only doing for him—and not because he'd asked, but because she loved him and knew that dusting Dru would bring him pain. Even if he never set eyes on his ex again.

Still, she had a time trying to justify that decision, even if she—as the bloody boss—didn't need to explain herself to anyone. There was also the part of her that Spike knew would carry guilt for other reasons. Having a vampire as dangerous and volatile as Drusilla in custody and letting them go was tacitly allowing more people to die. Everyone that Dru killed or turned would be on Buffy's conscience, even if she never learned their names. Maybe especially because she'd never learn their names, as that made it seem like she didn't care at all when he knew she did. So much he almost hated that he'd suggested doing it this way to begin with.

But he didn't see any alternative. There was no one else he'd trust with this, odd as it was to say, especially since he didn't much fancy going through the rest of his life—however long that turned out to be—indebted to Angel for deigning to grace his neck with his fangs. That was the sort of thing his wanker of a grandsire would hold over him in one way or another, regardless of how much time passed. Or how fervently Angel claimed to have accepted that Buffy would never again be the doe-eyed, lovesick girl who'd once risked it all for him. The balance they had right now worked for them, and Spike wasn't keen on giving anyone the opportunity to muck that up.

He'd just have to find a way to show Buffy what it meant to him, the allowances she was making. That she loved him like she did, so much that she'd help him do this at all, never mind the way he wanted it done. Point of fact, he was wary about slowing down long enough to let that bit of knowledge sink in. What it meant for her—for *him*. How just a few years ago, the thought of having Buffy at all had been something out of a dream. How he could never have imagined a future in which she was the one making the grand gestures, and doing it with a profound lack of ceremony. That beyond the decision to support him, Buffy was approaching everything as though she

wasn't making any sacrifice at all, when he knew quite well that she was.

They'd been together long enough that he understood that she loved him. It was the *how much* that might overwhelm him to the point of uselessness.

Bloody good thing he had plenty of other rot to focus on. Like the soul, for instance, though that turned out to be more handled than he could have ever dreamed. Seemed Willow had already done a good amount of research on behalf of Angel, who had at some point decided that a soul that could be knocked loose wasn't much of a soul at all.

"Well, I don't think it was *him* so much as Nina," Willow had admitted when Buffy voiced her surprise. "Something about how he has a martyr complex and that's why it didn't work out with them, and no woman in her right mind is going to want to be with him if she knows he'll never try to be *perfectly happy*. And I mean, I get it. Who would want to be with someone if you know you're not perfect happiness for them?"

"Even if perfect happiness in this case means high risk of evisceration?" Buffy had asked, her brow furrowing.

"Well, think about it." Willow had waved a hand at Spike. "If Spike's soul had come with that clause, would you *really* be happy knowing that every day he woke up and the soul was still there, that meant he *wasn't* perfectly happy? It's one thing to just take on faith, but when you know that something's missing that keeps him from being that, wouldn't you wonder if it had to do with you? I don't know if I'd ever stop thinking that."

"And suddenly I'm very glad these weren't the thoughts you were having when we were teenagers," Buffy had retorted wryly. But then she'd met Spike's gaze, her own softening. And he'd wondered if she was recalling what he'd told her earlier, if she got it now. He'd thought maybe she did. "But yeah. If Spike's soul was the sort that could be lost with happiness and he wasn't losing it left and right, it'd be a thing."

Spike hadn't replied then—Buffy got funny sometimes about public declarations of love—but that night, as he'd peeled clothes off her body, pressing kisses to the skin he uncovered, he'd repeated the thing in full. That if his soul had a clause like that, there would be no point

in having it at all. They'd spend all their time chasing it back again. Buffy had demonstrated her appreciation with so much enthusiasm he'd walked with a bit of a limp the next day, that bloody power-up ring be damned.

"You feature this'll still be worth anything when it's all over?" Spike had asked Buffy over breakfast, thumbing the ring before digging back into his hearty helping of chicken and waffles. They were spending the week leading up to his turning indulging in all his favorite foods—not because he would stop enjoying those foods, but the flavors would hit different and he wanted to savor his human taste buds while he could.

"Well, you won't need it anymore," Buffy had replied, picking at her own breakfast. "Guess we could always give it to Dawn, considering as much trouble as she likes to get into these days."

Spike had snorted, nodding. The Bit was in her senior year at college now, but that had been by the skin of her teeth. Offered the chance to have the normal life always denied her sister, and Dawn wanted to be in the fight with the rest of her family; as such, she made sure to get in as much monster hunting as she could in between her studies. Was working on tapping into her Key powers, too, so that if ever another army of demons came storming at them the way they had in Los Angeles, they'd have an easier time sending the buggers off to hell. But Dawn wasn't content with just her mystical side—she wanted to be in the thick of it like a true Summers, and had insisted on being put through the slayer training regimen. A bit of extra strength to even the playing field a bit would be like bloody Christmas for her once she learned how to use it.

"Was wonderin' how much juice it'd take to turn it into another gem like the one your ex-honey smashed to bits," Spike had replied. "One thing I will miss is not worryin' about bursting into flames anytime you crack a window."

Buffy had paused, met his gaze over the table, her own burning with a question to which she already had an answer. No second thoughts didn't mean no regrets—there was plenty about being a human that he had come to appreciate over the years, and the ability to walk around in daylight was one of them. Just made things easier. Also made it so there was little he felt like he was missing.

"We can ask," she'd said. "Doesn't hurt."

"And cheat the Nibblet out of a prize like this one?"

"Considering my sister is a walking klutz, it might be better to not give her super-strength on top of her superpowers. Besides..." Buffy had speared a piece of chicken with her fork and raised it to eye-level. "She shouldn't be more powerful than me. Hello with the unfair."

"It was your suggestion."

"And a bad one. You're supposed to keep me from making those."

"Then, Slayer, we are buggered."

She'd looked at him again, her mouth ticking up into a grin before she shoved the bite of chicken inside. "What else is new?"



Buffy had just one request in all of this—his last day as a human should be one they spent together, doing all the things he would never get to again. Though, truthfully, there weren't too many things on that list that they did all that often anyway. Theirs was a life where sunlit walks through the park, hand-in-hand, were a thing they enjoyed in theory rather than practice. While Spike had been telling the truth in that he would miss the sun, it came down more to convenience than anything else. He and Buffy were up at all hours anyway. Various crises and apocalypses didn't stick to a schedule, and though there were plenty of girls available to take things such as routine patrols and the like, Buffy still insisted on going out herself. It wasn't every night but many nights—that spot of violence she had finally admitted was part of her makeup. Fighting got her hot, too, in the best of ways. It always had.

What Spike would miss more than anything were the moments when they were sharing a sink and their eyes locked in their reflections. The thought that they would never again get to drag a mirror over to the bed and watch as their bodies became one was the sort that almost hurt.

There were plenty more to come, though, and a lot of fun to be had with mirrors ahead. But he couldn't quite keep from releasing a strangled whimper when Buffy rolled over her full-body mirror that last night, or while staring at the picture they made, their bodies slick with

sweat, Buffy moving in decadently slow strokes as she worked herself up and down his cock, looking every bit as hungry as she tasted. Then there was the sensation of his own pumping heart, the way it went from measured beats to bloody thundering in his ears, how *alive* certain parts of him were that wouldn't be the next time they were together like this. Blood rushing, chest clenching, his skin damp, and everything hot. So hot it was almost too much but somehow not, because it could never be too much with her. And that sensation of her cunt clenching around him as she came, squeezing him to the point of pain and beyond, for they had decided to forgo the ring this last time like this, but in ways he had long ago been conditioned to crave. Holding onto her hip with one hand, the other curved around her waist, caressing her clit in that way she liked. Relishing each gasp he won from her with his human fingers and human mouth and human cock. And when they finally collapsed together, sticky in all the right ways, the mechanics of his lungs inflating and deflating as he panted. Knowing that the next time he needed to catch his breath, it would be all in his head. A body acting based on memory rather than need.

And that was all right, he reckoned. It should be *hard* in some ways to say goodbye to this version of himself, for it had given him so much. Things he wouldn't have known he wanted to feel. Foods he loved that he'd rediscovered with a different set of sensibilities. Hell, he'd never known what it was like to shag with a heartbeat before all this. And while there was no *better* or *worse*, at least not as most people would view it, it was fitting that he felt a bittersweet pang the next morning when he woke up human for the last time. That while he and Buffy went about their morning routine—showering, brushing teeth, dressing—he would search out his reflection in every surface that provided it.

But then they were at the Council Headquarters, being greeted by some of the new-blood watchers—didn't matter how long they'd been there, they all seemed new to Spike—a few slayers who had never seen a turning and viewed this as a learning opportunity, and Willow with her freshly purchased Orb of Thesulah. Plan was fairly straightforward. Dru would do the deed, then be shepherded out. Willow would wait until Spike woke up to summon the soul—make sure it had enough



time to cross over. Once he rose as a vampire, she would do her mojo to drag the soul from the ether, vault it into the orb, then transfer it to him. A true transfer, not a spell or a curse. Pure soul magic the likes of which few practitioners ever got to dabble in.

The only part that worried Spike was Dru. Seemed a mite cruel to get her excited—she'd been setting up her version of a nursery, complete with burial soil to cover up her new baby—only to kick her to the curb once her job was done. On the other hand, he didn't much fancy her being left in a building teeming with slayers, or the scene she would put on when she realized Spike wasn't coming back to her. He'd tried to explain it again, how it was going to work, and she said she understood, but one could never be certain seeing as, so much of the time, Dru was having half of a conversation that no one had started. All he could hope was that she was right and that she did understand, as soul or not, human or not, he didn't like the idea of her hurt.

"She's not going to be weirdly sexual about it, is she?" Buffy asked, rubbing her wrist as they negotiated their way through the maze of halls that led to the room the others had set up for the turning. "Like, I'll tell you right now, if she tries to make you drink from her boobs or something, I am not going to go for it."

Spike chuckled and placed a hand on the small of her back. "Not that it would mean anythin'."

"Right. I'll remember that the next time Angel visits. You won't mind if I kiss him hello again, will you?"

Well, she knew how to play dirty. "Be careful with that tongue of yours or I'll have a mind to bite it off once I have my fangs back."

"I'm just saying, if it was me, you'd be all in a tizzy about how this was going to be done. It's all...intimate. And not exactly fun for me, considering I know what you two were to each other at one point."

"That's just it, love. *Were*."

Buffy crossed her arms in that way she did whenever she was feeling self-conscious or insecure, and it hit him again just exactly how much she was giving him. How much of a toll this was taking, and the wealth of *everything* she'd agreed to without resistance once she'd understood this was something he wanted. And how he would feel, truly, were it the other way around. If she had told him she wanted

something large, something he couldn't give her himself, something that he wasn't sure he wanted her to have except for the fact that she wanted to have it. And then, on top of that, if she told him Angel would be involved as means to an end, but his fangs would slide inside her and there was no one else she trusted except him to do it properly.

It was more than trust, what she was showing him. More than love, too. It was something uniquely Buffy. That quality of hers unmatched by anyone else he'd ever met or *would* ever meet. Her ability to give so much of herself, to be selfless when everything inside of her railed against it, was one of those things that made her something beyond beautiful.

Here she was, leading him to a room where he would engage in one of the most personal acts a man could share with another person, knowing *she* couldn't share it with him. That she was directing him into the arms of a woman he'd once loved.

"You all go ahead," Spike said to the slayers and Willow once they reached the door at the end of the final hall. "Need a word with my lady."

There was a general murmur of assent, then the lot of them paraded past, each shooting Spike and Buffy a curious, if not slightly judgmental look as they went. All except Willow, who waited until the last slayer had stepped over the threshold to give them both an encouraging smile before turning to follow.

"Buffy," Spike said, taking her by the shoulders. She had a pensive look on her face that spoke of hard, troubled thinking, but didn't hesitate to meet his eyes. "All you have to do is say the word."

"What?"

"The word, love. Last chance. Tell me not to do this and I won't."

Buffy shook her head, her brow furrowing. "That is not my decision to make."

"Of course it is."

"No, Spike... I know what you said and everything, that you'd never do it without talking to me first." She lifted a shoulder. "You talked to me. But it's you—it's all you. And this is something you want, so, the decision has to be yours."

"It's somethin' I want for *us*," he insisted, digging his fingers into

her skin. "You and me. So yeah, sweetheart, like it or not, you have final bloody say here."

Buffy pressed her lips together, not looking away from him. "It's something you want," she said again. "Something you want *for you*. You're not doing it just for me."

"No."

"And this is the way you want to do it. Exactly this way."

Spike hesitated before nodding. "Only reason it's her is it was her before, and I know she'll do it properly."

"And she's not Angel."

No sense denying that. "Right."

Buffy firmed up her jaw. "I don't like it," she said. "I don't like that it's her. That it's *you* and *her*. I know it's crazy, I know I'm being dumb, but... I love you, and I don't like sharing. I never did. That's why Dawn had to resort to stealing all my stuff. I never let her borrow anything. And letting someone I love do this..."

He cupped her cheek and kissed her, doing his best not to whimper when she did, when those emotions she was keeping beneath the surface threatened to boil over and overwhelm. When he felt her tremble, all the tension, all the fear and worry, all the jealousy and misgivings she was experiencing suddenly pouring into his mouth along with her soft cry. Buffy threw herself against him, her arms going around his neck, her body flush with his, kissing him with a desperate sort of hunger that left him weak-kneed. Like she thought it might be the last time.

In some ways, he supposed, it was.

"Buffy," Spike panted when he pulled away. "I'm a greedy bastard. That's why I'm doin' this. Why I want it. You make me the happiest man on earth every day, and I'll never have enough of that. Aim to give it back to you as long as I can. If that's forever, then it's forever. Just know I don't wanna go anywhere in any world without you. We find a way for you to die properly sometime and you decide that's what you want, then it's what I want too. But I'm stickin' to you every second in between, yeah?"

Buffy cracked a small smile, though a sob chased it away almost

immediately. She clapped a hand to her mouth then started wiping at her eyes. “God, I am not going to go in there looking like a wreck.”

“You’re beautiful.”

She gave him what was, by now, a very familiar glare. One part skepticism and one part exasperation, but also full of love as only she was. “Still better not be sexy biting. I will not be happy if it gets steamy between the two of you.”

“No steam, but if you fancy, I’ll give you a sexy bite later.”

“Promises, promises.”

Spike killed the smirk that itched to spread at that, as well as the retort—oh, she had no bloody idea. Instead, he tipped her head up to kiss her one last time, savor the feel of her lips like this. Wanting to remember every second, now that seconds themselves had run out.

Then he pulled away and her hand was in his. Firm and warm. Comforting.

And together, they walked inside.



He didn’t remember much of the last minutes of his second human life. That was simply the way of it. Vampire fangs go in and the brain starts to shut down, the mortal drive to live succumbing to the adventure of the unknown. Of death itself. And yeah, there was a moment when the bite turned from pain to pleasure—that had been true before and it was still true. Couldn’t be helped. But unlike before, William’s eyes hadn’t been full of tears he’d cried over another woman or the vague hope of where a scintillating stranger’s dark whispered promises would lead. Dru had been there, tearing into his throat as she had several lifetimes ago, draining him of his mortality and everything else that had been hard won, and through it all, Spike’s eyes had been on Buffy. The arrested horror and hope and love on her face, watching as she combated with every natural instinct she had to remain where she was. To let him die.

Then there had been blood. Blood as he’d only tasted it once before, with that burning, desperate knowledge that it was the only thing keeping him from the eternal black. Blood pouring down his

throat, coating his tongue, and going to work somewhere deep inside him. He hadn't known where it would lead him the first time, but he did now. And he carried that with him. That and the knowledge that when this part was over, she would be there. Waiting.

All he would need was the spark.

That was the thought that awoke him—had him lurching forward, lashing at the air in wild desperation and dragging in deep breaths that did rot to ease the burn in his chest. A sensation, both familiar and not, ripping through his veins and coaxing a hard roar through his throat. A true roar, not the pale imitation he'd been doing these last few years. A roar with feel and bite, the sort only a demon could release. Spike blinked hard, shaking his head and finding the scenery had changed. He was no longer in the room where Dru had drained the life out of him—he was in *his* room. He was home, the lights were off, and he could smell her. Hear her. *Buffy*. Warm, strong, and close. So close. Enough to make every nerve in his new body stand at attention, for she was the only predator a predator like him had reason to fear.

And she was...*delicious*.

*Food.*

*Home.*

At once, he was struck by barrage of things he'd felt and thought what seemed like lifetimes ago now. Spike would have sworn he hadn't forgotten what it was like to be a vampire—hell, he would have thought it impossible to forget, would have laughed at the suggestion. But even the oldest habits died once they were put out of use, and there had been no reason to remember. To cling to the memory of the sensation itself in addition to all the choices made, all the bridges burned, all the wrong turns, stumbles, and falls that had brought him to where he was. And as a result, that animal awareness had left his brain. What it was like to be in a room with people who had heartbeats. People whose blood was not only the key to his survival but a delicacy no human could truly understand. And Buffy, *Buffy*, whose blood was even more than that. She was sleeping beside him and he wanted to gobble her up.

Just like a monster would.

Spike twisted and damn near tumbled out of bed, hunger and panic joining forces. They hadn't talked about this, about Buffy being in bed with him, sleeping next to a creature that would wake up with a yen to rip out her throat. It hadn't occurred to him that she would do that. That she would trust him when he wasn't safe. He needed blood and distance, needed to remember how this body of his worked. Most importantly, he needed the bloody spark that was missing. The warm place inside that would rein him in when instinct threatened to override his senses.

And that was the thought that *did* have him tumbling out of bed. A good tumble, the sort that came with a loud, wall-shaking crash. Fangs sliced through his gums as the bones in his face shifted. Fangs he knew he couldn't control because she smelled so good. So alive. So *his*, and he knew she wasn't. Not like this.

He was on the other side of the room by the time she started to stir. Then her voice, so soft, hitting his ears along with a bloody avalanche of other senses. Her heartbeat. The rush of her blood beneath her skin. All those tells that broadcast to the world that she was the things he wasn't.

"Spike?" she asked, half-asleep, patting his side of the bed. Frowning when she realized he wasn't there. Buffy sat up then, wiped sleep from her eyes, and reached over to switch on the lamp on her nightstand. "Spike? Where are—"

But then she saw him, and her breath hitched. He didn't blame her. He was sure he was a sight.

For a long stretch, neither of them said anything. Spike dragging in air he no longer needed but wouldn't give up, for he'd forgotten just how much being a vampire heightened his senses. How every one of those unnecessary breaths filled him with her scent. Her warmth. Pulled her into him in ways that made him feel the life he had given up. Buffy panting too, making his head ring with the hard thumps of her heart. After a moment, though, those beats began to even out. Memory catching up with the present. She had not gone to sleep in his arms as she did each night. She had curled up beside a corpse and that corpse was now walking and talking again. Even though she had known what she was doing, it had to be a bit of a mind fuck.

But it all was. Everything was spinning. Was it supposed to do that? Had it done that before? Granted, he hadn't been aware before. Hadn't known what he was missing—or what he was capable of, for that matter. He hadn't found that out until it was too late.

“Spike.”

Spike blinked, shaking his head as she climbed to her feet. “Stay back,” he rasped. God, he'd forgotten how his voice sounded when it came out from between his fangs. “Stay back. Don't come close. Don't bloody touch me until the soul's back in.”

Buffy very rarely did what she was told and evidently was not in the mood to curb the habit now. “You said it might be like this,” she replied, rounding the bed and starting toward him. She was wearing the sleep shorts they'd gotten on their holiday to New York a couple of years ago, a thin camisole, and nothing else. It was a look he loved on her. Buffy in her home. Buffy at her most comfortable. Buffy ready to be eaten by the Big Bad.

Only he was a different Big Bad now. One with an actual bite, and he didn't trust himself. Not with her scent crawling into his nostrils, tantalizing and decadent, more memories coming to life. The monster reborn in his chest was snarling for a taste, and if she came near, touched him, he wouldn't be able to hold it back.

But then she was there beside him, crouching and reaching out at the same time, her fingers wandering over the ridges of his monster. There was no fear in her eyes, nor the revulsion he might have expected. Had, actually, if he were being honest with himself. Buffy might be drawn to demons, but he wasn't certain she'd ever allowed herself to be at peace with the knowledge. They had never had a chance.

“You told me it might be like this,” she said again, stroking along the harsh contours of his vampire face. “That you might be a bit disoriented. There's blood in the fridge downstairs. We were ready, remember?”

That much sounded vaguely familiar but he was bloody positive he hadn't meant for her to be cozied up to him during that disorientation. The woman would be the end of him one of these days. Spike worked

his throat and pressed a hand to his chest. "The soul, love," he replied hoarsely. "Better keep your distance until—"

"Oh please."

He blinked and drew his head back. "Sorry?"

"You're not going to hurt me." Buffy rolled her eyes as though the possibility were ludicrous. "Let's get real, here."

"Can't be sure until it's back, yeah?" He patted his chest. "I feel it here. Stronger than I remember."

"Feel what? What's stronger?"

There wasn't a simple answer to that—at least none he could see. Everything was amplified, and that much he *had* remembered. The first time out of the grave being sensory overload. Colors more vivid. Scents crisp and overpowering. Sounds making merry thunder in his ear canals. The call of blood screaming inside the veins of everyone he met with a heartbeat. He'd relished it then, even if he hadn't immediately understood what it meant. It had been his liberation, shackles lifted.

He hadn't woken up that first time burdened with knowledge, rather blissfully ignorant of it and happy to remain that way.

When he didn't reply, Buffy sighed and moved closer. Too close. Overwhelming him with the heat rising off her skin and the pounding of her blood through her veins. He knew these sensations—knew them intimately. He'd tempered them before and would again, but he needed help. Couldn't do it on his own. Couldn't trust himself to be with her like this. With *this* pressing against him, the need wild and unstable, his fangs itching to sink into her perfect creamy skin. To taste her. Mark her. Draw her into him as far as he could, the need of a demon and the desires of a man tangled into the same understanding.

"Spike," she said softly. "You have your soul."

He froze, met her eyes at that. Not understanding. "I have...?"

"Your soul. It's there." Buffy dropped her hand from his face and pressed it against his chest. "We... Willow and me, we thought it might be better not to wait after all. Not because we were worried about you or anything—"

"You should be."

"No, Spike. It had nothing to do with that." She said this firmly, taking one of his hands now, her own hot enough to blister. He had no



idea how she could do that, sit as close to him as she was. Trust that the monster inside wouldn't lunge the way it wanted to—the way *all* of him wanted to. “I just got to thinking that maybe it would be better to not have you do two huge things at once. The vamp thing *and* the soul thing. That maybe it would be better to make sure you woke up with everything you needed. So Willow went looking for your soul...only it was still here. It was with you the entire time.”

The words made an academic sort of sense but that was about it. “Not possible.”

“And yet, here we are.”

“Slayer—”

“The soul is yours. You won it. That's the best we can figure.” Amazingly, she smiled at him. Her warm, loving Buffy smile. “It wasn't a curse, and not the sort of thing you can just lose as a result. At least that's what we think. It's not like there are other vampires out there who have fought for their souls that we can ask, but it's you. This is all you. No spell necessary.”

Spike stared at her for a few seconds that felt like a sodding eternity, willing himself to understand. Everything he was feeling at the moment, the hunger and the sensory overload. All too much, overwhelming, consuming him with worries he'd never had before. Things he'd never thought or couldn't recall thinking. This feeling of lost control that had him dominated from the inside out.

Only the control wasn't lost, was it? He was still on the floor—fangs out, yes, but he hadn't done anything with them. Buffy was safe and unafraid, despite knowing how easily he could hurt her. And why would she worry? It wasn't as though they hadn't been here before. They just hadn't been to this version of here, where he was a fledgling learning how his legs worked. The thing he'd taken for granted was that it would be the same as it had been before, and maybe it would be. Maybe it already was. Memory was a wonky thing.

“I need some nosh,” he said at last, pleased when his voice didn't shake. “Take some of the edge off.”

“In a minute. Did you hear me? Your soul is completely yours.” She was still smiling that smile, the one that could light him on fire across a crowded room if she aimed it the right way. There were days he still

felt that raw wonder that she could ever look at him the way she did, and this was one of those days. "You were a demon who fought for your soul, and you won it. That makes it yours. *Just* yours. Even if..." Buffy broke off, shaking her head and letting out a soft snuffle. "Even if you do become human."

He understood what she was saying in a very rudimentary way, but that was a thought too large to sit with just yet, especially with all these new-old instincts clawing at him—instincts he had fallen out of the habit of keeping leashed. "Buffy—"

"That was it, Spike. That was when I knew."

"Knew what?"

"That this was right. That *we* were right...like this."

And the next thing he knew, her mouth was on him. Her hot, wonderful, blistering mouth, teasing him with soft strokes and familiar hunger—hunger he felt in ways made new all over again. Buffy kissing him, teasing his lips with her teeth, dragging her tongue down the point of his fangs. He couldn't remember her ever doing that before. Giving all of herself over without hesitation.

"I know you're hungry," she whispered.

God, she said that, but she really had no idea. "Slayer—"

"That's right, Spike. *Slayer*. And I think I want a fight."

She was kissing him again before he could muster a reply, pushing him to the floor, all that wonderful slayer strength in full use, and hell, maybe it *was* instinct or just the parts of him that had been irrevocably shaped by her, but all the tension and worry seemed to blip out of existence. Like he was home after a long bloody trip somewhere else, the discomfort he'd woken with dissolving as he shifted back into himself. There would be more moments like those initial ones, he knew, brutal and filled with the sense of rediscovering who he'd been before he'd been human, but there were other things a man could never forget. Things like this, like Buffy, that transcended understanding, overpowered all the ugly bits that would always be there, reminding him that they were only as large as he let them be. There was also existence as he was meant to experience it, the *way* he was meant to experience it, and nothing was missing at all. Not from either of them.

"Fuck," he murmured against her lips, his voice still raspy. "Didn't know how much I'd missed this."

She nudged his nose with hers, smiling. "I guess I didn't, either."

"Yeah?" He pulled back far enough to catch her eyes. "Not just sayin' that, are you?"

"That little tingly I feel? Vampire near and all?" Buffy shook her head and helped herself fully into his lap, making him realize, for the first time, that he was naked. Spike blinked down at himself and barked a little laugh, though it faded on a whimper when she started rolling her hips. "I missed feeling it with you," she went on, wrapping her hand—and oh god, she was so warm—around his cock and starting to pump. "Also kinda regretted the things we never got around to doing."

Spike rolled his head back hard enough it thunked against the floor, and Buffy seized advantage as every good slayer should. She had her mouth on his throat, just the right combination of tongue and teeth to drive him out of his bloody mind, and slowly made her way up until her breath was crashing against his lips and he had to pull it inside of him. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed this, either. How hot she was. How her skin burned beneath his hands—all that wonderful life that she exuded with everything she did. It wasn't that he hadn't felt it as a human, but it *was* the sort of thing that only the dead could truly appreciate. The mundanities of the human experience were made to be ignored—part of the scenery rather than the whole bloody show, embodying the truth behind not knowing what you had until you didn't have it anymore. And once Spike had had body heat and breath and a heartbeat, those tiny little everyday miracles had lost their novelty.

But now, he was holding a miracle in his arms. The continued miracle that was Buffy Summers. And she was whimpering and rubbing and blasting him with her heat and reminding him that no matter how good life had been since Los Angeles, there was always more *up* to go. Reminding him why he'd been an addict in the first place.

"What are the things, love?" he heard himself asking, lifting his head to find her eyes again. "The things we never got to do?"

He expected her to play coy, but she didn't. He loved it when she

didn't. Granted, he loved it when she did, too. All incarnations of Buffy were a pure bloody delight.

She threw a leg over his hips so she was straddling him, then leaned forward and traced a finger down the length of one fang. "For starters, it occurred to me that even though you *are* the main vampire in my life, I've never had these inside me."

Spike's throat went tight, and he would have sworn he felt a phantom heartbeat thunder through his chest. He stared at her for a second, panting out a breath, before sitting up so they were chest-to-chest. "Buffy..."

"And you need it now." She tilted her head to the side, giving him a splendid view of her neck. A neck he'd nibbled and kissed and explored a thousand times—a thousand thousand, even, but never with that sort of invitation. He remembered wanting it, wondering, just a few days ago, if she would even consider it, and now here he was. The fear came rushing back, bright and worse than before. He'd say she didn't know what she was offering if she were anyone else, but she was Buffy, and she did.

The sort of hunger wringing through him now wasn't the sort that went away with a few swallows. With as much as he'd forgotten, he did remember that.

"You won't hurt me," she said again, hearing his thoughts in that special way of couples who had been together long enough to develop unspoken language. "I know you won't."

"That makes one of us." Though he already felt himself surrendering. Couldn't help it. For all the ways he was strong, he was also weak. And starving. That craving for blood had an edge unlike any other—another thing he *hadn't* forgotten in the years between—that would have lent him hesitation were he a true fledgling. He wasn't, though. Every second that lapsed since awakening seemed to be furthering that knowledge. No learning things over again, just picking up those lessons, instincts, and skills from where he had dropped them.

"Please," she whispered, dragging her hair out of the way. "I want to... I want to be all the things you need. The way she was. Watching you grab her was..."

Spike started and pulled back just enough to catch her eyes. "You

always have been.”

“Not like this though.”

Perhaps not, but the thought that she worried she was lacking in any way was one he would have to banish. The past few days had been strange for them—a bloody trip. Discovering things about themselves, each other, that they thought they had already conquered and explored. That they had made it this far as quickly as they had was rather remarkable. Another thing he would never take for granted.

“Just like this,” Spike replied, and kissed her. All fang and without reserve, trusting in her trust in him and growling when he felt that trust repaid in kind. Then Buffy’s arms were around him and he was tugging her sleep shorts down her legs, trying to be careful and not rip them—they were a favorite pair—but thinking maybe it wouldn’t be the worst thing if they had to go back to New York to replace them. There was so much he wanted to do and do over, share with her, explore and enjoy, and the world was laid out before them as it never had been.

Then, *god*, the mouth of her sex rubbing along the head of his cock, coating him with her liquid fire, and then swallowing him, and he was inside of her, and she was rocking against him, and it was his first time all over again. Spike growled and kissed her, gripped her by the hips to help guide her up and down his cock, burning alive—*alive*, because that was what she made him feel. Buffy was bursting with enough life for them to share and he felt it in every stroke. Every caress of her mouth, every time she clenched around him, every little whimper she released against his lips, every artful thrust, every time she sank onto him again. Let him inside of her. Let him be the one who got to share these moments.

“Do it,” she panted before tugging on his earlobe with her teeth. “Do it, Spike. Please.”

He lowered his head to her throat, licked up the salt of her skin, then sliced inside. And she screamed and convulsed and clenched around him, and he drank deep, as much a part of her as he had ever been. As it was possible to be.

It would only get better. *They* would only get better.

They had an eternity to practice.

