

# L'AMOUR

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YELLOW BRICK ROAD BOOK III

HOLLY DENISE





## TENDER IS THE NIGHT

IT WAS another evening in Sunnydale.

“Heads up!”

Buffy Summers glanced up, eyes going wide as a flying vampire soared over her body and crashed into the headstone behind her before imploding into a thousand spectacles of shimmering dust.

“Nothing like cuttin’ it fine, eh pet?”

She snickered. Typical that he would find that funny. “Next time, how about a little more cutting and a little less fine?”

Spike shrugged, dazzling her with one of his patented smiles. It was damn near impossible to resist, yet she managed admirably. “See,” he retorted, running a hand through platinum strands, “we’ve already run into a problem. I can’t do anythin’ without being fine.”

“Egomaniac.”

“Yeah, yeah. You bloody well love it.”

Buffy pouted. “Either way,” she said, “you effectively managed to dust our only competition tonight. It hasn’t been this slow in...ever.”

“You call that competition?”

“You must understand, when I say competition, I mean saving grace from boredom.” She sighed. “This sucks.”

At that, Spike didn’t bother trying to argue, which annoyed her

because he was pretty much her only challenge these days. They were definitely in the quiet before the storm. And what a quiet it was. With only a few vamps on the move and even fewer willing to present themselves as targets, there was little to be done outside of looping sweeps.

Not that Buffy wanted to patrol, *per se*, especially when there were more pleasant ways to spend her nights right now. But there were several fundamentals every slayer had to acknowledge at one point or another. And, as Spike loved to point out, she got irritable if she went too long without hitting things. There were aspects of herself that were too Faith-like for comfort.

Things had been uncommonly quiet on that front as well. Two weeks had passed since the creepy-crawly box confiscation thing had gone awry, and nothing more had come of it. Silence disturbed her—made her feel like she wasn't looking in the right place. At least when something was screaming, she could defend herself. And while he would never admit it, Spike was concerned, too. While, true, he had made habit of following her on patrol since they'd put a label on their relationship, he was becoming more protective of her. Not allowing her to get too far from sight while they wrestled up the few baddies that decided to pick a fight. Buffy never mentioned it, of course, and he would deny it if she did. She knew that he knew that she could take care of herself.

Also, his worry was incredibly sweet, but she wouldn't mention that, either.

"Has been bloody slow," Spike agreed.

"Just means something big's coming."

He perked an eyebrow. "How you figure?"

She shrugged. "Just seems more likely. Besides, that's what usually happens."

"Really? Hmmm. Never noticed that. Even with your brooding ex and the Acathla nonsense?"

Buffy gnawed on her lip thoughtfully, brow furrowing. There were so many aspects of that entire affair she purposefully had

attempted to forget. "No," she answered. "But that was because Angel was sending henchmen after me. Big diff."

"Wanker couldn't even plan an apocalypse properly," Spike decided good-naturedly, wrapping an arm around her waist to pull her against him, nuzzling her hair. "We done here, love, or do you wanna take another sweep?"

She had to resist the urge to melt into him, still unaccustomed to a boyfriend who was so touchy-feely. There had been a time where Angel hadn't seemed determined to keep touching her, too, but after Angelus and Acatlha, she'd gotten used to being part of a couple in the most distancy-sense possible. "Nah. We're done."

"These vamps are right inconsiderate. Gettin' us all worked up only to bail before the big finish," Spike said with an eager smile. "Leaves a bloke all...unsatisfied."

Buffy tried to mask a grin with irritation, but his lustful gaze did her in. "Sorry," she said. "No playtime tonight. Homework. Besides, I think Mom wanted me in early."

Spike sighed. "History?"

"Math."

He winced. "Sorry."

"Not nearly as sorry as I am."

Wordlessly, they fell into step in the direction of Revello Drive, Spike taking her hand. He did that a lot, too, and she liked it.

"You'd think being the Slayer would come with certain privileges," Buffy continued. "Like not having to go to school and having a steady paycheck."

"Poor baby," Spike cooed, and brushed a kiss across her cheek. "If you want, I can eat your teacher."

She pretended to consider it. "Nah," she decided. "Education is probably a good thing."

"That's just rot they tell you to keep you from dropping out."

"Hey. Impressionable youth here."

"Just letting you know now so you'll be prepared when you become disillusioned in ten or so years."

"Let me live in my delusion."

"Course, pet. Whatever makes you happy."

Buffy tossed him a coy glance. "Well," she said. "I do have some English homework, too. Granted it's fairly easy, but I bet it'd be even easier if—oh say—someone helped me out with it."

Spike smirked and cocked his head. "I suppose," he said, "for the good of your education and all things literature. What's the assignment?"

"Paper on *Lord of the Flies*. Ever read it?"

"Can't say that I have. When's it due?"

"Thursday. I know what to say and all that stuff, but it'd help if..." She gazed off thoughtfully. "Actually, that might be a very bad idea, all things considered. Get us alone and give us a room and—"

"I'll be a good boy. Promise."

She narrowed her eyes.

"Well, I'll try."

A brow perked.

Spike's shoulders slumped, and she would have laughed at his crestfallen face were she not lamenting the oh so inconvenient truth that enclosed areas plus her horny boyfriend equaled no study. "You can chain me up?" he offered.

"Mmm...a chained up Spike in my room."

"Never said it was your room, now did I?"

"No," she agreed, giving him one of her patented sultry looks that he claimed on a nightly basis should be outlawed. "But where else would I need any chains?"

"Oi now!" he protested. "I'm a demon. I'm supposed to be evil. What's your excuse?"

The sultry look faded into a grin as she wrapped her arms around him and pulled him into her. "Guess I'm just under the influence."

"You're gonna be under somethin' in a minute."

Buffy giggled before kissing him. "Better not," she murmured. "Really...homework."

"Right," he replied huskily. "Well, at least let me get you home."

She narrowed her eyes.

Spike pulled back, hands going up. "Completely innocent. I won't ravish you on your lawn."

"Oh, yeah. Like it's never happened before."

The most ridiculous innocent look overcame him. "Can't imagine what you mean," he replied, his lips twitching until the memory of that night two weeks ago chased away his poker face. "Okay. Right. That one time. And it was your fault."

"My fault?"

"You came after me in your nightie. That provocative skimpy little—"

"Skimpy?! It is so not skimpy."

"Kitten, it was all lacy and see-through and your tits were so lonely. My mouth had no choice, see. And you weren't wearing knickers."

"You've told me not to!"

"And you started listening to me then? Face it, Slayer, those *night-ies* are made for one reason and one reason only. To drive yours truly out of his mind. To get your boyfriend to crawl on his hands and knees to make sure every...itch is satisfied." He dragged his tongue over his teeth, which wasn't fair because he knew how much she liked that. "What's a bloke to do?"

Two could play at that game. Buffy switched from defensive to pouty, which happened to be one of *his* weaknesses, thank you very much. "My mother could've been—"

"Hush now. You loved it."

"That tree was hard."

"Tree wasn't the only thing hard. Made you scream good enough."

Buffy smirked. "I'm doing nothing to stroke your ego. You hardly need the encouragement."

"Spoilsport."

"You know it."

Spike merely smiled at her, tightening his hand around hers as her home came into view. "You sure there's nothing I can help with, pet?"

"Not unless your last name is Golding and you wrote a controver-

sial novel that managed to wheedle its way into my English curriculum.”

He winced. “Sorry, no can do. Last I checked, I’m just Spike.”

“I suppose I can accept that.”

SPIKE SNORTED and pulled her to a stop. “It’s hard being you,” he murmured into her ear, planting mocking lovebites up and down her throat. It was amazing. Despite all they had shared, he could still ignite the fire within her in mere seconds. “No vamps to kill, no unhinged slayers to fight, no time to shag your incredibly shaggable boyfriend.”

Buffy couldn’t help but smirk. He just liked saying the b-word in reference to himself, and being the softie she was, she couldn’t help but find it absolutely adorable.

And as much fun as it was making out with him in her front yard, there was unfortunately homework to be had, and in mass amounts. Teachers and Sunnydale High didn’t seem to grasp that senior year was not meant for actual work. “Really, Spike, I gotta go,” she told him, forcing herself to pull away. “I’m already two assignments behind in algebra and if I don’t get that book read and written about, I’m as good as dead.”

“Right.” A whispered kiss across her lips. “Wish I could help, love, but math and I are—”

“Non-mixy things?”

“In your diluted version of the English language, yes.”

She snickered. “You’re one to talk.”

“You still studying Roman history?”

“Yeah. We’re about to Vespasian, now.”

“Ah. If memory serves, he’s the bloke that coined the infamous: ‘Vae puto deus fio’ before he kicked it. Lemme know when you get to Marcus Aurelius. Gotta admire a git who persecutes a bunch of holy people.” When she just stared at him, Spike shifted and glanced away in a manner that made him positively the most endearing thing on two legs. “What?”



"You're so cute."

He scoffed. "Am not."

"Are too. With your big ole brain that you hide behind questionable judgment." Buffy seized advantage of his mock-offended expression to worm into his arms again, resting her head against his chest. She chuckled when he immediately drew her nearer. "Of course, it'd help if you were the responsible type who told me to go do my homework."

"Homework's overrated."

"I second that. And yet, it needs to be done." With great reluctance, Buffy tipped upward to plant a brief, however heartfelt kiss on his lips before stepping out of reach. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Better believe it," he answered with a grin. "Same time, same place. Oh, and Buffy?"

She turned, her heart leaping even though she knew what was coming.

"I love you."

Buffy couldn't stop her grin if she tried. "I know."



SPIKE REMAINED stationary until she was no longer in sight.

It was amazing. This was amazing. This everything that he suddenly had.

So much had happened since the night they'd made this official—the night she'd kicked Angel to the curb right before hopping into Spike's bed. He had told her that he loved her then, and repeated it every night thereafter. Buffy had not said it back yet, but there were times he could swear he felt it with the way she looked at him. Smiled at him. Kissed him. And especially when she got down on her knees and—

Yeah. This was perfection. And it was his.

His. Buffy Summers was his.

It was bizarre, being this content, but he found he liked it very much. Still, Spike was hesitant; he didn't want to surrender himself to

unbridled happiness—he knew far too well how quickly it could be ripped away. But it was hard. It was so hard. He was here, he had the woman he loved, and it was he who got to kiss her goodnight. Every night.

There was no bloody doubt—the unlife didn't get any better than this.

## WINDING ROAD

A BIG BATTLE was coming up, which meant the Scoobies were spending even more time in the library.

“So it was short and kinda blue?” Buffy asked.

Granted, they weren’t exactly talking shop.

Willow frowned. “Not too short, medium. And it had this weird, sorta fringy stuff on its arms.”

The doors to the library swung open and Giles bumbled inward. “What’s that?” he asked with interest. “A demon?”

The girls exchanged a wry glance. “No,” Buffy retorted. “A prom dress that Will was thinking of getting. Don’t you ever get out of the Hellmouth?”

Giles offered a wan smile. The look in his eyes said more than words ever could. “I’d be delighted to. However, the day of the Mayor’s Ascension is fast approaching and we don’t know what to expect. Some things remain more important than dances, girls.”

“Not this dance,” Buffy said.

“So says those with demon dates,” Xander grumbled. “Though I better shut up before the Hypocrite Gods strike me down.” He wisely avoided her eyes, turning to Giles. “Well, what about the pages that

Will stole from the Mayor's book? Look, she put her life on the line there, pal. Don't tell me they're useless."

Giles shook his head. "On the contrary, no, we, uh, we know the Ascension refers to a human transforming into a demon, the living embodiment of an immortal. And Graduation Day, our Mayor Wilkins is scheduled to do just that."

"My life wasn't really on the line," Willow argued. "Spike was with me."

Xander arched an eyebrow. "And this is supposed to make me feel better, how?"

"Mutual support," Oz suggested. "It's a thing they're trying nowadays."

Buffy shot Xander a dirty look. "Hey, he did a world of good, and it's all new to him. Give the guy a break. And he didn't wig about Angel helping us out. Bonus in the Buffy Boyfriend Happy department."

"Please, for the love of god, don't use that word in context with Captain Peroxide...ever." He shuddered. "I can take you two going out—"

"One step ahead of me," Giles murmured under his breath.

"—I can take the cutesy looks, the kissy faces, and the handholding. But don't call him your boyfriend. It just makes it all so...real."

"He totally kept his cool with Faith, too," Willow continued as though Xander hadn't spoken. "Though I was the one who freaking told her off."

"Go Wills," Buffy cheered, awarding her a thumbs-up.

The library doors swung open again, this time ushering in Wesley and Cordelia.

"The trouble is," the younger Watcher said, "regarding the Mayor, anyway, is that we do not know what sort of demon he is to become."

"There are thousands of species," Giles agreed.

At that, Wesley puffed out his chest with the same ridiculous look of pride and superiority Buffy was beginning to suspect he'd had trademarked. "So, it's safe to say we shouldn't waste any time of such trifling matters as a school dance."

"Well, that's too bad," Cordelia replied, making to sit at the table. "Because I bet you would look way 007 in a tux."

There was an uncomfortable beat as the Wesley all but slobbered over the compliment. "Except," he continued, smiling winningly, "of course, on the actual night, I will be aiding Mr. Giles in his chaperoning duties."

At that, Giles glanced up in horror. "What? Excuse me?" There was a beat—then a sigh of resignation. "Oh, fine, fine, fine."

Buffy grinned and turned back to Willow. "We'll get you a dress. You know, we should check April Fools."

"Don't go there!" Cordelia blurted. Then, calmer, she said, "I shop there."

"I myself am dipping into my road trip fund to procure a shiny new tux, so look for me to dazzle," Xander added.

"And I myself will be wearing pink taffeta as chenille would not go with my complexion," Giles snapped. "Can we please talk about the Ascension?"

Buffy grinned at him. There were times when he was the epitome of all work and no play. "Giles, we get it. Miles to go before we sleep. But especially if we're all gonna vaporize or something on Graduation Day, we deserve a little prommy fun. One night of glory, not too much to ask."

Nothing could be that simple, of course. The PTB had little regard for teenage rites of passage, and things had been entirely too quiet of the recent. Detailing every night's patrol with Giles wasn't exactly momentous. She very much doubted her Watcher wanted a detailed account of Spike's lips.

For all the good gossip stuff, there was Willow. Willow, who was always interested in hearing how things were going.

"So," the redhead said later as they made their way out of the building. "How go things in the Spike department?"

Buffy couldn't keep from smiling if she tried. "What? Does my general bubbly persona not give it away?"

"A girl wants details. Details!"

"Things are..." Buffy trailed off, the dopey smile that had become

somewhat permanent over the last few weeks firmly in place. It was such a one-eighty from the gloom and doom of not too far back—a cheerful Buffy still managed to take people by surprise. “Things are perfect. He’s just so... God, Wills.”

“That good, eh?”

“Oh yeah.” Then her expression hardened. “And I’m not just talking about the—”

“Hot and dirty sex?”

Her cheeks went hot. “There’s really not much to say. We patrolled last night and he walked me home.”

“You patrolled. That’s it?”

“Well, there were smoochies.”

“Aha! I knew you were keeping something from me.”

“But no hot and dirty anything.”

“Aw, poor Buff. That’s what...three days in a row?”

“Hey, I would if I could. Believe me. I think there’s something addictive about Spike’s...well...”

“Buffy!”

She smirked. “You asked for it.”

Willow heaved a sigh. “I did. I really did. But still. Line. Crossing. Pay attention to the flashing red lights. They’re there for a reason.”

“For my amusement,” Buffy confirmed with a nod.

Willow shook her head, though her eyes glimmered with delight. “And he’s even a go for the prom? The tux, the flowers, the limo, the spending? Check double for the spending.”

A giddy grin spread across Buffy’s lips, and she nodded her enthusiasm. “He’s even assured me that the spending will be of the legal nature.”

“Wow! Now, there’s commitment.”

Buffy shrugged. “Well, considering my boyfriend has the morals of a politician during election year without the Religious Right on his tail, I say go him. He’s been crime-free ever since we...you know...got together.”

“Go, Buff,” Willow cheered, waving her fist in moral support. “The reformer of all things vampy.”

“Not all things. Just one.”

“Not counting Angel?”

“Angel was already reformed.” Then she frowned. “Actually, our relationship deformed him. Turned him all evil-like. No wonder that was doomed.”

Willow nodded. “How is he? Have you heard from him?”

“Not since the last oh-so-pleasant Faith encounter. And even then, we didn’t speak much.”

“But he’s all right?”

“I think so. I mean, he’s not dancing in the streets or anything.” A sigh tumbled from Buffy’s lips as she skipped a step on the sidewalk. “I don’t like seeing him all...I didn’t mean to hurt him.”

“He knows that. I’m sure he does.”

She shrugged. “Well, and even if he doesn’t...there’s really not much I can do, is there? I’ve already established the basics. I love him, but not like that anymore. There are feelings of the love-nature for Angel that are...I dunno...more...”

“Sisterly?”

She made a face. “Ew. Incestuous much?”

Willow rolled her eyes. “Not like that, and you know it.”

“Well, not girlfriend-love and not sister-love. Is there somewhere in the middle?”

“Sympathy love?”

“I don’t like calling it that.”

“And yet?”

Buffy sighed. “Stop it with the insightful. He’s leaving town when graduation is over, and pending any potential apocalypses, that’ll be the end of that.” A frown tugged at her lips. “Spike was right all along. We really can’t be friends.”

“And that’s...a bad?”

“I don’t know. There is no in the middle with me and Angel. It’s one extreme or the other.” She exhaled, shaking her head. “I...we’ve been through so much together. I’d like to give the friend-thing a go, but I just don’t see it happening, especially with all we’ve dealt with. There’s serious badness there that we need to work out before

anything vaguely resembling the friend-nature can ever be considered."

Willow frowned. "I'm sorry."

"Not your fault. Not even Spike's fault."

"Buff, it's not yours, either."

"I'm the cheater. I'm Cheaty McCheats-Alot."

"A lot? You plan on doing more of that?"

A beat, then Buffy's eyes went wide. "No. No! I would never... It's different now. I'd never do that to Spike. It's...we're different."

Willow cracked a smile at that. "She denies that she loves him," she said in a radio-announcer voice. "And yet, the idea of cheating on him makes her extend her claws. When will Buffy overcome her denial? Find out next time on *My Life as a Slayer*."

"Ha ha."

"Well, come on. Angel was the big-love-of, and yet you boinked another vamp when only out of his reach for what? A few hours?"

"Angel was the teen drama that every normal girl should have." She paused, frowned, and turned to thwap her friend across the arm. "And—hey!"

Willow barely flinched. "But not the big-love-of? You've—"

"Will, I was sixteen when I met him."

"Yeah. I was kinda there, remember? Trauma, smoochies, nailed-puppies."

A wry smile played across her lips. "Yeah. All that and a bag of very stale chips. At least with Spike, there's no hidden motive. I know if he's on the prowl, it's for one of two things—sometimes both simultaneously—violence and sex."

"Simultaneously?"

"Well, you know. Stakage, then massive happy."

"Oh. So he never..."

Buffy frowned in confusion, then stopped dead. "Wills!"

"What?"

"How can you—"

"Sorry, sorry. But lest we not forget, he is evil, you know!"



Buffy shook her head. "He wouldn't hurt me," she said firmly, voice ringing with conviction. "Ever. God, every time I even get scraped on patrol, he has to search me to make sure I'm not bleeding internally or something. He is the most over-protective-in-a-sweet-way vampire I have ever met. He's worse than Giles, for Pete's sake! You think he'd—"

Willow held up a hand. "Okay, okay. With the chilling and all."

"Sorry. I'm just..."

"Protective?"

Buffy paused. "You could say that. Anyway, enough. We still on for prom-dress shoppage?"

"Oh, you know it. I wanna get your opinion on the outfit I mentioned." Willow glanced down, cheeks tinting. "I'm not really good at this stuff, as you know. I don't think I would've survived homecoming if..."

Buffy's eyes narrowed. "Homecoming? Oh, you mean that thing where you pulled votes for Cordelia?"

"I was hoping you would've done that thing where you forgot that part."

"No such luck."

"How many times can a girl say she's sorry?"

And then, for no reason whatsoever, except that it was a day that ended with *y*, Buffy found her mind had taken her back to Spike. Thinking about how they grew closer every day. It was frightening in that way. So much time had passed before she and Angel had gotten to the point she was at now, and for whatever reason, that made things with Spike seem even more right. The casual intimacy they shared was like nothing she had ever had the pleasure to experience. With every beat, her heart swelled more. But she wasn't ready to call it love just yet.

"You went off again, didn't you?"

Buffy blinked. Twice. "Huh?"

"To the land of cherries and bleached blonds. No big." Willow shrugged, a devious look crossing her features. "I never thought I'd

say it, but, you two are cute together. As in really, sickening, I-can't-believe-it's-possible cute together. It's hard to imagine him as the same guy that tried to kill us god-knows-how-many-times."

"But he is."

"He is."

"And I can never forget that." A sigh rattled through her. "It doesn't change anything... He's so different. But...he's the real deal. And it's never been like this before. Never."

"Somebody's in loooooove," Willow singsonged.

"I am not!"

"Oh, come on."

"You can't make me confess anything."

"Spike and Buffy sitting in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G."

Buffy rolled her eyes. "God. Third grade, much?"

"Much," Willow agreed. "You need to wake up and smell the ciggies, girl. I haven't seen you this happy since...well, pre-Angelus-datage. And even then: run, money. Look into it."

She shrugged. "He makes me happy."

"He *gives* you happies."

No sense in denying it. "Well, that too."

The girls had stopped on the sidewalk outside Buffy's house.

"Shoppage," Willow said with a nod. "Tonight? I have some calculus to get through."

Buffy offered a very unladylike snort. "Calculus."

"And then shoppage, then helping with the algebra?"

"I should patrol, too."

"Ah." A grin tickled Willow's lips. "Of course. Spike time."

"He wanted to help me with my homework."

"Suuuure he did."

Buffy chuckled and shook her head, making her way slowly up the walk. "Later. About an hour?"

"Sounds good."

Yes, it sounded good. It sounded perfect. Everything right now sounded perfect.

That alone was enough to sound warning bells. Whenever things got perfect, they fell apart. And she knew she was close to dancing off the edge.

It scared her, how easy it would be to fall.

If she wasn't there already.

## ALL WORK

SHE ENDED up purchasing a strappy black number with shots of silver streaks and thigh-high leg-slits. Buffy typically wasn't one for black but felt this dress provided an elegant, adult touch which fit the emotional levels she'd breached over the year. And in that, it was perfect. So much better than the pink thing she'd considered. Spike did not strike her as someone who went well with pink, and even so, pastels were for teenagers. Buffy no longer felt like a teenager. She had moved mountains in just a few weeks, gone from a relationship with a man who could not accept her to one who loved her as she was. Thus the black was sublime. All she needed now was some killer shoes and an appointment with Sunnydale's one and only hair boutique, and prom would become her live-in fairytale.

The night was looking better and better. Spike was scheduled to meet her at the cemetery in thirty so they could snag some QT. She knew it was dangerous pretending everything was all right when there were dangerous factors like Faith and the Mayor and the Ascension looming in the very near future, but until things started hopping or they found a new lead, there wasn't much she could do about it. So she might as well enjoy the quiet while it lasted.

And even with all of this—the Mayor, what they'd learned thanks

to Willow's brilliant page-snatching, and the sense of doom lurking on the horizon—these past few weeks had been some of the best in her life.

And yeah, that was because of Spike.

Buffy grinned and pushed her front door open, her dress slung over her shoulder. She couldn't wait to see the look on his face when he saw it on her.

"Buffy?"

She turned. "Yeah, Mom. It's me."

Joyce Summers appeared around the corner behind the stairs. "Just making sure. Oh...did you get your prom dress?"

"I did."

"And how much did it cost me?"

Buffy plastered on an innocent-daughter grin, fishing out and forking over a thoroughly heated credit card. "I love you, Mommy."

"Uh huh. I'll bet." Joyce bristled. "Are you going to be in for supper?"

"I don't think so. Spike and I are taking patrol tonight, just in case Faith decides to make things interesting." She shrugged. "I'm banking a no for that, but you never know with her. We'll probably go grab pizza or something after that."

Joyce nodded. "Okay. I just thought I'd ask."

"Thanks. You know, we can bring you back something if you'd like. Cooking for one's not as much fun."

"Ah, the joys of takeout. Dinner minus dishes. I might have to take you up on that."

Buffy nodded, making a break for the stairs. "All right. Just let me know. I gotta go freshen up. Meeting Spike in about a half hour."

"You're meeting...? Sweetie, he's upstairs."

Buffy frowned, her eyes trailing upstairs. "He is?"

"Yes. He came in through the basement about an hour ago." Joyce's expression turned grave. "Buffy, I know there are things that you think you're old enough for, things you've already done and therefore think you can handle, but—"

"Mom, I swear I didn't know he was coming over."

"That's not the point. I know very well that you—"

Buffy held up a hand. "Yes. I know the drill. Sex is evil and bad and I should not remove my chastity belt until I'm in my late forties. Was there already, got the memo."

"I didn't mean it like that." Joyce sighed. "I know this isn't exactly the time for one of Mom's spiels, but I worry about you. You're taking on so much for a girl your age. And while Spike is probably one of the better developments that I've seen, I want you to be careful in the decisions you make."

She couldn't help but grin at that. "You really think that Spike's one of the better developments?"

"Well, I'm not crazy about the vampire thing, but he's well-mannered, polite, and he cares for you a great deal."

Well-mannered and polite? Oh yeah. Her boyfriend knew how to charm the Mother.

"I know it happened fast," Buffy said. "But I'm being careful."

Joyce nodded. "I know you are, sweetie. You can't blame a mom for worrying, though. Especially when my daughter is out saving the world every night."

"Well...not every night." Buffy nodded to the stairs. "I better go see what he's doing here so early."

The sight upon entering her room warmed her heart. In all honesty, she hadn't known what to expect. With Spike it was never any one thing. He filled seconds with large gestures disguised as small ones. When they'd made their relationship public, he had dropped by early to cook Joyce supper while assuring her that though, yes, he was evil, he would never endanger the life of her only daughter.

In his own words, *"Been there, tried that, fell head bloody over. Can't get much worse. Oi! Watch the ribs, love."*

Still, nothing could have prepared her for what greeted her in the bedroom.

Spike was reclined on her bed, reading.

Reading *Lord of the Flies*.

Buffy blinked. Hard.

*Oh. My. God.*

He glanced up as soon as he sensed her presence and a grin spread across his face. "Evenin' sweetheart," he greeted, rolling to his feet. "How was school?"

He was here to help her with her homework.

That had to be the sweetest thing she had ever seen.

Unfortunately, she was too flabbergasted to manipulate words. "Spike..."

He held up the book. "Bloody brilliant piece of literature, this is. Thought I'd try to help you with that paper and all. 'Course, that required upping my knowledge on all things Golding. This is heavy on the symbolism. And the story's not half bad, either."

"Spike, you didn't have to—"

"Hush now. I wanted to." A warm smile lit up his eyes, and he leaned in and kissed her. "Not like I have anything better to do, right? What's the assignment again? Just a paper?"

Buffy nodded numbly. "Metaphor analysis."

"Oh, no bloody problem there. We'll tackle it when we get back from patrol, all right?" He didn't wait for her to respond, instead glancing to the package wrapped in cellophane. "What's that? Get your prom dress?"

Buffy scowled and jerked the dress further behind her back. "Hey! No peeking!"

"Aw, come on, pet..."

"Prom's in two nights, Spike. Give it a rest."

"So? A bloke can't be excited about takin' his girl to the biggest bloody event of the year?" He chuckled and kissed her again. "You're gonna look ravishing."

"So says you."

"Bloody right, so says me. You could show up in a doormat and you'd sweep every bloke off his feet." He let the thought rest a minute before frowning. "Then I'd have to put a stop to it, 'cause I bloody well couldn't have you teasing any bloke but yours truly."

Buffy shook her head in amazement, crossing the room to secure her dress in the closet. "I can't believe it," she muttered. "You really read that book to help me?"

Spike shrugged. "Why not?"

"You really didn't have to."

"I know that. What else am I gonna do through the day? Life's bloody boring when you're not around. It was either this or the telly, and the telly'll keep." He waved the book. "This has loads. Adventure, death, blood, more death, the root of all evil. What's not to like?"

She smirked. "Why do I suddenly feel that this was a bad idea after all?"

"I can't imagine what you mean." Spike flashed an innocent smile and shrugged, then mimed fisting a long spear. "Kill the pig, slit her throat, spill her blood."

A girlish giggle tumbled from her lips. She'd been doing a lot more of that recently. "I think," she said, extending a hand, "it's time someone handed over the book."

Spike offered a petulant pout that was almost too yummy for words. "Why? It's getting to the good part."

"And how would you know?"

"Cause I think Simon's about to kick it."

She scowled and whapped him across the arm. Hard. "Don't tell me what happens!"

"What? You actually gonna read this thing?"

"Well, if it's so good, yeah!"

Spike arched an eyebrow.

Buffy pouted. "Fine. Okay. You win. So reading and Buffy are nonmixy things. You don't have to rub it in."

"I'm not doin' any rubbing," he protested, hands coming up—book and all. The mock-innocent look on his face remained only seconds before melting into a smirk that had her melting faster than she liked when she was pretending to be irritated. "Not yet, anyway."

His eyes clearly stated he would have her on her back in two seconds flat unless she did something about it. Spike was a sexual



being, and he would be the first to admit it. His relationship with Drusilla had been, from all accounts, intensely physical. And while Spike was far beyond Drusilla, he was similarly starved for contact because it was the only thing he had known. It proved to him that Buffy was real, and really his. He needed touch, any sort of touch.

And Buffy gave it to him, though she was careful to pace herself.

"Hold on," she said. "Remember, patrol? We actually have to get some of that done tonight."

He nodded and placed the book aside without another word. "Lead the way, then. I'm all yours."

She tossed a coy wink over her shoulder and nodded. "Damn straight."

"Villainous minx."

"And don't you forget it."

He snickered. "Like I could."



"JUST THE USUAL ROUNDS TONIGHT?"

"Yeah. Why?"

Spike frowned. "What you said last night got me thinking. If the big bang's coming soon, why aren't you saddling up the horses? The Mayor bloke looked pretty straight-faced about this Ascension business, if you ask me. And we're, what, waiting for him? Why aren't we going in to save the bloody day before anyone knows that it needs saving? Isn't that what you hero-types do? Mess up a perfectly good evil plan?"

"Yeah. Well, trouble is, there's nothing we really can do until he makes a move. You've seen the Mayor's get-up, and security's on the up now since time's growing closer and he's wise to our habit of breaking and entering." Buffy frowned, squeezing his hand. "What's wrong? Why the sudden wig? You're not worried, are you?"

At that, he scoffed, kicking petulantly at a circle of dirt. "What? Worried? You're off your bird."

"Oh my god, you're worried."

"Am not." He shifted uneasily. "You just...don't seem to be takin' it as seriously as you should, pet. And I don't want anything to happen to you."

"So in laymen's terms, you're worried."

Spike rolled his eyes.

Buffy grinned and kissed his cheek. "That's cute."

"Is not."

"Trust me. It's adorable."

"I just..."

"Don't want anything to happen to me." She squeezed his hand again. "I know. Me, either. For the first time in ever, my life is going all right. High school's almost over, my mother and I are on good terms, my friends and I are still friends, and I got me a hot boyfriend."

"Say that last part again, just for my benefit."

She ignored him. His ego was large enough. "And yes, an imminent apocalypse is of the very bad. But we're on it. Will got those pages and Giles and Wesley are practically up twenty-four/seven trying to crack the code. We patrol, albeit patrol is slow, and we live. This is how we do things. It's how we've always done things."

"Need I remind you that the world nearly ended last year?"

She batted a hand. "It nearly ends every year. Where have you been?"

"Buffy—"

"I know. I'm a casual superhero. I don't even wear a cape."

He grumbled. "You terrify me," he whispered, shaking his head and running a hand through his platinum strands. "And the thing is, I know if it's not this, it'll be somethin' else. Somethin' worse. And you'll fight it because that's who you are. And I'll be terrified."

Buffy stood, flabbergasted. That was the last thing she had expected him to say.

"I just got this, luv. And I know you're going on with business as usual. I guess. It just seems..."

She pursed her lips, tease melting away. "All this because of what I said last night? About the big being just around the corner?"

He hesitated, then nodded.

"It's all a part of the package, Spike."

"I know. It just worries me."

Buffy smiled and leaned in to give him a reassuring kiss. "Well, don't worry. If anything, we'll go down together. You're gonna be in the big fight, too."

"Better bloody well believe it."

"We're gonna be prepared. In the meantime, there's patrol and prom and all that good stuff to look forward to." She snuggled into his side, hooking an arm through his.

"You're sweet," she told him a few minutes later.

"Yeah, well, don't tell anyone. It'll kill my image."

She arched an eyebrow at that. "You're the Slayer's boyfriend, Spike. Consider your image killed."

Spike shook his head good-naturedly, squeezing her tighter. "You're hell on a bloke's ego."

"I might have to stroke it later then, huh?"

He grinned and leaned nearer, rustling her hair with his breath. "Tell you what, baby," he said. "You can stroke mine if I can get a little taste of yours."

Maybe one day it would take more than just his voice to turn her on. Maybe. But today was not that day. Buffy pressed her thighs together. "You're bad."

"You started it."

"So tell me about *Lord of the Flies*."

Spike arched a cool brow. "This your way of changing the subject?"

"Yeah. It working?"

"Lemme put it this way..." He grinned, slipping an arm around her waist, dipping his hand beneath the waistband of her pants so he could trace her sensitive skin. Then he began talking again. "Golding begins the book with Ralph and Piggy, two little tykes who've survived a plane crash or some rot and find themselves on this island—"

"Spike."

"Sweetheart?"

"You're really bad."

He chuckled again. "So they tell me."

## STUDY SESSION

IT WAS WELL into the night, and she knew she should be sleeping, but listening to Spike's soothing, butterscotch voice was something she had long taken for granted. He sounded like an English teacher when he went on these little tangents, which apparently did it for her in more ways than one. If she weren't so enamored by him, she might be a bit disturbed with herself.

"So, let me get this straight..."

"I'm I goin' too fast, love?"

"No. I just wanna make sure I understand the old material before you start on something shiny and new."

Spike rolled his eyes and tickled her feet lightly under the covers. They were positioned at opposite ends of the bed, doing their level best to remain chaste and keep to studies. Well, Buffy was trying—Spike was apathetic. She just needed to make him behave; anything fun was too risky while home, especially with her mother just down the hallway.

"Like a virgin?"

She blinked.

"Shiny and... Ah, buggerin' youth."

"Hey. Watch it, old man."

Spike smirked and tickled her again. "Madonna. From the '80s. You were around during the '80s, weren't you?"

"Yeah, but likely not listening to Madonna." Buffy smiled and tickled him back. "But no, I didn't fall off the tractor yesterday. I do, however, like giving you a hard time."

"You give me a hard something, all right."

She shooed him. "Evil."

"Always." He shook his head with a wry grin. "Anyway, the book, love, remember? The one on the paper that's due...oh, tomorrow."

Buffy sobered immediately. "Oh god. This is Wednesday, isn't it?" He nodded. "Yes, yes. The book. Book knowledge for last minute paper writing in the library."

"You're gonna skip first and third again, aren't you?"

"Yes. Paper takes precedence."

"I can try to pop by so I can proof it for you before you turn it in if you like." She stared at him. He fidgeted. "What?"

"You are the perfect boyfriend, you know that?"

A shit-eating grin spread across his face in turn, and he nodded as though he not only knew but had already handed out flyers. "So I've been told," he replied, too smug for his own good. "Comes with the territory."

"Okay. So, let me get this straight. Piggy and his glasses represent clear-sightedness and intelligence." She paused, searching her memory. "He's the law and order of the adult world. He wants to obey the rules they had before the crash. The ones that set them to society."

Spike nodded, rewarding her under the covers with an impromptu foot-massage.

"Ralph represents order and people. He's good but he's tempted by the wicked." Her eyes narrowed at him. "I can relate. And the Conch represents unity and power."

"Can you tell me why?" He rubbed his fingers over her sensitive arches, touch feather light and tender.

It was strange how the most subtle of caresses could turn her on so effortlessly. Buffy nodded, breathing a bit harder as she leaned

against the headboard. "Because...the boys established...ummm... that psychological whatnot from the beginning. They can speak...if they're holding it. And they answer it when it's...ummm...sounded, and when it breaks, the last of their..."

"Something wrong?"

"Nope."

"Right then. Go on."

Buffy glared at him but complied. "When it...smashes...the last of their...their unity smashes, too."

He winked, fingers gliding further up her leg. "Good girl."

"Spike—"

"Hush, sweetheart. This could get interesting."

She frowned. "What could—"

He whipped the blankets away, expert hands prying her thighs apart as he slid up the bed and settled between them. "This," he answered hoarsely, nuzzling her clothed pussy with an appreciative breath. Then he frowned and fingered her panties. "What've I told you about wearin' these?"

"I'm sorry," she answered, not nearly as aggressively as she intended. "Sometimes underwear is essential."

"Sometimes," he agreed. His canines extended before she could retort, deftly slicing through the thin material. When he glanced up to her astonished face, he had nothing to offer but a cheeky grin. "Not now. Here's how it goes, love. You gimme a right answer, you get rewarded."

"Not a good idea."

A cool brow arched. "Why?"

Her eyes widened and she waved erratically at the door. And to her utter amazement, he shrugged.

"Shouldn't be a problem," he said. "As long as you can keep quiet."

"I—"

Spike lowered his head, nuzzling her slick flesh with a wanton moan of approval. "You always smell delicious," he murmured and licked along her inner thigh.

"Oh god..."

Just as quickly he withdrew his tongue and looked up at her, blinking innocently. "Right then," he said. "Now that the rules have been established...tell me 'bout Jack."

If glares were stakes, he'd be dust. "You're so gonna get yours later."

"You better bloody believe it, baby."

"Argh!"

"Shhh. Wouldn't wanna wake up Mum, now would you?"

She glared harder, waited, then sighed when she realized he wouldn't let up. "Jack...ummm...he's the one who's all, 'yay anarchy'... right?" Spike smirked and brushed a soft kiss across her clit. Buffy and seized his shoulder. "I'll take that as a yes."

"Mhmmm...what else?"

"Well...he's the leader of the bad guys. The ones that wanna kill Ralphie."

"That's Ralph."

"Difference being?"

"Ralphie's the kid from *A Christmas Story*."

"There's more than one Ralphie in the world, I'm sure."

"Yeah, but not in this book." He nipped at her thigh and grinned when she muffled a squeak. "But you were right about Jack bein' the leader."

To emphasize her rightness, though, he favored her clit with a long, lavish lick.

Buffy dropped her head against the headboard. "I could get used to this teaching technique..."

She scrunched up her face and searched her memory. "He... ummm...he banks on self-interest," she said after a moment. "He...he represents the type of person Golding thinks everyone...would uh...turn into without society."

"That was two right answers, love."

"Kinda one big one."

He shrugged. "Whichever." He slid a hand up her leg, leaving a pathway of goosebumps trailing after him. And without ceremony, he



slid two fingers inside of her before treating her clit to another kiss.

“And now Simon.”

“Just Simon?”

He shrugged. “We can cover Roger and the others if you like...”

“Ohhh...I might like very much.”

Spike’s eyes narrowed. “Might?”

“Mmm...I’d like the reward more than the remembering.”

He chuckled. “It’s all right, pet,” he murmured. “We still have the themes to go over. Now, tell me about Simon.”

Her breaths came heavier, faster. So much so they nearly hurt. “Simon’s Jesus,” she explained, closing her eyes and forcing herself to think, which had never been as hard for anyone as it was for her right now. “He’s in tune to everything. He can hear the Beast. And he gives up his life to...to...uhmmm...”

“Go on.” Spike began pumping the fingers he had inside of her.

“Heightened...uhhhh...perception. He takes... everything...seriously.”

He lowered his head again, nipping at her clit. “Mmmm.”

“He’s...like Giles.”

Spike paused and glanced up, doming a brow. “Scuse me?”

“Well, if Giles was stranded on an island, he’d be the first to start hearing voices from evil.”

“You think so?”

She nodded. “Also...from what you said...Simon’s more in tune to the big picture. If that isn’t Giles, I don’t know what is.”

“Lemme get this straight...” Spike cocked his head, considering her. “I’m down here licking your cunny, and you think of Giles?”

“I was answering a question! And ew!”

A grin that was one-hundred-percent pure evil tickled his sinful lips which were, yes, slick with her juices. “Just checking,” he replied, winking.

“Major ew.”

“Sorry baby. Can I make it better?” He returned his mouth to her skin, dotting her inner thigh with gentle, teasing mock bites. “Better?”

“No, keep trying.”

"One condition."

She looked at him.

He smiled. "Tell me 'bout the Beast."

"Well," she began. "I have one between my legs right now."

Spike flashed a grin and plunged his tongue into her pussy, licking wildly and drawing away before she could blink. Buffy arched and moaned under him. Now had to be it, right? The moment he forgot what the hell they were talking about and held her to his mouth. Spike and control did not mix, so how he was still so calm was freaking beyond her.

"Baddest beast there ever was," he replied. "But not the one I'm talking about. Tell me more, sweetheart. After all, I get to enjoy the rewards, too. And you've been such a quick study so far."

Okay. So that was his aim. Proper motivation. She could do this.

"The beast...is..." Buffy's brow furrowed as she concentrated. "He's the root of all evil."

"Mhmmm..."

"It..." Her eyes fluttered shut and she tunneled her fingers through his hair, directing him unthinkingly back to where she craved his touch the most. Spike grinned against her, tickling her clit with his tongue before sucking her into his mouth, wagging his head.

Hot sparks of *pure yes* began to ignite. Buffy hissed and thrust her hips up, and when he pulled back she thought she might cry.

"What?" she asked. "Spike—"

"You stopped talking."

Her mouth fell open, closed, and opened again. "I—"

"I really don't see why you're being so mean to me," he continued, straight-faced. "I mean, here I am, wanting to touch you. Begging you to come all over my face and you won't even answer a simple question."

She stared at him incredulously.

"Something the matter?"

"You are a jerk."

Spike gasped and pulled back. "Words hurt, Slayer. Didn't they teach you that at school?"

"I'll hurt you a lot more here in a second."

"Shhhh. Careful there. Wouldn't wanna wake up ole mum." He offered his smuggest smile, which only grew wider when she growled at him. "Now then. Tell me about the beast. Tell me...and I can get back to what I'd really like to be doing."

To emphasize his point, he resumed pumping his fingers into her, the sound wet and elicit and *god* she wanted him now.

"Talk to me," Spike murmured before dragging his fingers out of her again. And just to torture her, she was sure, raised them to his mouth and licked them clean.

"Spike..."

"Want more, gotta talk."

"You expect me to..." He lowered his hand to her pussy again and ran a finger between her labia. That need to cry returned and Buffy did everything she could to keep from arching into him. "You...expect me...to...talk like this?"

"Why not?"

"Remind me to tell you to keep a lively conversation next time I decide to...erm..." She glanced down and noted, not unhappily, that he had to be the most uncomfortable man on the planet if the bulge straining against the denim was any indication. "...You know."

Spike grinned at her. "You know?"

"Well, I'd hope you know."

"You're adorable."

"Funny. I think the same thing about you."

A growl tore through him and without warning, he pulled his hand back entirely, ignoring her whimper of protest. "The Beast," he said, suddenly the epitome of a no-nonsense schoolmaster. "Explain."

"I...uhhh...the Beast. It's...it's the Lord of the Flies." She searched his face for a sign of encouragement and hissed a breath of annoyance when she didn't receive one. "You...ummm...you said that the Beast was the Lord of the Flies, and that the Lord of the Flies was like...the...ummm..."

"Y'know, pet, I just don't think your heart of hearts is in this anymore."

"Spike!"

He pressed a finger to his lips, eyes twinkling.

Buffy leaned forward to whap him across the arm. "You got me into this!"

"Into what?"

"Bah..."

He shrugged. "Come on, sweetheart. We just went over this. I know you can do it."

Buffy glared a moment longer, but her glares had officially lost their juice because he didn't even pretend to look intimidated. Left to nothing else, she turned her thoughts back to the conversation they'd had earlier. The things he'd said then—how he'd said them. She closed her eyes and focused for a few seconds. Then, more collected, she began, "The Beast is the Lord of the Flies. It's...it's the root of all evil. Basically, take people away from society...like the boys were, and place them in uncivilized conditions, and they revert to the root characteristic of human nature." Her eyes remained shut and Spike didn't say a word, but she felt his answer press against her intimately the next minute. A teasing nibble at first, then he murmured into her flesh, sank his tongue into her pussy, and lapped. A long moan sailed through her lips and she focused harder, desperate to maintain concentration even as her fingers wove through Spike's hair to hold him against her. "A-according to Golding, then...the root of all human nature...is..." He licked from her opening to her clit and slid his fingers back inside her as he sucked her into his mouth. "The root...of all...human..." His tongue was drawing circles around her clit as he sucked and she knew she wouldn't be able to hold on much longer.

He pulled back just long enough to ask, "Root of what, pet?"

"Evil!" she finally gasped.

He muffled a response into pussy, fucking her faster now with his fingers, staring as his soaked skin plunged in and out of her. He watched for a moment, raised his gaze to hers, then moaned and fell back on her clit, flattening his tongue against it.

And that was it. Buffy blast off. She shuddered hard, her muscles clenching around his fingers. God, he knew just what to do with his hands, but she couldn't help but be marginally disappointed when he didn't follow it up by thrusting something else inside her. Not that that was a good idea because they couldn't be quiet, but damn.

When Buffy finally returned to herself—when her eyes decided to kindly unblur—she found Spike resting on her stomach again, dawdling mindless patterns across the sensitive flesh at her thigh with his forefinger. His eyes were closed, but then he opened them and met hers, hitting her hard with that open adoration that seemed too big for one person to hold, to feel for anyone. It was only a flash, though. Over the past few weeks, Spike had become more reserved with his declarations, verbal and otherwise. She knew he loved her—he told her often, with enthusiasm—but somehow, even that feeling had transpired the hit and miss of most relationships. They had come so far in just a short amount of time, and it was only getting better.

In seconds, the wall was up again, and he smirked a smirk of pure male arrogance, wagging his brows.

"I'm sorry, pet," he said. "Got carried away there for a minute. What was the Beast, again?"

Buffy blinked. Then, flashing a smirk her own, said, "The Beast is the Lord of the Flies, and it's the root of all evil. Take people away from society, ergo the boys, and place them in uncivilized conditions, and they fall back on pure human nature. Which, according to Golding, would be evil. Also, you said only Simon could hear the voice, which boosts his Jesus-status. Jesus having a conversation with the devil. Furthermore, it makes sense that the Beast would appear to him in the form of a decapitated pig's head—gross yes, but sense-like. The boys put it there because of their reverting to form, thus it manifested out of general wonkiness." She paused briefly, placing a thoughtful finger against her lips as she considered. "Do you think it's possible that you were born on that island? Because you're about as evil as they come, Buster."

Spike looked at her with astonishment.

She shrugged and flashed a smile. "What?"

"You've never read the book?"

"Never ever."

He stared at her. She smiled again and leaned forward to kiss him. "You're a good teacher," she said with a shrug. "The very best I've ever had."

"Bloody well better be."

"Though I think if Mr. Edwards tried teaching the way you just did, he'd be fired."

"And then killed. No one else gets to teach you the way I do." Spike glanced to the bed linens, still flustered, and shook his head. "You really just...you picked all that up by listening to me?"

She nodded. "Sure did. Despite what Giles has told you, I do listen when it's important. Slayer here. Kinda essential. Besides..." She kissed him again. "You've got a really, really sexy voice. Very easy when it comes to the listening."

Spike stared at her a moment longer. Then, slowly, he smiled. "Sexy, huh?"

"Oh yeah. Really."

"Are you coming onto teacher now? That's a naughty girl."

"And you're a bad, bad man."

"Got that memo."

A sudden tapping filled the room. Buffy jumped and grabbed onto Spike's arm out of reflex, finding her lap covered with a pile of bunched blankets the next instant. Her boyfriend's warning growl meant only one possibility, and she rolled her eyes in silent agreement.

"Who invited loverboy over here?"

Buffy felt a familiar wave of irritation at that. She and Spike had had numerous conversations about Angel, specifically how he wasn't her lover anything anymore, but the conclusions of those conversations seemed to evaporate by the time they next had to see the elder vampire. And yeah, it was beyond annoying feeling like they had made no progress where this was concerned.

But then, as she always did, she reminded herself that not too long had passed since she'd tried to convince Spike that she didn't

want him, that she was happy the way things were with Angel, and what they'd shared had been a mistake. It hadn't been true, but feed a person a lie enough times and eventually they believed it. On the surface, Spike hadn't been duped, but his feelings had been tossed in the shredder until the night where Angel-Became-Angelus-But-Not-Really. It hadn't been until then that Buffy had admitted to herself what she really wanted.

And given the long history of women Spike loved choosing Angel over him, Buffy understood why he had a complex. Hell, she'd have one too.

She just didn't know how to make it better. How to convince him the complex might be real, but its focus wasn't.

"I think he invited himself," she said after a moment. "Better open the window."

Spike cocked his head.

"Well, he's obviously here for a reason."

"To annoy yours truly." He rolled his eyes but complied, shaking his head as he arched back to unhook the window latch. "Ello, Angel. Whatsa matter? Run out of pulsers to irritate?"

The dark brooding figure tilted his head in begrudging acknowledgment. "Spike."

Spike nodded. "It's a bloody pleasure to see you, too." He turned to Buffy, eyes wide and imploring. "Can we kick him out, now?"

She snickered and ignored him. "Hey, Angel. What's up?"

"I need to talk to you."

Spike bristled. "Figured as much."

"There's trouble," he said, never once taking his eyes off Spike. It was amazing how quickly the levels of testosterone shot off the scales. "An attack earlier today. Some creature busted into a funeral visitation."

Buffy sat up straight, eyes wide. "Anyone hurt?"

"A couple scratches. One guy got a pretty considerable chunk taken out of his arm. It was a hit and run thing...at least that's what they're saying." Angel shook his head. "The creature got there, did its business, and left."

"Why didn't anyone contact me?"

He finally turned to stare at her. "Giles has been trying on and off for a few hours, but Willow said everything was fine. That you and..." Angel nodded slightly in Spike's direction. "That you had plans tonight and had gone patrolling. I just...wanted to make sure everything was all right."

"What he means, love," Spike clarified, "is that I hadn't eaten you up."

Of course. Because this was a fight she would also never stop having. At least until Angel left town, as he'd told her he planned to do following the Ascension. "Well, there was no reason to worry. No one's been eaten here."

Spike chuckled and winked. Buffy replayed what she said and felt her face go hot.

Angel's scowl deepened. "So...you two have had a busy night?"

"Got plenty busy, if you—"

"Yep," Buffy said quickly. "Spike's been helping me with my homework."

There was a pause of disbelief. "Homework."

"That and then some," Spike agreed.

"Smells more like the 'then some.'"

Spike tilted his head, obviously very proud of himself. "Comes with the territory, mate," he replied. "Slayer's got a paper on *Lord of the Flies*. I was...testin' her memory."

"You've read *Lord of the Flies*?"

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Oh god. Please don't get him started." She shifted slightly and puffed out her chest. "'S tha best bloody book in tha world, luv. Here, let me quote you me favorite passage. Starts on Chapter One an' ends with 'the end.'"

Spike smirked. "Gotta tell you, sweetheart, that's likely the worst accent I've ever heard."

"You could always give me lessons."

His grin widened in delight. "My bloody pleasure."

"And that's my exit cue," Angel said, backtracking fast out the window. "I'm just glad you're all right. Giles said he'd likely be up all



night trying to pinpoint what the creature was off the description and the sketch I made, so prepare for a game plan come morning.”

There was a groan. “Great. Paper and work all in one morning. I need you, Friday night!”

Spike reached out to massage her shoulder. “Poor baby. I’ll be sure to pamper you extra special.”

“You’re so good to me.”

He shrugged. “What can I say? Anythin’ for my girl. Be it grunt work or hand service.”

Buffy flushed again and slapped his shoulder again. He dazzled her with an unrepentant grin.

Angel favored them both with a stoic look that made her feel like discarded chewing gum. At length, he nodded. “And I’m gone.”

Spike snickered. “Thought you were gone two minutes ago, mate.”

“I’m gone now. Good luck with your...” Angel’s eyes narrowed. “Studies.”

Though he had behaved marvelously during the impromptu visit, Spike visibly relaxed once they were alone again. Buffy watched the way the tension in his body rolled away, feeling very much like she was the only person who truly knew him. The arrogant mask he wore around Angel faded as well in favor of the sweeter, more open expression he seemed to reserve just for her. There was such a large difference based on his behavior around others and his behavior with her alone.

“Thanks,” she murmured after a minute.

Spike stiffened again but only briefly. As though he needed to remind himself who he was with. “It’s nothing, sweetheart,” he replied. “It’s just Angel.”

“It’s more than that.”

A beat passed, and he nodded, resigned. “Yeah. Well, as long as these little midnight visitations don’t become a habit.”

“That’s the first time he’s attempted contact without us being in a group-sitch. Don’t worry.”

He offered a faint smile. “Who’s worried?”

Buffy released a sigh and moved forward, cupped his cheek to draw his mouth to hers. "Trust me," she murmured. "I'm your girl. If I wanted to be with Angel, I would be. I don't. He never made me happy. Not really." She smiled into his eyes. "You make me so happy."

"I love you," he whispered.

And again she broke inside. That was the last barrier. The one thing she couldn't tell him. Despite how she wanted it, to know that the thing she felt was love, she couldn't make those words come. It made her soar with every time she heard them. Every time those words escaped his lips, she was made over again.

But she couldn't give it back to him. Not yet.

Someday. There was always the promise of someday.

Thus she opted with a weak but heartfelt, "I know."

Spike smiled and kissed her forehead. "It's all right, sweetheart," he reassured her.

She hoped so. She hoped so with every fiber of her being because she—better than anyone—knew how simple it was to say one thing and mean another. Even if he thought he meant it now, it did not mean he always would.

"Now then," Spike drawled, tone lighter. "Where were we?"

Buffy's eyes widened. He whipped the blankets away in a blink, and she found herself immediately assaulted by a hungry mouth and hands that knew her well. A low moan escaped her, and she leaned back. She was absolute pudding at his touch.

"Ah, yes. Done with metaphors." He leaned over her, stealing a kiss from her lips. "Time for themes."

## MUSIC AND PASSION

NIGHTS LIKE THIS, Buffy wondered if the term 'day off' had been made up by a practical joker. It would certainly explain why her graduating class was currently dancing the night away with their respectful honeys, not knowing and likely uncaring that she was currently in one of their town's many cemeteries as Spike zipped her up.

"You're sure the other one's dead?"

"Positive. Turn 'round. Lemme see you."

An aggravated sigh rumbled through her throat. "One night. One lousy night. That's all I ask for. And do I get it? No. Of course not. And you ask yourself why. My name would be Buffy, that's why. And I am of the Chosen, and thus must eradicate this world from all its evilness."

She felt him grin behind her. "Hopefully not all its evilness."

"I'm tempted."

"Oi!"

"No offense. It's just...hellhounds?" She whimpered, finally turning so he could inspect her. "It's prom night and I'm in the graveyard. What does that say to you?"

But Spike wasn't paying attention. He ran his eyes down the

length of her, a grin tickling his lips. "Mmmm," he murmured. "You're gorgeous."

Buffy pouted, raising a hand to inspect the up-du on which she had wasted a good hundred dollars on. "I'm a wreck. My hands are dirty, my hair is ruined, and I'm pretty sure I got hellhound blood on my dress."

He shook his head and tsked. "Vanity, vanity."

"It's the prom! It's a twentieth-century girly thing that you will never understand." She sighed, placing a hand on her chest to compose herself. "All right. A few deep breaths and I'm miraculously over it."

"You look smashing."

"Do not."

"That dress does you proper." He licked his lips in approval. "You make it, all right."

"Stop."

"What?"

"You're trying to make me not aggravated."

Spike shrugged and flashed a grin. "And doesn't that make me a horrible person? I'm also telling you you're the most beautiful creature I've ever laid eyes on, that I'm impossibly the luckiest bloke in the world, and that I better hurry and change so we can get you over to your dance to make sure that every wanker in proximity curses me for my fortune while upstaging every chit there is to upstage. Savvy?"

There was a long pause. Buffy simply stared at him.

He shifted. "What?"

She stared a minute longer before smiling. "You're so sweet."

He shrugged again and brushed a kiss over her forehead. "I'm honest. You're so divine and you don't even know it. My exquisite girl. Now...do you know how to tie a necktie?"

She chuckled and held out a hand. Spike made quick work of his clothes—shedding his duster and shirt and smirking when she ogled his chest.

"Slayer," he said as he began fitting on the tux. Yes, Spike had gotten a

tux. Without needing to be told to, without complaint, and he was putting it on for her right now. And giving her quite the show. "You better put that tongue back in your mouth if you fancy getting to this dance of yours."

"Mmm," she said, almost forgetting she'd been in a bad mood just a few seconds ago. "You look very yummy."

Spike grinned. "I know you're yummy, pet."

"Evil."

"Evil can be yummy, too." He smoothed his hands down himself, then grabbed and pulled her close. "Give us a taste."

She grinned but shook her head. "Down boy. Later."

He broke into his glorious pout. "Come on. Just a little taste? Little sampler?" He lowered his head to her throat and inhaled. "You smell heavenly."

"Sweat and blood. Yeah. Heavenly."

"Hello, vampire."

Buffy jabbed him in the ribs. "You weren't supposed to agree!"

He grunted but the sound became a chuckle. "You smell like Buffy," Spike explained. "Can't get much better than that. Vanilla, powder, and..." One of his hands pressed against her then, too fast for her to catch before it was rubbing her pussy through the satin of her dress, and her mind went too blank to give a damn. "Mmm...just as I thought. Wet. Naughty girl. Oh yeah. That's the stuff."

"Spike..."

"Can I have my taste now?"

But he didn't wait for her answer before taking her mouth in a hard kiss. One that made her wonder just how much she'd regret missing her prom if she decided it was just another casualty of her slayer life. Except slaying vamps and doing vamps weren't exactly the same thing, but she wouldn't have the latter if it weren't for the former.

Spike answered for her when she pulled apart, smiling into her eyes. "Right then. Let's get you to that dance."

"You still wanna go?"

"You do, love, so yeah. I do too."

Maybe one day she would stop warming all over when he said things like that, but she kinda hoped not.

"Okay."



THE SUNNYDALE GYM was hopping when they finally made their grand entrance, the lighting reminding Spike of every 80s movie Drusilla had forced him to sit through. But the look at Buffy's face, the glow behind her eyes somehow made everything worth it. She turned to him and flashed a smile that made his knees do funny things.

"Thank you," she said.

"Nothing to thank me for, sweets."

"You've made my magic night all magicky, even with the unscheduled world-saveage and the bitchiness that was me in the graveyard."

"Well, serves the PTB right for tryin' to muck up my girl's special night."

"I notice how you very decided not to add, 'Oh, Buffy, honey. You are in no way bitchy. Just neglected and misunderstood.'"

Spike smirked at that. "Well now," he said. "That would be lyin'." She whacked his arm, and he wrapped his own around her middle and drew her near to caress her mouth with his. "You're right, though," he murmured. "You deserve a night off. You do so much for this pissant town."

"Now you're just trying to play your sweet card so you get laid tonight."

"Not entirely." Spike pulled back a little and rocked on his heels. "It working?"

"Believe me, all you had to do was put on that tux."

"It's more a suit, actually."

She arched an eyebrow. "I don't care what it is. Looks damn fine."

He grinned. "Naturally."

Her eyes sparkled with that familiar fire, but before she could retort, they were ambushed by Willow and Oz. It pleased him to

see her here; Red was his personal favorite of all the Slayer's friends. She seemed content as long as Buffy was content. And the bloke at her side was equally okay, in Spike's book. His being a wolf seemed to bless him with an appreciation for all things other-worldly.

"Buffy!" the redhead gushed. "You look awesome!"

Buffy beamed at her friend. "Thanks. So do you."

Spike nudged her. "Told you."

Willow turned to him with more of the same. "Spike. Very suave."

At that, the Slayer waved a hand. "Don't encourage him. He knows he looks good." She grumbled and shook her head. "Ten minutes sans mirror privileges and you look good enough to eat."

He waggled his eyebrows. "I *am* good enough to eat."

Willow snickered. "I see what you mean. No more complimenting Spike."

"Oi!"

"He looks good," Oz observed, shrugging.

Spike offered a sober nod of solidarity. "You too, mate."

Buffy smirked. "Should we leave you two alone?"

Oz shook his head with a grin. "Nah. He's not really my type. Not much for blondes, natural or otherwise." He held up a hand. "No offense."

"Trust me, mate, none taken," Spike replied. "I would say you're too short, but that'd be a personal remark."

As he expected, Buffy elbowed his ribs.

"See?" He turned to her. "And ow. Watch the goods, love. Remember, I might have super strength, but I'm not quite up to slayer par."

Willow's eyes lit up. "You could become, Super Spike, the Slayer Layer! A-and have that Superman 'S' engraved on your shirt while wearing stylish tights." When this didn't earn the laughter she'd obviously expected, she flushed and glanced down. "Well...I thought it was funny."

Buffy cocked her head. "Mmmm...tights. The image is oddly appealing."

"Bloody perfect. You've given her ideas."

"You can go with your patented red and black," Willow said with a shrug.

Oz smiled and wrapped an arm around the redhead. "She's quite industrious, isn't she?"

Buffy nodded. "On really scary levels." Without taking her eyes off her friends, she grabbed Spike by the necktie and gave it a good tug. "I'm gonna go check out the refreshments. Looks like they're about to start with the awards. I wanna step to the side before everyone goes all wonky with the cheers and whatnot."

Spike arched an eyebrow. "Guess I'm comin' too?"

She dinged his tie once for good measure. "Yup."

"Woof bloody woof. Lead the way, Sweets."

Oz's eyes narrowed. "If I were a lesser man, I would take offense to that."

"Well, no offense, mate, but if you were a lesser man, you'd be three bloody inches tall."

There was another jerk on his tie. Buffy beseeched him with an imploring look. "Come."

"Here? Now? Can we at least go to the loos? It's a little more private, I'd wager."

Willow's eyes went wide and she turned pink in record time, tugging at her boyfriend's shoulder. "Oz! We should find Xander. He's banking for the Class Clown Award...and...you know...moral support."

"Class Clown? Stay Puff's a bloody shoo-in." Spike turned to Buffy again. "They actually have rewards for that sort've thing?"

"It's a silly high school thing," Buffy explained, snickering as the Willow dragged Oz away in a hurry. "Look, you scared her off."

He shrugged. "She'll be back later."

"And you'll scare her away again, later."

Another shrug. "I'm just being myself."

"Ah. Very frightening."

He smirked, she smiled, and life was good.

Damn good.

Giles and Wesley were loitering near the refreshment stand. They



cast Buffy and Spike nearly identical glances of disapproval but didn't otherwise comment on their presence. It had been a couple of weeks since the Spike stopped by the library to announce that yes, he was dating the Slayer. Yes, he knew they would not like it, and no, he didn't give a bloody damn. And that was the end all of that. He knew that Buffy had likely received a good scolding, but she denied it to this day. She'd also asked him not to accompany her, saying it would be better if she dealt with Giles on her own. He'd agreed, though he hadn't liked it. The talking to she'd received had likely been one for the books.

And yet, Spike hadn't received nearly as much hostility as he would have wagered. He didn't know if it due to the fact that no recent citizen deaths were his fault, the Slayer's urging, or the fact he had done nothing but help since arriving in Sunnydale—and quite frankly, as long as the watchers didn't bother him, he didn't rightly care. Either way, Buffy had been nothing but open about their relationship, and the only person whose opinion mattered was her, anyway.

Spike poured his girl a glass of punch, nodding cordially at the selected chaperones. Wesley's surly expression melted and he offered a wave. Giles, however, did not, and when Wesley saw he was alone in the friendly greeting, he swallowed and dropped his hand to his side.

A chuckle rumbled through Spike's chest. "Bloody typical."

Buffy turned to him. "What?"

"Your old man has that 'why did I leave my stake at home' look about him."

She offered a weak smile, then waved a dismissive hand. "Ah, I don't think so. He likes you."

Spike just looked at her.

"Okay, so he hates you with the burning, fiery passion of a thousand suns. His loss." She cuddled into his side. The slightest touch of her skin had the power to fill his long-dead veins with hope and song. In just a few short weeks, she had turned him into an all-out wanker.

And such was just fine with him, because the wanker had the girl, and that was all there was to it.

Speaking of wankers, he caught sight of Xander standing apprehensively near Willow and Oz, the boy's attention glued to the stage. The next minute, the reward for Class Clown was given to some bloke named Jack Mayhew, and evidently, the loss was a major blow to Harris's ego. Spike watched with amusement and shook his head.

"Guess not a shoo-in after all."

"Awww. Xan's gonna be in a funk for the rest of the night." Buffy made a face. "He was already edgy 'cause he had to take Anya as his date."

"Anya?"

"I told you about her. Ex-vengeance demon type."

"Ah." He nodded, throwing back a mouthful of punch. "Right. First Cordelia, then the great avenger of scorned women against all things manly. The boy sure knows how to pick them."

"Well, as he said, it was either her or the sock-puppet of love...or something equally disturbing."

"Sock-puppet of love, eh? Bloody toss-up." He chuckled off her look, drawing her near so that he could nibble on her lips, uncaring if he was in full view of the watchers or not. "I love you, sweetheart."

Buffy smiled at him before nodding, leaning in to kiss him again. "I know."

And still, nothing more. That was all right. He could wait.

The air sliced again with the interference of the microphone. Though this time, the interruption was of interest.

"We have one more award to give out," a short, nervous boy announced. "Is Buffy Summers here tonight? Did she, um..."

Almost immediately, the crowd seemed to part and center on them, and Buffy tensed against him at the attention. Spike merely grinned, seizing the opportunity to snuggle her closer. Best to stake his claim on the catch of the night while everyone was looking.

"Knew they'd save the best for last, baby."

She shot him a worried look. "I don't even wanna—"

"This is actually a new category," the little bloke at the mic announced. "First time ever. I guess there were a lot of write-in ballots, and, um, the prom committee asked me to read this." He

shuffled a bit and pulled out an index card. “We’re not good friends. Most of us never found the time to get to know you, but that doesn’t mean we haven’t noticed you. We don’t talk about it much, but it’s no secret that Sunnydale High isn’t really like other high schools. A lot of weird stuff happens here.”

Weird stuff. Bloody understatement of the year.

At that, there were several random outbursts from the crowd.

“Zombies!”

“Hyena people!”

“Snyder!”

The last earned a snort of laughter from the Slayer’s peers. Spike tried not to take it personally that crashing Parent Teacher Night didn’t make the list.

The guy at the mic smiled and quickly turned his attention back to his card. “But, whenever there was a problem or something creepy happened, you seemed to show up and stop it. Most of the people here have been saved by you or helped by you at one time or another. We’re proud to say that the Class of ’99 has the lowest mortality rate of any graduating class in Sunnydale history.”

The crowd burst into applause at that. Spike almost laughed aloud. Though he was busy bursting with pride, that was hardly something to advertise.

“And we know at least part of that is because of you,” the little guy concluded. “So the senior class offers its thanks, and gives you, uh, this.” He produced a multicolored, glittering, miniature umbrella with a small metal plaque attached to the shaft. “It’s from all of us, and it has written here, ‘Buffy Summers, Class Protector.’”

A lasting applause broke once more, several catcalls sounding the air. Buffy looked thoroughly stunned, her eyes shining with tears, and turned to him in awe, as though he could procure a speech on demand.

Spike grinned and nudged her subtly toward the stage. “Go on, sweetheart.”

And she did. As she approached to accept her reward, he swelled with something greater than pride. Admiration, respect, all of the

above. Everything he should rally against, she represented. The Slayer, the Class Protector, Buffy Summers.

He should hate her. He should hate himself. But he didn't.

He was just bloody thankful she had come here with him. *Him*. The last bloke on the planet who deserved her, but was willing to give up anything to try.

All he could hope was that that was enough.



THEY WERE DANCING. Etta James was belting out the lyrics to "At Last." And he knew of what she sang.

The night had gone surprisingly well. Even after their war of glares, Giles had made a point to greet them and even managed to treat Spike like a human being. Well, as much as Giles could without appearing to be calculating a plot that would secure his permanent removal.

It was perfection without all the hustle.

"Oh. I forgot to tell you." Buffy pulled back suddenly, eyes shimmering with glee. "I nailed my paper."

"Really? You've got it back already?"

"No. We did this peer editing thing where you pass your paper around the room so that the other classmates can take a look." She smiled proudly. "I so totally nailed it. Granted, there were some decent attempts to mark it up by my classmates, but I kick ass." A shiver raced through her, and she cuddled against him. "Or should I say, *we* kick ass? Thanks for everything."

"Don't thank me yet, sweetheart. Wait till your teacher takes a gander."

"He'll love it." Buffy ducked her head. "I also forgot to thank you for coming by the library yesterday to give it the once over. That helped a ton."

Spike grinned and ran his tongue over his teeth. "Don't worry, baby," he murmured, head dipping to nuzzle her throat. "You thanked me plenty."

A charming flush colored her ivory skin. "You think we made too much noise?"

"Nah. Library's always deserted, anyway."

"Still, we should've cleaned up the books."

He shrugged. "You had to get to class."

Buffy snickered. "This would be the very same William the Bloody who not two nights ago told me that homework was overrated and that school should be ignored?"

"That is unless manual labor is the only other option." Spike stole a kiss from her lips. "Personally, you had me bloody well winded, even for a vamp. And I prefer to place my strength in...other areas. Spot of violence, brilliant shaggin'. Let someone else clean up the mess."

"That someone else happened to be Giles."

"Better and better." The vampire nudged her forehead with his before dipping to brush his lips against the nape of her throat, shuddering when her pulse hummed into his mouth. "Mmmm...have I told you yet how ravishing you look tonight?"

She smiled the kind of smile for which he lived. The same that could inspire his heart to start beating again. "About ten or twelve times, yeah."

"Just ten or twelve? I'm laggin' behind."

She smirked, but the humor in her eyes softened the next moment. "Thank you for tonight. I know that proms aren't your thing."

"If it's important to my girl, it's important to me."

"There are other places you'd rather be, though."

Spike arched an eyebrow. "You mean other things I'd rather be doing, love, and only provided you're there with me. But I've watched enough teeny bopper flicks to know that this thing was somethin' that would get your knickers in a twist."

Buffy favored him with a coy glance and arched a brow, coiling her hands in the lapels of his dress coat. "The only thing I need twisting my knickers is you," she replied, then scrunched up her nose. "And...teeny bopper movies?"

"I get bored and there's nothing else on Pay Per View."

"You are too cute sometimes."

Yeah, he couldn't have that getting around. "Take that back," he growled.

"Nope. Don't think I'll be doing that."

"Don't make me make you squeal, love."

"Oh, what? With Giles here, watching your every move? Don't think I have much to worry about."

Well, whatever happened next was her fault. Girl ought to know better than to challenge him. Spike narrowed his eyes then darted a hand between them to cup her pussy through her dress. "You were sayin'?"

Fuck, she was gorgeous when turned on. Buffy blinked, her eyes going a bit hazy, and she shook her head. "You...wouldn't."

"Don't count on it."

She fed him another mewl as he increased the pressure, then dropped her head against his shoulder. "You...you wanna get out of here?"

"I'd rather see you come, right here, right now."

She moaned again. "Spike..."

"Oh yeah. Like that." His fingers inched to the slit in her dress and he favored her with a wink. "It's dark enough in here that—"

"No. I'm not going to be arrested for public indecency this close to graduation. Do not get this good girl into trouble."

"You're not a good girl, love." His hand was completely under the black fabric of her dress, dancing closer to her center. "You're very, very bad."

"It's your fault." Buffy clutched at his shoulders and rumbled another whimper. "We've already...uhhh...established that you're a bad man."

"Makes us quite a pair, eh, pet?"

"Spike, seriously. Let's get out of here."

He frowned. "It's your big night."

"I've had my big night. I'm ready for my big something else." To emphasize her point, she grasped his cock through his slacks, smiling

when he moaned in turn and thrust against her. “Besides, all we’re missing is the crowning of the stupid queen, and we all know it’s Harmony, so no big.”

“Harmony?”

“It *would* be Cordy, but her popularity’s never recovered from the time she dated and was cheated on by Xander.”

“Ah, yes.” He glanced down. “That was my fault, wasn’t it?”

Buffy chuckled and kissed him. “Well, the circumstances were, but I think it would’ve happened anyway. And it let Will know how she really felt about Oz, so that was a good. Kinda like when I thought Angel had turned and it made me realize how much I...”

Spike drew in a sharp breath and could’ve sworn his heart lurched.

Which she, of course, noticed. Immediately, she shifted like she did when she was feeling self-aware and began floundering. “...How much...I... How you...how...”

A sigh rumbled through his chest and he nodded, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “It’s all right.”

“Spike, I—”

“It’s all right.” He stepped away, releasing her completely and offering a weak smile before extending a hand. “Come on. Let’s blow this joint.”

“No, it’s not. I’m sorry. I’m really, really sorry. I just—”

“I got forever, Buffy. I got you. I’m happy. I love you, and even if you can never—”

“Spike—”

“I know, love. I’m just saying if you ever feel that you can’t, that doesn’t change a bloody thing. I’ll be here. I’ll always be here.” He stepped forward, clasping her hand as their fingers entwined. “I’m not going anywhere. Not unless you’re there, too. You understand?”

THERE WAS a second’s pause before Buffy nodded, eyes filling with tears. It broke her heart. She felt she was at love’s doorstep, waiting for a yes or no. It was a frightening thing; going from one extreme to

the other so quickly. She had started the school year mourning Angel, hating herself for what she had to do to him. By Christmas, he had been back, dealing with the First Evil, and they'd become a couple once more. By the time her birthday had come around, they had already grown apart because it wasn't the same. And it could never be the same.

What she had with Spike was unlike anything she had ever experienced. She didn't want to admit she cared for him more than she had cared for another man. She didn't want to face the absolutes staring her down in the mirror when she got ready for school in the morning. She didn't want to surrender the knowledge that having it all—friendship, laughter, passion, heat, romance, everything—was more than Angel ever could have given her. She didn't want to will herself in love, because even if she knew it was true, that made everything serious. It made everything real. Realer than before. A real she'd never experienced because it felt...grown up.

But as she and Spike said their goodbyes and made their way through the crowds, she acknowledged one truth that scared her beyond reproach. If Spike ever decided it wasn't enough and left her, she didn't think she would recover.

She had it all. He had given it to her. And she couldn't give him the one thing he wanted. Not yet.

What was worse, she felt she knew what the answer to the love question was anyway. Why she kept it to herself was something she couldn't understand, except that saying the words themselves made things real, and when things got real, they tended to suck.

They arrived at Spike's place within ten minutes. He had moved in two weeks ago after deciding against nesting in one of the cemeteries, saying he knew she wouldn't care much for that. And he had opted against an apartment because he likewise knew that they needed their space. His house wasn't anything special; three bedrooms, one bath, and was near enough the graveyard so he could meet her for patrols. Still, that he'd gone this route for her meant the world.

Within two seconds of walking through the front door, Buffy had



leaped fully into his arms, determined to compensate for the love she withheld. Her mouth tore at his as she sent his jacket and tie to the floor. Spike moaned into her, guiding her blindly toward the bedroom and fending off her attack with one of his own.

"Mmm," she gasped, throwing her head back as his lips skated down her throat.

"You have no bloody idea." His hands fisted the material of her dress with a whimper.

"Don't tear it."

"Wasn't gonna."

"Good." Buffy pulled back just enough to catch his eyes before ripping his dress-shirt down the middle, buttons flying in every which direction. "I've been wanting to do that all night."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "Minx."

"Don't you forget it."

"Never," he replied as his fingers found the zipper to her dress. In seconds, he had the fabric pooled around her ankles and his mouth at her breasts. "Like it even more on the floor, I think," he decided before sucking a nipple between his teeth. She felt him grin against her skin when she grasped at his shoulders, then again when she started pulling at his belt.

Time had not been good to them this week. And here they were, making it up.

Then he had a hand between her legs and her mind went blank.

"By the by," he said, "not playing fair going without knickers."

"You're the one who tells me not to wear them."

"Finally, some proof I've been a good influence." His thumb found her clit, and he smiled as she bucked against him. "Glad you finally listened to me. No panties for my Slayer."

To emphasize his point, he ground his palm against her pussy, then edged a finger into her.

"Oh god." She punctuated that by whipping his belt out of the loops and sending it sailing in the same direction of his necktie. "So good."

"We're just getting started."

She beckoned his mouth to return to hers as he kicked his shoes off and worked his way out of his trousers. When at last both of their clothes were on the floor, Spike pushed her back slightly and ran his eyes over her in ways that made her feel a whole new level of naked. Then he seized her by the shoulders and tossed her back onto the bed. He kept his eyes on her—particularly her breasts—when she bounced on impact, before pouncing. peppering her neck with hungry kisses and pressing his cock against her thigh.

“Oh, god.”

Rather than reply, Spike cupped her face and explored her mouth with his tongue. Doing things to her that shouldn't still surprise her, but did all the same. How long they kissed, she couldn't say. Tonight, Spike seemed determined to take his time—something that surprised her, given the fact that her schedule had kept them from having too much time alone this week. Aside from the impromptu study session, during which he'd not let her take off his pants, saying something about her mum and not wanting to be smacked with another ax. Buffy had pretty much expected to be fucked hard and well when they arrived. Part of her wanted that, but damn, she also loved this.

Particularly when he began dragging his lips southward, over her collarbone and breasts, down her stomach, and lower still until his cool breath was caressing her sex. When she forced her eyes open, she found him watching her as he swept his tongue over her clit. Then his fingers were involved, pushing into her and he began sucking on her flesh harder, grumbling little yummy noises that might be able to get her there on their own.

He brought her to the edge and growled when she came against his mouth. And then he started again, sucking and teasing, and driving her out of her freaking mind. But it wasn't enough—she needed him inside her, needed his mouth where she could reach it and his eyes on her face.

“Spike, come up here.”

“Rather like it where I am now, thanks.”

Buffy grabbed one of his hands and tugged. “I need your mouth.”

He smirked and ran his tongue up her slit. “It's right here, love.”

She tried to growl, but it might have come out a moan. She didn't know. But then she was pulling at him in earnest, and *yes* he'd stopped fighting. The second his face was above hers, she raised her head to kiss him, then wrapped her legs around his waist and flipped him onto his back.

"Not playing fair, Slayer."

"Neither were you." She threw a leg over his thighs and lifted to run the head of his cock across the seam of her pussy. "I wanted you here."

He gave her one of those looks she loved. "I want you always."

"Then take it." She lowered herself onto him with a whimper, throwing her head back. "I've missed you being inside me."

"Fuck, sweetheart..." Spike attempted to sit up but she pushed back again, quite happy to remain in control. He was who had taught her to steer, after all. And she loved it. Loved the way she could wipe his smirk off his face by squeezing her muscles just like that, loved how she could make him babble a thousand nonsensical things just by bouncing a little harder, loved how he looked at her, even while she was riding his cock, like they somehow still weren't close enough.

Spike sat up again, and this time she didn't fight him, because she could read his intent. The next second, he had drawn a nipple into his mouth, his hands on her hips, pulling her down hard on his cock again and again. Every time he drove him, he moaned around her flesh. Telling her how wonderful she felt, how he was going to burst, how hard she made him, how fucking amazing she was, and always how much he loved her. Always. It came off his lips like air came off hers. And hearing it, the way he said it, the way he meant it, was the thing that got her to the edge. What had her trembling and spasming around him.

And more than ever, she wanted to give those words back to him. Tell him so he knew. Tell him so he believed.

Tell him so he never left her.

Except then the universe would know, and this would end. All of it. Buffy didn't get to be happy. If the past few years had taught her anything, it was that.

And what they had right now was too good to tempt fate. Not with another apocalypse around the corner.

So she bit her tongue and let him lick up the blood, and hoped he was telling the truth.

Hoped that this was truly enough for now.

## MANY A NEW DAY

SPIKE DIDN'T KNOW how long he had been watching her. An hour, two, twenty. She was slumbering peacefully, resting on her stomach, her face turned toward him as moonlight poured in through the windows and made lazy play across her bare back.

He couldn't sleep. He couldn't do anything but watch her. Curled at his side with her hand entwined with his, she was just far enough away from him to make him feel the distance. He would have moved closer if he weren't worried about jostling her awake. Distance bothered him—always had. The distance he had placed between them after the night they had spent together had all but driven him out of his mind. The series of quick fucks he'd had after that in a desperate effort to prove it *wasn't* the Slayer who made him feel things hadn't fixed that distance. Now, he couldn't stand thinking of that period, even if it had been before their relationship had been defined. Before they'd even had something to call a relationship. Before he could acknowledge to himself, let alone anyone else, that the thing he felt for her was love.

Buffy was the Slayer. She was everything he was destined to hate and more. He had tried to kill her more times than he cared to count. And for whatever reason, she was lying beside him now. Her naked

body next to his as she slept, trusting him. A slayer with a vampire. A vampire without a soul. A vampire who had no reason to be good except for her.

Because he loved her. He loved her so much. And with every breath he stole, every kiss he treasured, every minute of her time that should belong to anyone but him, he dreaded losing it all the more. He knew she cared for him and just that was enough to blow him away. And while it might have been presumptuous to want her love too, he couldn't help himself. It was there, an impossible yearning gnawing his insides away.

Perhaps it was more his own insecurity. It didn't matter what she told him or what he told himself—he had spent a century playing second fiddle to Angel, and though this had always bothered him, it hadn't started killing him until Buffy had gotten involved.

If he couldn't get her love where Angel had, he didn't know what he would do. Selfish? Absolutely. But Spike wanted to have it all. He wanted her—her friendship, her body, her love. Everything that came with it. Everything that made her Buffy.

She gave herself over willingly. She hid nothing from him. And while he never doubted she was happy, that she was with him because she wanted to be, she still seemed so distant. So far beyond his grasp. He kept reaching for her and she kept slipping through his fingers.

But for the time he had before she slipped away forever, holding her was the closest to Heaven he would ever get.

Spike sighed, giving in and covering the space between them to drop a kiss across her back.

He sensed the minute that she came awake. Felt her go through the first few seconds of remembering where she was before she relaxed into him and brushed a kittenish kiss across his chest. And he couldn't hold back his moan if he tried.

"Spike?"

He smiled softly and pulled back, brushing strands of hair away from her face. "Morning, sweetheart."

“Mmm.” She yawned and stretched against him, favoring him with a sleepy smile. “What time is it?”

“It’s almost four,” he replied and pressed his lips to her forehead. “Better be getting you home before long, else your mum’s gonna pound down the door with an ax, and I’m not sure I’ll end up fairin’ well.”

Buffy arched an eyebrow, shifting upward and finding his chest a makeshift pillow. Her hand fell to his abs, where she etched feather-light patterns into skin she knew was ticklish from experience he didn’t care to relive. “I told her where I was gonna be,” she murmured with a gentle smile. “Don’t worry.”

“You told your mum that you would be at my place, getting shagged sideways and you’re telling me not to worry?”

“Well, I left out that last part. I just figured she would know that without having to be told.” Buffy sat up slowly so that she could see his eyes. “You can relax. My mother does know that I’ve had sex.”

“Yeah, but not with me.” When she didn’t agree, he narrowed his eyes. “What? You’ve told her?”

“What? No! I don’t want the details of her sex-life any more than she wants the details of mine. But she knows I’m a big girl in an adult relationship.” Buffy dropped her eyes to his chest again, then slipped her hand back up his abdomen to play with one of his nipples. She wisely ignored his low whimper. “I told her that I wouldn’t be home tonight. She did the Mom thing where she speechifies me to death, but in the end, she said that she didn’t approve but that I’m old enough to make my own decisions. Besides—hello—graduation coming up soon. I get to move out of the house.”

Spike grinned, stretching to his leisure. “Here’s hoping you get a flat-mate who doesn’t mind a bunch of noise,” he purred. “Think you can pull some strings and get space to yourself?”

“What kind of strings?”

He shrugged. “Like, ‘Lo. Name’s Summers. I save the world and I’d like my own room, please.’”

She giggled and shook her head, grinning. “I don’t think so. The Slayer package doesn’t come with benefits, sweetie.”

"Watch it. You're hell on the ole ego."

"I could stroke it later."

He leered at her, his cock going hard at the words alone. "I'm gonna hold you to that, baby."

"I don't doubt it." Buffy offered him a wicked smirk before settling comfortably in the bed. "You're just gonna have to face it. It's inevitable that I will be spending a lot of quality time right here."

Spike smiled, trying hard not to read too much into her words, though he couldn't help the way he bubbled with excitement. "I suppose," he replied, trying for casual and failing miserably. "So you can stay? Your mum's not gonna come at me an' chop off all my manly parts?"

She flashed him a wide-eyed look, dropped her hand to his dick, and started stroking him in ways that had him whimpering and writhing in a matter of seconds. "She better not," she replied. "I'd be angry."

"Furious," he agreed, collapsing against the pillow and arching himself into her hand with a long moan. "Fuck, baby..."

"But to answer your question, yes, I can stay." She paused at that and a shy smile broke across her face. And yeah, that did it for him—that she could be pumping his shaft like she was and still find the room to be self-conscious. "That is, if you want me to. I didn't mean to invite myself over or anything. I just—"

Spike grinned and silenced her with a teasing kiss, covering her hand with his and encouraging her to squeeze. She did and he moaned again and kissed her harder. "Sweetheart," he murmured, "if I had my way, you'd never have reason to leave."

Maybe that was telling her too much, but he didn't care. Right now, the worries in his head faded and all he could focus on was her.

BUFFY SMILED, dragging her fingers up his cock. When he arched and whimpered into her touch again, she leaned over to plant a kiss at his throat before straddling his hips. Though her heart was pounding and she was twelve kinds of nervous, she knew now was the time to



do the thing she'd wanted to do for weeks now. To try to worship his body as effortlessly as he did hers. He knew exactly where to touch her, knew exactly how she liked to be kissed, knew more than anyone had ever known. And now, she wanted to give the same back to him.

Something about taking those final steps had always terrified her. And while she was still shy when it came to sex in many ways, Spike gave her courage. He gave her so much.

It amazed her that this was the finish line. That just a few months had passed since the night everything had changed—since she'd entered the Council's trap just plain ole Buffy Summers and left with... Well, she hadn't known what then, but she did now. She'd left with him.

It frightened her to think she belonged with a vampire, but perhaps she did.

"Buffy..."

"Yup," she replied with a wink, giving his cock a squeeze. "That would be me."

"Please."

"Please what?"

Spike offered a pitiful whimper and thrust his hips toward her. "Need you, baby. So much. So bad."

"Well...I wouldn't want to disappoint." Buffy smiled at him and shimmied down his body so that she was straddling a leg. The move earned a growl, and he arched a little to ground his flesh against her soaking pussy.

He looked a little relieved to hear her answering moan. As though the knowledge that he wasn't alone in his need made it all the more tolerable. "Ahhh," he breathed, arching again, moving just a little harder. "You're gonna be the bloody death of both of us."

"You first."

"Already dead."

"I died last."

Spike arched an eyebrow.

"Well, I did. And the mystery of two slayers...? Never mind." Buffy shook her head, leaning forward against his weight and, yeah,

grinding herself a little harder against him. They both moaned, but she settled before she could pursue her own pleasure. This was for him. Instead, she returned her attention to his cock, encircling him with one hand as the other measured the weight of his balls. The sound of his answering mewl was all the prompting she needed. She edged herself forward still and took the tip of him into her mouth, her thumbs massaging his sac in sensuous circles as her nails feathered his sensitive skin. Spike threw his head back and panted, thrusting upward again. Still, he was gentle. He was always gentle, never wanting her to do anything she didn't want. Anything for which she wasn't prepared.

But Buffy was prepared tonight. She licked lightly at the sensitive head of his cock before pursuing his shaft with long laps of her tongue.

"Ohhhh...fuck," he groaned, eyes falling shut. As though she was the answer to some unholy prayer. "Oh, fucking hell."

"More?"

He bucked, nodding desperately. "Buffy!"

She giggled and nuzzled his erection. "What do you feel?" she asked softly. "How...what's..." She was never good at issuing demands during sex, so even asking that much made her flush in ways that she had hoped to have outgrown by now. Spike never poked fun at her, never even mentioned her inexperience. Granted, she was hardly as inexperienced now as she had been when they spent their first night together. There was simply something about Spike, about his intensity, that made it difficult for her. As though the wrong words would take her down a peg in his eyes.

Times like that, the depth of his love for her scared her shitless because it hammered in what exactly she stood to lose.

"Good!" he gasped. "So fucking good. Heat. The sun. Light. Buffy. Oh god, my Buffy. Mine, mine, mine. No one else." Emboldened, Buffy began planting wet kisses along the underside of his cock. "Velvet," he continued, arching again. "Satin. Buffy."

"That's quite a list."

"Gonna be the death of me..."

She looked at him and she shook her head. “No,” she replied before engulfing him fully with her mouth, then drew him out again to whisper, “Never.”

Spike sighed and gasped again when she swirled her tongue along the tip of his cock. “Buffy. Oh, Buffy. Love you. Love you so much.”

Her eyes fluttered shut and she pulled back again, licking at his head again and again. Hoping he felt what she was trying to tell him without words—the things she couldn’t yet confess. Things she wanted to say but couldn’t.

She sucked harder in earnest, drawing him far into her mouth, then back and in again. Encouraging him to fuck her mouth, tongue massaging him every time his cock slipped back into her mouth. His skin was musky, salty, and so inherently Spike it had her pressing her thighs together in need. She wanted him to touch her, but not nearly as much as she wanted to drive him out of his mind. So she began pulling harder on his dick, savoring the saltiness of his skin and the way he bucked and trembled. The way he made her feel like a goddess even now.

“Buffy, I’m gonna... If you keep...” Another long sigh sailed through the room. “Gonna...”

Buffy withdrew just enough to whisper her answer. “It’s all right.”

“No. No. Inside you. Need to be inside.”

The next thing she knew, she had been hauled upward and resituated in his lap, her breasts pressed to his chest. Spike looked at her with awe in the iron dark. At some point, they had lost the moonlight, and it was just them. Trembling fingers explored her pussy, pressing inside to tease her dripping flesh. A tremor rumbled through her at that, and he fed her back a moan of his own.

His eyes found hers and he kissed her with such tenderness the need to cry resurfaced without warning. It felt different, for some reason. How it was so, she did not know. Only that it was the best form of different she had ever experienced.

He teased her vaginal folds with the head of his cock, then slowly

slid inside. So slowly. It seemed tortuous hours had passed before he was fully within her.

“Oh fucking Christ,” he moaned when he was buried to the hilt, his face in the crook of her neck. He held still for long seconds, just hugging her to him as he drew mindless patterns across her back. A tremulous breath rushed through his body, and he brushed a kiss across her skin.

He was trembling. Buffy felt her heart leap at the knowledge.

“Spike?”

“God, I love you.” He lifted her off his lap just enough to torture them both before pulling her down again, impaling her on his cock. “So warm. You’re so fucking warm.”

“Uhhh...”

Spike began rocking with her rhythmically, cupping her face to see her eyes before bringing her mouth to his. His movements increased only slightly—his own insistence keeping their tempo slow. He liked it slow; granted, she knew he also liked it hot and hard. But it depended on the mood he was in—what he wanted to tell her with his body, and over the past few days, when they had time, he seemed to prefer this. Unhurried and indulgent. Deeper and deeper. God, she loved it.

Buffy’s eyes fell shut once more, her head falling back. She felt him change at the sight of her exposed throat, but it didn’t frighten her. It never did. Such was expected, and he had control of himself in seconds.

He had not bitten her yet. Not since their first night together. He lavished the mark he had given her then, kissed and licked and nipped at it, but didn’t touch it with his fangs. She didn’t know why and hadn’t asked since the night they’d made their relationship official

He had said he would. Someday. And honestly, Buffy didn’t know why she was suddenly so eager to feel his fangs in her throat. The thought would have disgusted her not too long ago. But with him like this, with him moving within her deep strokes, laving her neck and breasts with his lips, tongue, and teeth, she couldn’t help but wonder.

She also hadn't forgotten what it had done to her. How it had sweetened the climax all the more. How hard it made her come.

"So much," she heard him murmur. "Not enough."

"What?"

"Buffy." His thrusts deepened and he captured a nipple with his mouth, his hand brushing hair away from her face before skimming the length of her to stroke her clit every time his cock pushed back inside her. She mewled and rested her head against his. Her nerves were on fire. And when she felt his fingers become more insistent, it was all over. From where her orgasm had sneaked up on her, she didn't know. Only that her body spasmed and clenched, and then he was coming with her, spilling inside her, bucking and gasping her name and telling her a thousand things in hurried whispers.

Something had changed. She didn't know what, but she knew that it had.

He turned her world upside down so effortlessly. She wondered if he even realized he was doing it.

Spike cupped her face again, thumbs caressing her skin as his lips found her temple. "Always," he murmured, leaving her to wonder if she had said that last bit aloud. But he did not elaborate, and she did not ask.

Some things were best left unsaid. Others were made for words.

This seemed someplace in between—somewhere between the iron and the silver.

Perhaps that's where she was.

## TROUBLE ON THE ISLAND

THE FIRST DAY back following prom, Buffy skipped into first block with a grin on her face while humming “Monday Monday” under her breath. She greeted a bemused Willow with a cheery nod but otherwise ignored the stares she was attracting.

Willow stared at her for a moment before breaking into a grin. “So, I take it you two had fun after prom, eh?”

Buffy shrugged. “What makes you say that?”

“The fact that I called your house last night around nine and you still weren’t home. I had to convince your mom to not go prowling the town.”

At that, Buffy winced. “I got the big scold when I got home.”

“When did you get home?”

“About a quarter till two last night,” she admitted sheepishly.

“Buffy!”

“We...lost track of time.”

Willow’s eyes narrowed. “Well, obviously. Doing what, I wonder?”

“We actually did a lot of...stuff. Lots of patrols. Watched a movie or two. Oh, and sparring—and he’s really good at that because he likes it when I hit him and doesn’t expect me to hold back.”

“Your boyfriend is so weird.”

Buffy wisely decided to refrain from adding that fighting with her turned Spike on like nobody's business. "He also prepped me on Marcus Aurelius. So homeworky stuff was done." She shrugged again, doing her best to look as casual as possible. "It was nice. We haven't had an 'us' day in a while. With all things Faith quiet right now and Graduation coming closer... It was wonderful. Just what I needed, really. A real day off."

Willow cleared her throat.

"All right. A weekend off."

And yeah, a good part of that weekend had been spent in bed. But Buffy figured that much went without say.

"Mom threatened to ground me, of course," Buffy continued. "Says I'm getting too reckless where Spike is concerned."

Willow frowned and bit her lip.

"What. You don't agree with her, do you?"

"Well, not at first. But you've been spending a lot of time with him. He's distracting you."

"He's helping me, Will. Big diff. Look into it."

Willow brought her hands up in defense. "Whoa. Calm down. I'm just making an observation. Remember, I like Spike. I've forgiven the entire 'trying to kill us multiple times' and the ever important 'bottle-in-face' incident because I know he makes you happy. But remember the last time you got too wound up in your boyfriend? He turned evil."

"Spike is already evil. He can't turn much more evil."

"Well, technically he can, but..." She shook her head and forced herself back on track. "That's not the point and you know it. I'm not saying that Spike's going to pull an Angelus and try to kill us. I'm saying that you might be focused a little too much on—well, you—to pay attention to what's going on."

"I'm not. I'm really not."

"Buffy—"

"Look. I took a weekend. All right? And hey, we're all still here." Buffy scowled. "It'd be different if we'd heard anything from the Mayor or Faith. We haven't. It's been all on the side of extremely quiet

for a long time. And until Giles and Wesley crack what this Ascension is, how the hell am I supposed to plan to stop it? I've still done my job, haven't I? Took care of the hellhounds with a big smile on my face." She paused, considered, and plowed onward. "And besides, suppose the Ascension is the big it. Don't I deserve a little—"

Willow held up a hand. "All right, all right. I get you."

"Do you?"

"Yeah. I just...it's been too long, you know? Since we heard anything." Her friend looked down, her brow furrowing. "The hellhounds were something, but they weren't Mayor-related. I'd like to hear something Mayor-related. But you're right. You stopped them—"

"*Spike* and I stopped them. He helps me, Wills. He—"

"I gotcha. I'm just... I can't shake the wiggy feeling that the longer things stay this quiet, the louder the big boom is gonna be, you know?"

"I don't like silences any more than the next slayer, but until we figure out what to expect..."

Willow shook her head. "It's not just the silences, Buffy. It's *this*. I don't like this. Big booms are loud and scary, a-and they always make me scream and then the people in the movie theater get angry with me. I'm thinking an-Ascension boom might make me, you know, sound an alarm."

Buffy offered a sympathetic smile and gave her friend's shoulder a pat. "We'll be fine."

"We will? 'Cause dying... I've heard it's not all it's cracked up to be. A-and if it's true that only the good die young, I'm gonna take up smoking a-and staying out past curfew. And you know that test in physics? I'll—"

"Go and ace?"

"You mock my plan."

"It's an excellent plan," Buffy replied. "You know what happened the last time you thought being good and reliable constituted a major bad, right?"

There was a sigh. Time past differently on the Hellmouth, but that didn't mean anyone would soon forget how vamp-Willow had



nearly killed everyone at the Bronze. “Really don’t have to remind me,” the redhead muttered.

“Good thing.”



SHE WAS STILL SINGING as she made her way to the library for the usual bout of after-school training. Giles had some teacher conference to attend, and Wesley felt rather uncomfortable loitering around the library when Giles was not around, thus she had the wing to herself.

Which was good, because she was going to take up some room. The weekend of playtime was over. And it was good. The sooner they got past the Ascension, the better. With as perfect as things were going, she feared something of the massively bad nature striking in a colossal way. The two days with Spike had given her such energy, such reassurance, it was nearly impossible to ignore what loomed around the corner.

If trouble was coming, and of that Buffy had no doubt, she wanted to be fully prepared. There was simply too much to lose. More than anything she had faced in the past. This wasn’t a vampire’s evil plan—it was something larger. She could take nothing for granted, especially when she had so much to lose.

Her friends. Her family. Her Spike.

*Spike.*

Buffy set up a modest training module and placed her stereo on the library counter before popping in the latest mixed CD that Xander had burned for her. The air immediately exploded with a favorite oldie.

“Nice,” she murmured appreciatively. Then got to work.

As any normal, healthy, and perpetually cursed teenage girl, Buffy had gone through the obligatory obsession with *Dirty Dancing* and likewise developed a fondness for the music. It was a fondness shared with Xander, though she had been sworn to secrecy on penalty of a very upset best friend. Therefore, his choices reflected

their mutual love of *Dirty Dancing* with a few other songs interspersed.

*"I can really move,"* Buffy sang absently, throwing herself into the heat of her workout, attacking the various props and displays she had set about the foyer with grace and precision. *"Do you love me? I'm in the groove. Ah, do you love me? Do you love me? Now that I can da-a-a-ance! Watch me now, hey!"*

One by one, the barriers around her came down. There was nothing quite like a good workout. It was the only activity that granted total solitude—not that she wasn't thrilled to be around her friends, but lately, the pressure she had been receiving was too much to handle. Yes, she knew everyone's intentions were about as good as she could have expected, she felt the weight of their collective expectation anytime she entered a room. Which made Spike the only person she could stand to be around for any length of time. He was the only one not constantly pressuring her. The only one not always reminding her of what had to be done. He grew worried on occasion, of course, but ultimately trusted that she knew what she was doing. And it was nice. It was one of the reasons the weekend had been so superb.

It was strange to think her healthiest relationship of all time was with a soulless vampire. Strange, but no less true.

She loved this. Loved everything about this.

*"I can mash-potato. Mash-potato! And I can do the twist. Do the twist! Tell me baby, tell me baby! Do you like it like this? Like it like this! Tell me!"*

"All right, love, you're asking for it."

The next thing she knew, the music was off and Buffy was on her back across the nearest table with a very aroused vampire caught between her legs. He clamped her wrists to the wooden surface and pressed against her hard, rubbing his erection against her center. The look on his face was dangerous and his grin was nothing pure wicked—and once the surprise faded, Buffy found that, yeah, she liked this. A lot.

"There's only so much a bloke can take," he informed her before demanding her mouth in a hot, hungry kiss.

Buffy moaned, battling his invasive tongue with her own and seizing his arms as she thrust her hips hard against him. He had the power to turn her into jelly so effortlessly, and he never put it to waste. Except he wasn't supposed to be here, and though it took a few seconds to remember or care, she was able to get a hold of herself long enough to push him away.

"Spike, what are you doing here?" His name came out a heady gasp, and she arched off the table as he trailed kisses down her throat. "What...are you..."

"Missed you," he replied, stepping back.

*Swoon.* "I was only gone for a few hours."

"House's big and lonely without you."

"Your house is not big."

He shrugged, sliding his hands into his duster pockets. "Bloke gets spoiled. Got used to you being there. So I thought I'd come by. You mind?"

"No. Don't mind at all."

She hopped off the table to close the space between them and brought his mouth down to hers in a hot kiss just to show him how much she didn't mind. And as with them, the kiss quickly spiraled out of control, to the point where she was debating finding the darkest corner in the place to make her feelings on the subject clear. From the way he was grinding against her, hard and ready to be convinced, Spike was on the same page. And they might have stayed there had a very familiar voice not chosen that moment to interrupt.

"What is—oh good lord!"

Buffy pulled back with a world-full of reluctance and peeked at Giles and Wesley over Spike's shoulder. She pouted. "Busted."

Spike chuckled and treated her lips to one last nibble. "Hold that thought," he murmured, then turned and greeted the watchers with a wave. "Lo all."

There was a long pause.

"Rupert and I were about to engage in a little fencing," Wesley explained, his voice overly cheery. "I do hope that we're not interrupting."

"Nope!" Buffy replied. She was at Spike's side the next minute, gesturing that he should close his duster to hide his erection. "We were...just...ummm..."

"No need to add a caption to the diagram," Giles retorted, brows arched. "I believe we could see what you were doing."

"It wasn't what it looked like."

"Really? Because it looked like you were three seconds from getting defiled in my library by a soulless killer."

She winced. Okay, so yeah, it was what it had looked like. She glanced at Spike for help, a bit worried how he'd react to the hostility Giles had not yet learned to hide behind a poker face.

But Spike seemed thoroughly unbothered. He shrugged and dragged a pack of cigarettes. "Bloke's not wrong, you know."

Ugh. Whose side was he on?

"And it's my fault," he continued, nodding at Giles as he lit up. "I ambushed her while she was working out. She didn't know I was comin' by."

Giles's expression remained stony. "And why *are* you here, one wonders?"

"Please, put out that cigarette," Wesley said. "I do not believe smoking is tolerated on school grounds."

Spike favored him with a snicker, then blew out a long stream of smoke. "I'm here," he said to Giles, "cause I wanna be."

Buffy held up a hand before her Watcher could retort. "Just lay off. Whatever it is. He's here, I'm here, we're all here. Deal with it." She sighed. "So, you all are fencing? We can just leave and—"

"Actually," Giles said, and though he didn't look particularly happy, it seemed he wouldn't press the issue, "I was hoping to catch you before you left."

"Oh?"

"I don't suppose you got a look at the newspaper this morning?"

No. She hadn't. She had been too sleepy from her late return home and had employed the time she usually dedicated to breakfast to catch a few more winks.

Giles and Wesley exchanged a grave glance.

"There's been a murder," the latter explained. "Brutally stabbed. A visiting professor by the name of Wirth. He was found late last night."

"There's nothing there that bellows motive," Giles observed. "But we thought it better if you were aware of it."

Neither one of them would say it, but the word *murder* told Buffy everything she needed to know. Faith had struck again. "A professor of what?" Buffy asked hoarsely.

"Geology," Wesley replied. "Like Rupert said, there is no reason why we should automatically—"

"Unless he knew something," Giles added. "A visiting professor with no known enemies, no family in the area...I simply fear that it might be that there was an issue of importance that he was guarding."

"Something to do with the Ascension?"

"Like I said, Buffy, we don't—"

She shook her head. "I know."

Spike frowned. "You're sure? You don't know anythin' about this other than what these blokes have told you. It could've been—"

Buffy met his eyes. "It's Faith. She's been quiet for far too long. And you know Faith...she's not the quiet type. And a professor of geology—visiting, no less—this close to graduation? My slayer tinglies are all over this one. The Mayor's trying to hide. I say we go seek."

"Ah." Wesley beamed. "By attempting to keep a valuable clue from us, the Mayor may have inadvertently led us right to it."

Buffy and Spike gave him a virtually identical narrowed glance. "What page are you on, Wes?" Buffy asked, quirkling a small grin. "Cause we already got there."

Wesley glanced down, flustered. "Yes, well. You will go tonight. Look over his apartment. Anything of note, report back here."

"I just love it when you take charge, you man, you."

"Getting a bit big for your britches there, aren't you?" Spike added, eyes glimmering.

There was a confused pause. "Uh, we...was that a yes? I have trouble keeping track."

Buffy grinned. "I'll go."

"We'll go," Spike reaffirmed, taking her hand.

"We'll go."

Giles nodded. Evidently, that much amounted to some relief. "Be careful. If Faith should show up..."

"Faith won't get anywhere near her," Spike said coldly.

"I don't think she'll show. Been there, killed that. She's not much for follow-up." Buffy nodded toward Spike. "And even if she does, I have my own slayer-slayer along with, so no big. All with the protection."

Spike broke into an adoring dimpled smile and brushed a kiss over her cheek. "Gotta admire your spunk, sweetheart," he told her.

"I'm all with the spunk."

"Nonetheless," Giles argued, clearing his throat, "I want you to be careful."

She rolled her eyes to conceal her gratitude at his concern. "Well," she said, "I'm not gonna go around with a big sign over my head that says, 'Faith Attack Here,' if that's what you're worried about."

"I'm worried about you, Buffy. I always am."

"Join the bloody club," Spike grumbled, earning a look of fleeting respect from the Watchers. "I think we have hats."

Giles smiled grimly and nodded. "Well, I believe Willow was going to come here after Math Club, and Xander thought he might drop in as well. Do you think it wiser to go now or later?"

"Later," Buffy answered. "No sun, safer. We could get there all right now, but I don't exactly want a crispy boyfriend."

"Thanks ever so."

"And I think it safe to say that there's a better chance that Faith'll show up tonight rather than this second."

Giles frowned and stepped forward. "Do you think it wise to purposefully seek her out? That could be exactly what she wants. And, no offense"—he glanced to Spike—"but she is well aware that you have a vampire with a history of killing slayers on your side. Faith

might be erratic, but she is neither naïve nor gullible. If she wants to cross you, she will. And she will be prepared.”

“I know.”

Spike tightened his grip on her hand. “Do you?” He ignored her hurt glance and pressed, “As much as I hate to admit it, pet, Rupert is right. If we should run into the other Chosen bird tonight, it’ll be because she wants us to.”

“Then we’ll take her out tonight. Get her out of the Mayor’s running for the Ascension ensemble.”

Giles shook his head. “Buffy—”

“Look. I know what I’m doing. All right? And hey, not even going alone.” She nodded at Spike again. “I just know that waiting for her to come to us isn’t doing anything but get professors murdered. I’d really prefer to nix that part and go to her.” The faces around her were somber. “Guys, she’s not even gonna show. It’s not her style. I just wanna be prepared.”

The air grew thick.

“I’ll be with her,” Spike reiterated. “My word, Watcher. She won’t get hurt.”

“I can look after myself,” Buffy argued.

“Yeah. But I got your back. That bitch tries anything and she goes in the ground.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Giles replied with a nod. “Report back here immediately. Wesley and I will be researching the Ascension until such time.” He looked back to Buffy, eyes filled with concern. “Be careful, Buffy.”

A weak smile fluttered across her lips. “Hey—it’s me, right?”

Spike favored her with a skeptical glance.

“Yes,” Giles agreed dryly. “That’s why I worry.”

## HEART OF DARKNESS

“I STILL DON’T SEE how Marcus Aurelius stands as one of the Five Good Emperors with his track record,” Buffy argued, dropping her house key into her pocket after double-checking the front was locked. “His rule was plagued with disaster and he killed a bunch of people. Not exactly a good check in the Buffy Book of Etiquette.”

“So the test didn’t go well?”

“I imparted my personal opinions, so I’m guessing no.” She scowled. “It’s just a stupid final anyway. What’s it really matter?”

“How your grades look on your transcript for one.” Spike chuckled. “So, you started arguing with the bloke right in the middle of the essay? Smooth move, Slayer.”

“I know you told me not to, but it bothered me!”

She turned to meet Spike’s amused eyes just as he shook his head and took her hand. “The why’s not really important,” he explained as they set out “Just that he was. And as much as you might not fancy it, he didn’t exactly reinvent the wheel with the people he offed. Aurelius is no different than Augustus or Vespasian or Hadrian or any of the others that came before him. He just knew what to stay out of.”

“He persecuted Christians!”

“And I suppose the Christians never persecuted anyone.” He



chuckled at the dirty look she gave him. "Someone's always persecuting someone else, pet. It's the order of the bloody universe. You can't change that. Whether it be Marcus Aurelius or the Spanish Inquisition or the sodding Holocaust. Everywhere you look, you see another human monster."

"Love how you snuck the *human* part in there."

"Just putting things in perspective, is all."

"Uh huh."

Spike sighed as they turned the corner toward the side of town where the professor had been murdered. "It's not so important that you understand *why* he was but know that he was, or so I'm guessin'." He grinned wider when she bristled and couldn't help himself from brushing a kiss across her cheek. "You're lovely when you're confused."

"Get on with it, Bleach Boy."

He chuckled. "To me, seems like your teacher shoulda spent more time tryin' to explain the bloke's philosophies. That's where the studying bit comes in. Marcus Aurelius was a Stoic."

"A what-ic?"

"A Stoic. Part of the stoicism movement. It was one of the philosophical movements of the Hellenistic period." His grin faded when he saw the look on her face. "What?"

"My boyfriend's a brain. Who would've thought?"

He scoffed and ignored the way his heart nearly skipped. Rarely did anyone ever compliment his intelligence—namely because he often went to great extents to conceal he had any. There was so much he had spent years repressing. His childhood. The severe teachings of a sadistic schoolmaster who enjoyed punishing the students more than educating them. Never had he thought the outcome of such rigorous schooling could be rewarding.

Then again, never had any woman been attracted to him for his intelligence, which had led to the need to feign he had any. "I can stop if you like."

"No! No." A shy smile crossed her face. "I like you all brainy. It's sexy."

Warmth split his insides. The other night, Buffy had something about how he let her be herself. He hadn't really understood what that meant, but maybe this was it.

"Sexy, huh?"

Buffy blushed, nodding. "Oh yeah."

"Is it sexy to know that stoicism was taught at the Porch—Stoa Poikilê—in the Agora at Athens decorated with mural paintings, where the members of the school congregated and their lectures were held?"

"Okay...who are you and what did you do with my boyfriend?"

"Thought my encyclopedic knowledge was sexy."

"It is. It's also kinda wiggly."

Spike chuckled and kissed her cheek again, squeezing her hand. "Guess I can give you the Cliff Note's run through, then," he said. "Stoicism's basically the belief that focuses on the good and purging all other impulses from your system to achieve enlightenment...or what all." He frowned. "At least I think so."

"Oh, so you don't know as much as you thought?"

"Gotta remember, it's been over a century, sweetheart. Quite literally. And I used to confuse bits of it with Calvinism. Guess losing my pulse didn't change that." He smiled when she frowned. "Predestination, that is. But he didn't come till centuries later. Just my rotten luck that I learned this at the same time. Gets a bit jumbled."

"He's the one that thought people were marked from birth on whether or not they got into Heaven, right?"

"Score one for the little lady."

"Still say it's a stupid philosophy. What if a murderer was 'predestined' to go to Heaven? So he can go out and kill all those people and still get in?"

"Think the Almighty Wanker'd know it if a bloke was gonna turn into a murderer, love—at least according to what your Good Book says."

"But if it's predestined, and the person who got in goes bad, there's nothing you can do to stop it."

He pressed his eyes closed. "I think we're getting off topic here."

"That's basically saying that a person could sit down and just let everything happen to them from where they're sitting. Like, say I was predestined to save a busload of kids from going off the edge of a cliff." Spike simply stared at her. God, she could make the smallest issue exhausting, and he loved her for it. "So," Buffy continued, "if I'm predestined to it, does that mean I don't have to do it and yet since it's written in the Big Book Of Things That Will Happen, it happens anyway? I could sit down and watch Jeopardy and somehow save the kids, too?" She looked at him expectantly. "Well?"

"Think I lost you."

She pouted. "Predestination sucks."

"Then don't believe in it. Problem solved."

Buffy shook her head with conviction. "The crackpots who made these up obviously never met a slayer," she decided. "If all my battles were predestined, then—"

"Some of them were."

The look he received only served to remind him that he should know when to shut his yap.

"What?" she asked.

Spike sighed and glanced to her, exhausted but enthralled. Never had he imagined he would spend an evening going to investigate a murder while arguing philosophy with anyone, least of all the Slayer. Least of all *Buffy*. "Well, there's a certain measure of predestination in everything your Watcher brings up. Half of what you have to fight is stuff he's dug outta those books."

Her pout intensified. "So?"

"So, predestination exists in some circuits. You're the difference, sweetheart." He squeezed her hand. "You take out the nasty 'Slayer's gonna die' clause and switch it to your favor." He winked at her. "Now, we have a professor to be tending to, right?"

Buffy was still frowning. Then, with schooled control, she nodded and stepped forward. "Right. Well, predestination..." She stopped and shook her head again. "Remind me not to argue philosophy with you again. As in ever."

"Too challengin' for you?"

"Hey!"

"Well come on. You're the Slayer. If you can't take a little heat—"

"I think the last thing you need to be worried about where I'm concerned is whether or not I can take your heat."

"Cause I don't give off any or I give off too much?"

She rolled her eyes. "Pig."

"Fine animal. Smart, too."

"Okay, we've got fine, smart, and I'll add dirty for good measure."

At last, the corners of her mouth lifted up in a grin that told him, contrary to what she said, she was enjoying their back and forth. "Yup. You're definitely a pig."

"If that's the criteria, I gotta say you are, too."

He thought her smile would widen at that, but it didn't. Instead, her eyes took on the faraway look that always warned that she was thinking of something that upset her. She glanced down, her expression growing long and serious. "You think if predestination is real then the professor was supposed to die?"

Yeah, that was a mood killer.

Spike had to clamp down on his tongue before the more immediate retort could escape. She took this seriously—he knew she did. She took so many things seriously—things that seemed so trivial to him. It was one of those unspoken things that could jostle their relationship from Cloud Nine to a Cloud Six. Where the white wasn't as white and the sun was harder to see. He remembered vaguely what it was like to fear death. To feel his insides recoil at the thought of someone brutally murdering someone else.

As William, he'd avoided focusing on the darker things in life. The transition from William to Spike, in that regard, was the most radical in his existence. From one extreme to the other—trying desperately to wipe out the lingering in his system.

But he had never been a full monster, despite what the books said. At least not a monster on par with those around him, thanks to the William bits that remained. The more time he spent with Buffy, the more he feared the hapless poet would reemerge for good.

Except he wasn't afraid of that—not really, not as he should be.

Caring about what she cared about was easy. The price of love, he figured, and for her, he would be pretty much whatever she needed.

Except he didn't want to tell her only what she wanted to hear. If anything, they had to be honest with each other.

"If predestination was real, love," he murmured, "then you'd have to take into account the loads of other stuff that's happened because it was supposed to."

He watched her as she drifted, as memories stole her away, and he knew what she must be thinking. Her calling. Her death. Two slayers. Angel. Their meeting. Jenny Calendar. Their truce. Angel's death. Drusilla's leaving him. His return. Faith. Them. Where they were now. Holding hands, out on a stroll to investigate a murder. One. Slayer and vampire. Drawn together despite everything. *Together* despite everything.

"I don't know," she said, at last, her shoulders sagging. "I just feel that...maybe...I could've stopped this."

"By what? Reading Faith's mind?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Reading minds? Been there, hated that."

He squeezed her hand again. No, that had not been a fun two days at all. "You couldn't have stopped this, baby," he told her. "Please don't tear yourself up over something that you didn't do. You suffer enough. With as much as we've been looking for your evil twin, I'd think—"

"That's just it, Spike. Have we been looking? Have we really?"

He frowned.

Buffy sighed and glanced down. "Willow suggested today that maybe I've been spending too much time with you and not focusing on my work."

"Rot."

She arched a brow. He sighed.

"Right, so we spend a lot of time together. Red does know that we patrol, right?" Spike didn't wait for a response, raising a hand and shaking his head. "You've done nothing wrong, pet. We went to the Bronze to hassle the regs. We hit all of Faith's hangs. Tried sniffin' her out, even. Didn't work. End of story."

"But I—"

"But nothing. And shame on Willow for even slightly making you believe this could've been your fault." Spike sighed once more before a pleading note hit his voice—one he couldn't stop. "Doesn't she know that I'd rather have a nice sunny stroll in the park than see anything happen to you? I wouldn't let you shirk your duties, Slayer. Faith would've found a way to off the sod. We're just innocent bystanders."

She studied him for a moment, and her lips quirked. "So you're saying that it was meant to happen?"

Ah, tricky. Very tricky.

"Predestination, pet?"

Buffy nodded, turning to the building before them. The tension he felt rolling off her shoulders made his insides churn with anger that honestly failed to surprise now. That anyone could make her think that anything that had happened was at all her fault royally pissed him off. The Slayer took matters of life and death very seriously, as every good slayer should—but Buffy took it a step further. She wore her failures, perceived or otherwise, the way no one else had. That included everyone she couldn't save. As though she were as responsible as the person who'd done the actual killing.

"I don't know," he replied at last, tucking an unruly lock of hair behind her ear. "I gave up searching for higher meaning in life until you came along and suddenly everything had meaning again, so I'm feeling my way around. Testing out the groundwork." He smiled when she looked at him sharply and shrugged. "And even so, all I do is enjoy it. But I know there's nothing you coulda done. Nothing any of us coulda done... Not with what we know. So yeah...maybe it was predestined. Woulda happened either way, and your mates just wanna say it's because of us that you missed it. Post hoc ergo propter hoc, and all that rot."

"What what ergo what?"

"Post hoc ergo propter hoc. After it, therefore because of it. Like this bloke kicked it after you started shagging me, so your shagging me is what caused it, according to your mates."

Buffy nibbled her lip, then turned back to the building slowly. "After it, therefore, because of it."

"There's a reason that's a logical fallacy, sweetheart. Life doesn't work that way. You can do the math all you like."

"And now?"

Spike turned her into him, coaxing her chin up with gentle fingers. "Buffy, listen to me. You've done nothing wrong."

"Then why," she asked softly, "does it feel like I have?"

"Because you're you, sweetheart. And in the book of Buffy Summers, nothing will ever be enough."

The smile he received was grateful but forced, and even as she faded back to the business that awaited them, he felt a familiar pang. The same thing that could kill him a little more each day if he wasn't careful. There were certain truths to be reckoned with. One step forward, two steps back. And while there was no reason to think so, he was terrified he could feel her slipping away from him. That all it had taken to shake her confidence in them was this very unpreventable setback.

Buffy tightened her hand around his and pulled him closer to her; jarring him back to reality with a wan smile.

"Everything all right?" she asked softly.

He nodded, but he knew she didn't believe him. "Just fine, sweetheart. Let's do what we gotta and get back. The sooner we get back to your Watcher, the bloody better."

"You're gonna end up sounding like him, you know."

"In some instances, that's not such a bad thing." He forced a laugh when she arched a brow at him. "I said *some*."

The brow remained arched, but she nodded and squeezed his hand again before they made their way up the walk and through the doors. Finding the professor's room was easy enough—the second floor was completely shut off, yellow tape bannered across the hall. Spike couldn't keep from grinning when Buffy wordlessly slithered under the tape, as though tampering with a crime scene was the most natural thing in the world. There were certain aspects of her life that had become so ordinary that even she didn't notice anymore.

The room itself was a collective mess. A scatter of papers and files, open books and the like. Buffy sighed and hugged herself.

"It's not as bad as it could be," Spike said softly.

She graced him with a skeptical glance.

"What?"

"It's a mess. I don't even know what we're looking for."

He shrugged. "We'll know it when we find it, eh pet? Let's just get started." He turned then and snatched a random box from the corner, depositing its contents onto the kitchen table. "Just take whatever looks important."

They were spaced on either side of the room, respectively digging through whatever looked remotely important and crating it for later research. Spike kept careful watch of her, though he tried not to be obvious. Reading Buffy had never been that much of a challenge to him but she was now, and he didn't know what to make of that.

Then she shocked the hell out of him.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Spike paused, swallowed. "What for?"

"For being here. For understanding." A soft smile crossed her face. "This...everything...would be so much harder without you. I know that I have... It's not like I'm alone—far from it, actually—but you make me...well...you just make me." The words were so far from what he'd expected that it nearly bothered him. He was used to knowing exactly what she felt when she felt it. This was...

Fuck, she would never stop surprising him.

"You keep me from falling apart," she continued. "I fell apart last year. Died the year before. Haven't yet, and Faith's given me every reason to. Faith plus Angel and Ascension and...everything. And even...with this..." She gestured broadly to the room. "I don't know how I feel about it. A part of me wants to die because I could've stopped it."

"Buffy—"

"It was a life. And that's what I do. Every time I don't save someone, it feels like I might as well have killed them."



He shook his head. "Sweetheart, I told you, there was nothing you could've done—"

"I know, I know. I hear you say it and it makes sense, but... God, Spike. We were having fun this weekend while someone got killed. Someone who wasn't supposed to die. And who knows? Who knows how many others have gotten killed on my watch just because I've been distracted. Last year, it was Angelus and this year..." Tears formed behind her eyes, and she looked away. "But I can't. I can't keep doing everything. And I owe you so much. That's the kicker. You keep me from falling apart and I'm suddenly terrified that it's making me blind to everything else."

"It's not," he assured her. "I wouldn't let it. I wouldn't let you get hurt because of me. I wouldn't let you not do your job."

"That's just it. You won't let me get hurt, but what about everyone else? What about Professor Wirth? If I hadn't been thinking about myself, he might still be alive."

"Might." Spike exhaled and crossed the room. He took her by the shoulders. "You can't live on absolutes, Buffy. Tell me, really, what you would've done had I not been a factor, huh? Gone patrolling. Hit the usual places. Looked for Faith and come up empty-handed. Do exactly what we did. You had nothing to do with this bloke's death. And I won't let you tear yourself up about something that isn't your fault." He barked a short laugh and shook his head. "We talk about predestination and Stoicism. Some things can't be changed. Some things are not supposed to be stopped. No matter how you look at it."

Buffy's expression hardened, though it wasn't directed at him. More of a defense mechanism. Her tendency to shut down.

"Innocent people die every day, sweetheart," Spike continued softly, stroking her cheek. "It's the cycle of life. You're just one person. Albeit, the most gifted of such persons I've ever come across, but there's no sodding way you can be everywhere at once."

"It feels like I should be."

He shook his head again. "You can't, baby. You try too hard. You win so much that somethin' like this breaks you. It wasn't your fault. This bloke was murdered by someone who never even had a chance

of touching what you can do. You amaze me. With everything...with who you are. With how much you care." He nodded vaguely to their surroundings. "The git might've not had a friend in the world, but by golly, my girl'll weep for him. That's who you are. It's a blessing and a curse rolled into one. Trust me. I know somethin' about those."

There was a long beat of silence before Buffy nodded, raising her gaze to his. Her eyes were filling with tears again, but they weren't all bad tears—he saw that. She was moved by what he'd said.

*Thank fuck.*

"You see?" she whispered. "This is what I mean. With you, I'm not alone."

"You never will be again, kitten. I'm not going anywhere." He flicked her tears away with his thumb. "And again, I won't let you shirk your duties. Told you as much before...know it'd be the same to hurt you if others got hurt. Remember?"

She nodded, and he saw the wheels behind her eyes turning. Saw her remembering the conversation that now seemed so long ago. They had been in the graveyard after investigating the Mayor's office for clues. The same night that Angel had pretended to be Angelus for Faith's benefit. The same night Spike had first told her that he loved her.

He'd made a promise to her then and he was a man who kept them.

Spike released a trembling sigh and buried his face in the nape of her neck. "Sometimes I love you too bloody much. So much. Almost like it's gonna fill me up someday, and I'll explode 'cause my body can't take it. I hate seeing you in pain."

Buffy didn't reply, but raised herself up on tiptoe and pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth. He felt her trembling against him, the air thick with the scent of her tears.

And he couldn't stop talking. "I still don't think you know what you do to me, Slayer. To what degree you've turned my world upside down. You're so much more than I can take. But God, I have to try."

The tears running down her face set against her like water lilies. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. "Spike—"

A loud, clunky crash cut off whatever she'd been about to say, and Angel barrelled into the room like a bloody rhino on rollerblades. Buffy started and drew a step away from Spike, which hurt more than it should, though he knew she was trying to spare her ex's feelings.

And he could admit, it was fun to watch Angel bump into things.

"Ow," came the unconventional greeting.

Buffy wiped her eyes, a small, forced smile twisting lips. "Stealthy."

Angel glanced up, not bothering to mask his hurt at finding them together. Though Spike knew the git had known to expect them—he'd have heard them talking, smelled them at the very least—so he wasn't sure what exactly there was to be hurt over.

"Not my best entrance," the sod said. "I think they were mopping in the halls."

"We didn't have any trouble," Spike felt obligated to point out.

Buffy cast him an amused grin before glancing back to Angel. "What are you doing here?"

"I checked in with Giles. Told me what was up...I thought it'd be better if you had three pairs of hands instead of two."

"Yeah..." Spike drawled. "Ever heard that sayin', 'two's company?'"

A wry grin tugged the elder's lips. "Yeah, well, I heard a rumor that three's company, too."

Spike snorted in disgust and began rummaging through the boxes. He needed a distraction, and fast.

And, as it would, the discussion continued around him, unhampered.

"So Giles sent you?" Buffy asked.

"No. I came on my own." Angel paused for a long minute. "Giles actually doesn't know I'm here. He thought it would get messy if I tagged along, especially since you brought..." No one needed to finish that sentence. "But I still thought it would be for the best. Especially if you run into Faith."

Spike snickered into the report he was reading.

"Something funny about that?"

"Oh no, mate," he replied. "Nothing funny. Except that you don't

seem to think the Slayer and I can handle a rogue just fine. I've seen them both in action; this Faith bird has nothing on Buffy. And, well, you know me. I just love a good brawl."

"Especially if there's a special calling attached to the package, right?"

He shrugged lazily and reached for his cigarettes. "Maybe once. As far as slayers go, I don't think any other would be able to satisfy me the way Buffy does. And quite frankly, I'm not really aimin' to let another take it for a drive. We can handle this, Peaches. Sod off."

Buffy moaned, shaking her head. "And Giles had the gall to think you guys wouldn't get along."

Spike scowled and pointed at Angel, who pointed right back. "He started it," they said in unison.

"How is it with nearly four centuries between you two that I'm the adult here?" She shook her head again, then glanced to the document Spike was holding. "What's that?"

"Huh? Oh." Spike quickly skimmed the first page. "It's a report. Some excavation of an old lava bed, looks like." He frowned and looked up again. "Seems our prof was a volcano-ologist, love."

Angel stepped forward. "Anything in there that connects him to the Mayor?"

"Dunno yet. Better let Rupes take a crack at it."

"Agreed." Buffy plucked the report and placed it in her box, which Spike immediately snatched from her.

"Never say chivalry is dead, pet," he told her with a wink as the three made their way into the hall.

"With you around?" she replied. "Never."

With a diplomatic nod, she turned to the sulking Angel.

They truly hadn't had much cause to hang around the git, save the group save here or there. After Buffy had broken things off proper-like and announced she was moving onto bigger and better things, Angel had grilled both Buffy and Spike until staking him would have been the more humane option, but he'd said very little in the time that had passed. Like he knew there was nothing to be gained from it.

The sooner he left town, the bloody better.

Spike and Buffy drew to a stop at the curb outdoors—Spike to wait and Buffy to say her awkward goodbye. He told himself not to be too insufferable about Angel on the walk back.

“Well,” Angel drawled. “I guess you guys don’t need me to come with you.”

Buffy shrugged. “You might pop by later. See if Giles has anything new on the Ascension and whatnot. Just to keep everyone on the same page for what’s gonna go down and everything.” She glanced to Spike, who offered a stiff nod. “Might as well run through the plan once with everyone there so that whatever alterations are made won’t get confused with...you know...other versions of the plan.”

“Right.” Angel pursed his lips. “I found a place. In Los Angeles, so the move is official.” He glared at Spike but didn’t say anything. “I just... I’ll let you know, should we not...talk again. Directly, that is. After everything’s over.”

“Los Angeles is good,” she agreed. “Not too close, not too far.”

“Not bloody far enough,” Spike murmured.

“I want to be close enough that I can get here quick should I be needed.”

Buffy nodded awkwardly. “Well, good. You’re all with the thinking ahead.”

“I have to be.” Another long, uncomfortable pause. “Well, if that’s it, I guess I’ll—”

In truth, Spike heard it before he saw it. Heard the unmistakable zap of something flying through the air, too fast to be a stake, too slow to be a bullet. His eyes caught sight of movement from the roof of a building across the street two seconds before the arrow came to view, and he threw himself with instant reflex, dropping the boxes and leaping to shove Angel out of the line of fire.

He would wonder why he bothered later. At the moment, it seemed like the thing to do. Even if it did little good. Angel was far too massive to out-navigate something that moved that quickly, especially without warning. And though the attempt was admirable, the

arrow speared through the sod's side anyway as they both went crashing to the pavement.

Spike heard Buffy call for him, then Angel once she saw the damage. He wasn't listening. His eyes were fixed on the rooftop across the street.

"That was close," he murmured, fighting to his feet.

Buffy was instantly at his side, scanning him for injury and feeling up his sides. "Are you all right?"

"Fine, pet." Spike turned to Angel. "Took a nasty chunk outta your ex, though." With a grunt, he moved to help the wanker up. "You all right, mate?"

"Yeah," Angel replied, jerking the arrow free of his side. Then, almost as though the words would choke him, he added, "Thanks to you."

"What was that? Could you say it a little louder, please?"

"Guys!" Buffy made quick tracks to get between them. "You two can argue all you like at the library." Off Spike's questioning glance, she shrugged and replied, "We should help him. Come on."

Spike pouted. "Should've let him dust. It's not like he's much of a bleeder, kitten."

"Please?"

Oh, with the eyes. She always made with the eyes when she wanted something. And he, being a world-class git, fell for it every time.

"Right," he grumbled, turning to collect the supplies he had dropped while Buffy inspected the small wound in Angel's side. "How silly of me. Guess three's company after all."

*Hell of a time to get petty, mate.*

He couldn't help himself even against his better judgment. Angel would heal fine, but it was likely in their best interest to speed up the healing as much as possible, especially with the Ascension on the rise.

And it meant the world to Buffy.

Funny how things with Angel always did.

**BREAK**

SPIKE HAD THOUGHT he was being petty before, but apparently, he hadn't had the proper definition—something he got once they arrived at the Sunnydale High library.

It wasn't enough that the wanker hadn't died. Oh no. In mere seconds, he had a concerned group congregated around him, prattling endlessly with a series of inane questions. And granted, as Spike knew from experience, taking an arrow to the chest wasn't exactly pleasurable, the Scoobies on a whole had seemingly neglected the realization that Angel was a vampire. It wasn't as though the wound was fatal.

Well, if he wanted to be perfectly honest, the other Scoobies had very little to do with it. He simply hated seeing Buffy fawn over the magnificent ponce. It was innocent, of course. All dolled up and innocent. She had to make sure the great big brute was all right, didn't she? She owed him that bloody much for leaving him for the enemy.

Still, Spike couldn't help the growl that wanted freedom every time his girl's hand made contact with the wanker's skin. Even if it was to dab disinfectant...and what the bleeding hell did a vampire need with disinfectant, anyway?

He needed to kill something. Pronto.

"I heal pretty fast," the wanker was saying. "I should be all right."

God. Hadn't Spike been telling them that for the past twenty minutes? Figured they would listen to the souled one before giving the actual boyfriend a second glance. Hadn't he been the one to save the git's life in the first place?

Buffy caught his eye then, an amused smile playing across her face. Oh, she was just eating this up. Bloody brutal bint. Poking fun at his duress.

He was alarmed when he felt himself almost smile back. That was how she got out of these situations. By looking adorable. No. Not this time. Not if he had to stand here and watch the lot of them pretend that Angel was dying of some third-world disease that would suck the marrow from his bones and turn his vitals inside out.

"You're just lucky Spike was there," his girl said the next minute. "Else we could've been scraping up dust instead of patching up flesh right about now."

Though Spike felt a surge of pride at her acknowledgment, he groaned all the same. "God, Slayer, don't rub it in."

"Oh, give it a rest. You saved him for a reason, right?"

"Yeah, so you wouldn't spend valuable shagging time crying over the git."

Nearly everyone in the room favored him with a dirty look.

Spike released a long groan and wedged a cigarette between his lips. "Oh sod you prats. You know why I did it." He turned to Angel, straight-faced. "This is so hard to say...I love you, man."

Angel rolled his eyes. Xander burst out laughing. Even Giles cracked a smile.

"And when were you going to tell me about this?" Buffy demanded, eyes dancing.

He grinned at her. This was more like it.

"No competition, sweetheart. You know I love you more. No offense to Angel...well, *all* offense to Angel, but he just doesn't have the kinks and curves that—"

Xander's laugh quickly became a disgusted cough. "Could you, like, not do that now?"



"I see your *now* and raise you an *ever*," Angel muttered, hand covering his side with some need to throw in last-minute dramatics. "Have you forgotten the wounded, here?"

"What happened to not being much of a bleeder?" Spike replied.

"It's something I can overlook if it means not having to witness..." He trailed off, gesturing at the two of them. "That."

Buffy merely grinned and tossed Spike a coy look. And he ate it up.

*That's my girl.*

"Yes, quite," Giles agreed, stepping forward. "We should progress with business. Did anyone get a good look at the shooter?"

The three exchanged a series of looks.

"It came from the roof, is all I know," Spike said, shrugging and blowing out a pillar of smoke. "Saw it right after I heard it. Didn't get a good look, though. Was too busy saving my ungrateful ponce of a grandsire."

"I never said I was ungrateful!"

"Really? Well, if you're so bloody obliged, you might as well act like it." He sniffed. "I've got feeling's, too, you know."

Buffy shook her head, eyes narrowing as her tone became strained. "Spike..."

"Can we muzzle him?" Xander asked.

"He's just acting up 'cause I'm bandaging up Angel," Buffy explained, smirking. "It's no big."

Angel snickered. "You'd think we were doing something scandalous. Like, oh say, having sex while you're involved with someone else."

A warning growl clawed at the back of Spike's throat, though he was reacting more at the way the light abruptly vanished from Buffy's eyes. While he knew she regretted nothing, there was the leftover guilt that she carried to this day. Buffy was a true spirit—whatever lies she'd told were usually to protect herself from scrutiny or to explain a demonic act to people unwilling to see the truth. To live in such a large lie for as long as she had, without relying on her mates,

had done its number on her. She was still picking up the pieces whether she wanted to admit it or not.

But getting in a fight to defend her honor would do little good, so he settled with, "Watch it, mate," instead.

To his great surprise, Xander raised his voice too. "Yeah, man, that's not cool. Sure, Spike's an evil bloodsucker, but...really. I'm seeing a pot/kettle scenario, here."

"Whatever," Buffy said abruptly, rising to her feet and bolting to Spike's side. "The point is Angel's fortunate that Spike was there." She turned back to Angel, gaze hardening. "One more second and Faith would've added you to the pollen count."

Giles glanced up with interest before the git could reply. "You sure it was her?"

There was a dry snicker at that. "Well, I've narrowed down my list of one suspect."

Spike smiled. Yes. That was his girl, all right. Sassy. Right to the point.

God, he loved her.

"Ooohhh," came from behind, and everyone in the room turned to Wesley, who appeared to have not been paying much attention to anything for the past ten minutes, rather flipping through the reports they'd recovered from the crime scene. When he realized he was suddenly the focal point in the room, Wesley lowered his reading material. "Sorry. It's just fascinating."

Giles frowned, interested. "What?"

"Well, it seems our Mr. Wirth headed an expedition in Hawaii, digging in old lava beds near a dormant volcano."

Buffy quirked an eyebrow. "I'm not fascinated yet."

"Second that," Spike replied, nuzzling her hair.

"He found something underneath," Wesley said. "A carcass, buried by an eruption."

"A carcass?"

"A very large one. Mr. Wirth posits that it might be some heretofore undiscovered dinosaur."

"A demon?" Angel suggested.

Giles nodded. "Yes, that would be something that the Mayor would want to keep a secret. If it's the same kind of demon he's turning into and it's dead, it means that, well, he's only impervious to harm until the Ascension. In his demon form, he can be killed." He balked at the blank stares that Spike and his Slayer gave him in turn. "Oh, sorry. You were not here for Xander and Anya's rather... disturbing revelation."

Buffy immediately tensed. "What?"

"Apparently," Harris jumped in, "my prom date has known about Ascensions all along. Hell, she was at the last one. Doing what, you ask? That's right. Reaping vengeance. Anyway, she went on this spiel about how all the demons we've seen so far are only human hybrids—"

"That's right," Angel agreed. "True demons are much larger."

Xander nodded. "That's what she said."

"And the only way this other demon was stopped was with a volcanic eruption?" Buffy asked with a whimper.

Wesley shrugged. "That was how this particular demon was defeated. Times have changed, as you are well aware. But otherwise...yes."

"Great. So all we need is a million tons of burning lava. We're saved."

Angel nodded his agreement, apparently missing the sarcasm, and moved to stand at last. "Well, it's a start anyway."

Then, before anyone could react, he had tripped again.

Spike supposed it was instinct that tore Buffy from his arms at that, driving her directly to Angel's side to help him up. Still, he was a petty bastard and nothing in the sodding world could keep seeing her fawn over the git from hurting.

"Okay," Buffy said, helping Angel to his feet, "you've been a real klutz today. You need—"

Angel grasped her shoulder so rapidly he started her out of whatever she'd been about to say.

"Damn," he muttered.

That was the last thing he said before he fell once more—uncon-

scious. The room quieted with shock, then Buffy exploded into action, hurrying to Angel's side.

Spike's eyes widened. "Oh, bollocks."

"Did he just pass out?" Xander asked, standing to gage a better look.

"Yes," Buffy replied, turning him over and placing a hand to his forehead. "Angel, come on. Wake up. Wake up for me."

"I do not understand." Wesley frowned. "Vampires do not contract disease. I—"

"I know what it is," Spike said, forcing himself to look away from the sight of Buffy prodding his Angel, playing the ever-important role of the concerned girlfriend. It was far from the truth, sure, but it still caused an unpleasant rumble to upset his stomach. A bitter taste to fill his mouth. And when she looked at him with such naked panic, the feeling only grew, and he hated himself for it.

It was ridiculous. He knew it was ridiculous and he knew he was a git for thinking it. But there was something else there. Something other than her concern for someone's well-being. A certain Buffy quality she reserved only for Angel—a worry that never extended to her friends or family. Or Spike.

"Saw it back in Prague. Bloody mob got wind of a few vamp nests and started hunting them down with it." Spike tore his gaze away from her and instead focused on a spot on the floor. "Don't know if they knew we were vamps, 'course, but they knew we were dead. Or supposed to be dead. It's this mixture or what all...a potion that kills dead things. Or undead things, I should say. Researched it a bit when I was lookin' for a cure for Dru, but gave up once I found out that she'd be dead already had she been infected."

"What do you know?" Giles asked as a slowly calming Buffy propped Angel against the nearest bookshelf. "Other than...that. I've never—"

"It's not as popular anymore, mate. Bloody hard to come by, too. Some dealer had it in Prague, but that was the first sign of it in over a century, I think. And it works just like that." He tilted his chin toward Angel, who had sprung a nasty sweat. "Get infected, think nothin' of

it, then the aftershocks settle in. Made specifically for vamps in the fourteenth or fifteenth century when they weren't as fabled as they are nowadays and there was only one slayer to protect the lot. The stuff ensures that a vamp'll die if he gets contaminated, no matter where you hit him."

"Fascinating," Wesley remarked.

"Indeed," Giles agreed.

Buffy looked up, her eyes wide and shining with impatience. "Enough. All right. Big history. We got it. Feel free to skip ahead to the part where, 'and you cure it by' begins." She arched her eyebrows and pressed her hand to Angel's forehead again, gentling her tone almost at once. "Angel, come on. Wakey wakey. Talk to me."

The sound of her voice must have helped. He stirred a bit and grasped her wrist with weak.

Spike his throat. "That's just it, sweets. There is only one cure."

She turned to him again. "And that would be...?"

He gestured to her.

"Me?"

"Slayer blood." He felt the temperature in the room drop to the sub-degrees, but shook his head and continued anyway. Their fault; they'd asked, he'd told. That was the way it was. "It's all I found in books, and I've seen it work. Actually, pet—and here's a funny story—it was probably how the chit before you were called snuffed it in the first place. Seems as I recall, a slayer showed up in Prague and was killed for that very reason. And no..." He turned to Giles and Wesley, who were immediately at the ready to ask the expected. "Not by yours truly. I had my hands full with Dru at the time. Didn't find out about the little antidote until after she was all dead and drained. An' trust me, pet, I looked everywhere else. Not that I would mind killing a slayer, right? But then, I wouldn't've met all of you." He glared at her scowl, at the growing fury behind her eyes. And yes, he understood why she was looking at him like that, it hurt still. It hurt to see her like this—doting Angel while snapping at him while he was trying to help. He hated the look that had briefly flashed across her face at the mention of slayer's blood being what counteracted the

poison. And he hated the feeling welling inside about all others. The same that suggested for the minute—between the two of them—Angel was the lucky one. “I’m just telling it like it is, sweetheart. Slayer blood’s the only thing that’s gonna get your boy all well and broody again.”

Angel turned at that, weakly reaching out for her. “Buffy...”

However, she wasn’t listening. Spike had her undivided attention, and he had it in spades.

“Is that what this is about?” she said at last, her voice low. “You’re jealous that I’m worried about Angel? God, I can’t believe you!” She gestured at the sick vamp sitting beside her. “He’s dying! You just told me so!”

“I was here, pet. I remember what I told you.”

“And you’re jealous? You arrogant bastard.”

“Sod. All.” Spike leaped into motion, tearing his gaze from her and stalking toward the dumbfound Watchers. “You blokes better call up Red and her little wolfie. And hey, while you’re at it, even the demon bird and Cordelia. Might as well get a bloody crowd.”

“Right,” Giles said, surprising him when he didn’t argue. Surprising Buffy, too, from the looks of it. *Talk about sodding role reversal. And we’ve entered the Twilight Zone.* “What do you need?”

Spike tossed a dirty look in Buffy’s direction. “Jus’ have Willow set up a little lab. Something that’ll drain anything right and proper. I’ll be back in a flash.”

He turned at that, making a heated line straight for the library doors. His veins were about to combust with an unnamable emotion. A combination of frustration, jealousy, and shame. The part of him that screamed she should understand, no matter what. She should know him and get it. Regardless of the situation, he had thought them beyond this. Not just her—himself as well.

Pissed off like a scorned lover. He was so frustrated with himself he could barely see straight. Spike was accustomed to frustration and anger, but this outstretched anything he had ever experienced. Being in the wrong and knowing it but still feeling right.

“Spike!”

He paused at her voice but didn't bother to turn.

"Where are you going?"

He willed himself patience, released a deep breath. "To do what I'm good at."

Then he was gone.

## A STICK SHARPENED AT BOTH ENDS

SPIKE KNEW she was there before he saw her. His jaw tightened and he released a long sigh but did not do anything to discourage her. With how everything had turned so sour so quickly, he found, for the first time, he didn't particularly want to be around Buffy.

So he knelt by the spot on the rooftop where Faith's scent was strongest and did his best to appear thoroughly engaged. Right now, he didn't know if she was angrier with him or Faith. And frankly, were it the former, he didn't know if he could blame her.

Appearing occupied did little good. Buffy only reacted based on what she wanted to see, at least when it came to her personal relationships. They were alike in that manner, but he couldn't shake the feeling that he was in the right even knowing he wasn't, so he didn't even attempt to look apologetic. After all, it was she who had come after him.

And likely not even for him, he realized. If anything, she was out here to help him snag the antidote that would save her precious Angel.

Spike sighed and stood. Some things would never change. He was only surprised that it had taken him so long to see it.

Buffy stopped a few feet away from him. "Hey," she said softly.



He glanced up, tilting his head. "Slayer."

She narrowed her eyes, her hands dropping to her sides. "So, you're still all moody?"

Spike snickered and turned his gaze downward again, though he had lost sight of what he had been pretending to scrutinize. "Can't imagine why."

"Because I'm worried about Angel? I'm sorry if I didn't know our relationship came with a clause that forbids us about caring for our former lovers." She didn't blink at the icy glare he sent her way, and he hadn't expected she would. That was another thing about Buffy he knew intimately. Once she got the idea that she was right, it took severe evidence to change her mind, and even then the chance was remote. "I really don't see where I'm being unfair here."

Of course not. She wouldn't.

Then again, neither did he. Sure, the big ponce was mortally wounded and, unless Spike could bag his third slayer tonight, would die a slow and agonizing death, but did that mean she had to fawn over the big git as though he were the earth and sky? As though his death would mean the end of everything that had made her life valuable?

He had the sinking suspicion that, should Faith not be nabbed, she would do something colossally stupid to save the bastard's life. Something like offer him her neck with the empty promise that Angel could stop drinking when he was all healed up. Something that she would never offer Spike, and likewise something he would never take. He hadn't allowed himself to taste her blood again since they'd gotten together for that very reason. The first night, the same that seemed so long ago, he had bitten her because of what he was. A vampire. And she was the Slayer. And yes, while he had been enjoying her body for reasons that vampires, by nature, should avoid, biting her had been more predatory. A reminder of what he was.

It was the same reason he had refused himself that pleasure since the start of their relationship. The true start. If the first time had been out of savagery, he wanted the next time to come from love. And that was something he didn't think Buffy could give him. There were some times

when he felt himself so close—so bloody close—to breaking through that impenetrable wall of hers. So close, but never close enough.

And he was so fucking sick of playing second fiddle to Angel, no matter the circumstance.

“Right,” he said at last. “You’re bloody right as rain, as usual, and I’m the arse that fucks everything up. It’s all right then. Next case, please.”

“Spike!”

“Sod off, Buffy. I have me a slayer to find, and you’re only here to distract me.” He smirked. “Wouldn’t want to waste time bickering when we could be saving dear grandpappy’s life, now would we?”

“God, what’s wrong with you?”

“Why don’t you tell me, sweetheart?”

“I...can’t believe that you’d be jealous of—”

“Believe it.” He paused, chest crashing with harsh, heady breaths. They couldn’t get into this here. Not now. “Just go back to the library and make sure Angel’s comfy enough. I can handle this.”

“I don’t want to go back to the library.”

“Fine. Go to his place. Just don’t—”

“Spike!” The plea in her voice was enough to make him stop and face her head-on. “I came out here to see you. Because of the way you stormed out—”

“Right.”

“I did! I...” Buffy sighed and broke away, fingers drawn to her temples. “Look...whatever...I don’t want to mess things up between us. And yes, while I think you’re being overly possessive and jealous right now, that doesn’t mean I...” She broke off again, shook her head and looked away. “I can’t fight like this. What happened to Angel is horrible, and I’m worried about him, yes, but that doesn’t change us. What you are to me. I just want us to be okay.”

“And what is okay, sweetheart? Your version or mine?”

“Don’t do this.”

“Why not? Feels like the thing to do.”

“Spike...” Buffy was beside him the next second, grasping his

wrist, her eyes were wide and pleading. "Please. Can we just be us? We're happy, right? Before...just tell me we can be us so that the moving on thing is possible."

He looked at her for a long minute, drinking her in as though he hadn't seen her for months. There were several harsh realities to face in the coming days. Many he didn't want to and even more he feared he couldn't see coming.

At last, he released a deep breath and nodded. There was something precious about anger he desperately wanted to keep, but couldn't where she was concerned. And that fact alone annoyed him more than nearly anything else. "I don't know," he murmured. "God, I hate this."

"I do, too. It just happened so fast." She looked down, pursing her lips. "Why don't you trust me?"

"I do, baby."

"Could've fooled me. I don't know what you're worried about. There's nothing between me and Angel. There hasn't been anything since...since our first night together. My birthday. Even after you left and..." A long breath rattled through her lips. "It's just us. You and me. There's no one else."

Spike smiled dryly. "You might not be with him, love, but don't give me that rot about there being nothin' between you two. That's bull and you bloody well know it. You love the sod. Anyone would know it from lookin' at you." He paused, his throat suddenly tight. "You love him."

"No, I—"

He looked at her and she sighed.

"Okay. Yes. But not like that. More...friend love. You know? 'I-don't-want-him-to-die-even-though-we're-not-together' love." She shook her head again. "I thought we were past this. I want to be with you. I'm so much happier with you than—"

"You're happier with me; you love Angel, but not like a lover, and there's nothin' between you except a stormy past that somehow mucks up with my life everywhere I turn." He shook his head. "And

through it all, despite you're being happy and all that, you still don't love me."

The color drained from Buffy's face. He didn't blame her. It was the first time he had ever dared mentioned it, but hell, he was feeling ballsy tonight. Might as well put everything on the table.

"Spike—"

"Right. I'm not a patient bloke, Buffy, and you know it. And yeah, I don't want it where it's not real. I'm just so sodding tired of playing this game with you. Of being happy but not having everything. And I fucking hate feeling the way I did tonight." He shook his head, tugging away, his feet itching to pace. "It shouldn't be this way. I can't bloody well stand it. The looks. The sighs. The little touches...oh fucking Christ, I hate the touches. I shouldn't want to tear the git's head off for touching you. I shouldn't want to tear yours off for touching him. You're not together? Fine. You don't love me? Fine. But I love you, sweetheart, and it's better that you remember whose heart you have in your hands whenever you decide to play Nurse Slayer." Spike turned from her, not particularly caring to identify the look on her face. "You can break me on a whim. Whenever you feel like it. It's all a fun little game that we play to keep ourselves from being bored. Well, guess what? I don't wanna play anymore. I'm bloody through."

"Spike!"

"I don't know what the fuck we've been doing these last few weeks, but it hasn't been getting anywhere."

God, now there were tears in her eyes. Couldn't he ever learn to keep his big yap shut?

"It hasn't been getting anywhere?" she demanded hoarsely. "None of it? God, are you even listening to yourself? I don't know where you've been, but these last few weeks have been the best of my life. Since I was called, since before I was called...I've just been with you. Are you telling me now that because of tonight, it's—"

Spike held up a hand, his shoulders slumping in defeat. No. He couldn't do that. He was being an overreactive wanker and he knew it—saying things he didn't mean in ways he didn't mean to say them. He just didn't know how to stop. How to make these feelings go away.

How to make everything go back to the way they had been just three hours before.

"It's not tonight, pet. And you're right: what we have it's so bloody amazing. I just don't like feeling like I'm back at square one. Took me too long to get here. To get with you." He released a long sigh and stepped forward. "I just...hated it. And yeah, the wanker's dying. Not exactly being one for Mr. Sensitive here...but god, I hated watching you touch him. And then later—"

"I know. I'm sorry. But you have to trust me, Spike. I would never do to you what I did to him." She took his face in her hands, and he warmed at her touch. "Never. Call it what you want...I don't know yet. And I know you've been waiting. I just have to be sure. I don't want it to be something...and then not."

He fluttered his eyes closed and open again. "There was once a time," he muttered, "I'm willing to bet you thought you'd never do to him what you did to him...with me. Right?"

"Of course."

"So how—"

She silenced his protest with a kiss, and he instantly melted into her. They were warring within seconds, teasing and nipping and moaning as though they had been separated for weeks. Spike grasped her shoulders before breaking away and charting his mouth down her throat, eager for any part of her he could taste.

And then she murmured, "Because it's you. Not him. Because this time it's you."

For all the world he could have taken her there on the rooftop had he not known they were running against the clock. But she would never forgive him if his outburst cost Angel his life—and despite how he resented that, there was no sense making a thing out of it.

Once Angel was cured, they could talk. Until then, it was better to keep these feelings bottled up. And it was hard—he was the first to admit it. Spike dwelled in his emotions with almost the same intensity that Buffy did. He had seen her nearly torn apart the previous year because her feelings for the great git had been so fantastic she

hadn't cared that he was the bad guy. And it had gotten Jenny Calendar killed.

But in the correct setting, the same emotions could be wonderful assets. His had driven him to set things in motion, brought him here. To the side of a woman he loved more than he'd ever loved anyone.

And she was the Slayer. That amazed him.

Tonight was different, though. He had the other slayer to find and drag back to Scooby Central. Then he could take Buffy home and have the talk. Find out where they stood.

He didn't understand how she could be so blissfully happy with him, as she claimed, and still deny him the one thing he wanted. How she could have loved Angel as unconditionally as she did if she had been so miserable with him. And he was tired of waiting—he would wait until the end of time, but he was so fucking tired of waiting.

He was beginning to think the only way of getting this girl's love was to make her miserable, but that wasn't something he was willing to attempt.

"Buffy," he murmured after they pulled apart. "Kitten, head back to the library and make sure Angel is all right. Wouldn't want the wanker dying on you or what all."

She arched an eyebrow. "And leave you out here to face Faith by yourself? Ummm, don't think so."

"You don't think I can handle myself?"

"No, I really think you can handle yourself. But Faith's a bit unpredictable."

"Yeah, and so am I. Figure the fight'll be fair, at least."

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Don't get pissy about this. Angel's down, and yeah, while I'm worried, I can still strategize. If something happened to you, too..." She shuddered. "I don't know what I would've done if that arrow had hit you."

Every part of him softened at that, warming though he felt he knew better than to let his guard down. She did so many things without realizing it, said so many things that blatantly screamed the one thing she kept inside. And when she looked at him with love in

her eyes, there was nothing he wouldn't do to keep her like that—just like that.

"Right," he agreed, pressing his lips to her forehead. "What are you packin'?"

She shifted slightly and lifted up her left pant-leg to reveal Faith's dagger strapped to her shin.

"I don't want to use it," she muttered. "But it might... You're planing on draining her for Angel, right?"

He nodded.

"To death?"

"If that's what you want, sweets. Doesn't need to be to death, but as close as you can bloody well get."

Buffy's expression hardened. "Then no," she said. "I don't want to be responsible for...and yeah, she'd kill me in a heartbeat, but—"

"You're better than that." He offered a weak smile at the look she gave him. "Better than that. Better than me. I'd just as soon watch the bird squirm until there's no squirmin' left in her. But that might just be because she's a threat to you."

"Not for long." She released a long breath and turned her attention back to the town. The town seemed so small from this angle. "So, did you pick up anything?"

Back to business.

*That's more like it.*

"Think she headed in the direction of daddy's office," Spike replied, pointing. "Probably a check-up on what happened and all that."

"Seems like as good a place as any to start."

It likely was, but Spike didn't want Buffy anywhere near here—not with what was about to take place. It had nothing to do with his pride or even protecting her from the horrors of life's darker nature. The Slayer needed no such protection. But what he was about to do was something that, once she saw it, she could never unsee.

It was for that reason Spike stopped her once they reached City Hall. The reason he made like he was sniffing out leads he didn't need.

Buffy frowned, worry etched into her eyes. "What? What is it?"

"Lost it."

"What?"

"Her scent splits here. Don't know which direction she headed." He sighed and avoided Buffy's gaze, shuffling his feet at the ground. It wasn't as though he wasn't a gifted liar—it was more he hated lying to her. "Her place is to the west, right?"

She nodded. "Yeah, I think so."

"Why don't you head that way, then? I'll follow the other."

Suspicion leaked into the Slayer's face. He didn't blame her.

"You're kidding me, right?" When he didn't respond, she sighed and tugged at his arm. "Come on, Spike. I wasn't born yesterday. You're not getting rid of me that easily."

"I'm not trying to get rid of you, love. I just don't want the chit to get away." That was simple enough. Mostly truthful, even. "Better if we split up. I'll be right along if my lead turns out bad."

"You're lying."

"Am not."

"Then you take the west, and I'll take whatever direction you're thinking she's actually in instead of being sent on a wild goose chase."

Spike arched his eyebrows and shrugged. "Do whatever you like. You want east, you take east. See what I sodding care. I just want the job over and done with."

The glimmer in her eyes died, and a cute pout seized her lips. "Why do I suddenly feel like I'm in *A Princess Bride* and both cups are poisoned?"

"Never go against a Sicilian when death is on the line," he quipped, earning a glare.

"If you're lying to me..."

"Honestly, sweetheart, why would I lie?"

She just looked at him. He sighed.

"Listen, I can't do anything but what I came out here to do, right? So I'm heading whichever way you're not. Just lemme know."

Another moment's hesitation. "You're for real?"



"As real as they come."

"So I can take the east?"

He shrugged again, reaching for his cigarettes. "If that's what makes you happy."

"What makes me happy?" Another long, hard pause settled between them. "What makes me happy is the truth, Spike. I want the truth."

"You have it."

"If I find out differently..."

He nodded, waving a dismissive hand. "Right. You'll stake me good and proper. Gotcha."

"No," she replied, horrified. "Spike, I'll... I'll just be hurt. I trust you more than anyone...and if you're lying to me just to get me out of the way...and you get hurt, I'll never forgive you for that."

The words did just what they were supposed to do. Pained him with guilt. But there was nothing that could move him from his decision.

If she stayed, she would get hurt. Not by Faith, of course, but by him. Spike the monster. Spike the slayer killer as she had never seen him before. Not even last year, because truthfully, his heart hadn't been in it like it was now. Even before he'd known he had feelings for Buffy, there was something that had held him back from giving it his all. Knowing that, if anything, she made the world more interesting. He'd preferred her in it, when all was said and done. In the world, even if all she did was muck up his plans.

Faith was nothing like Buffy, and he would not hold back. With her, he would be all vampire. And there was no way he would let his girl see him like that. No way.

He couldn't let Buffy watch him kill a slayer. There'd be no coming back from that.

Better for her to think him a liar than a monster. He couldn't stand the latter. Not after what they had shared.

Thus, he parted his lips and spoke the untruth that would change his life, one way or another.

"I'm not lying, pet."

He wasn't quite sure when the first pang of regret struck, but with it came the bitter knowledge that he had just lost everything. She had come to him to make up for his earlier spectacle, even when she had nothing to apologize for. She had reassured him after he had challenged their relationship. She had reached for him when he was doing his damndest to pull away.

He had her trust. It was all he had. And when she left, it left too. Many people wandered through life and didn't recognize their colossal mistakes until well after making them. He supposed he should get some sort of medal for knowing what something was when he saw it.

There was nowhere to go from here.

He suspected Faith knew that, too, which was why she'd decided to watch the show rather than interrupt.

"Wow," the other Slayer drawled as she slid out of the shadows near City Hall where she'd been lurking. Just as he had known. "That took nerve. Lyin' to B to her face? Man. Glad I'm not in your shoes right now." A small smile crossed her face. "For more than one reason."

Spike looked up. Yes. There she was. Dark hair, snark, attitude, and a crossbow strapped to her back. A slayer. His third.

"What?" she asked when he didn't respond. "Not funny enough? Grow yourself a sense of humor."

"Right next to your tombstone, I'd wager."

"Ohhh, big words. I was thinkin', we could use your dust as fertilizer. 'Cause even if I don't get in the winning punch, I'm willin' to bet B's gonna take you to school on that one." Faith sighed dramatically and rolled her shoulders. "Kinda hurt that my own girl didn't sense me here, you know? Guess it was that extra vampy charisma."

"I'm guessing it was because slayers weren't structured to have slayer tinglies." Spike pivoted on his heel to face her fully. "Lucky for us, eh, pet?"

"Lucky for me, I guess. Get to boast as the one and fucking only who took down the notorious Slayer of Slayers." She paused,

pressing a finger to her lower lip. "Or is that Layer of Slayers? Not really on the up of which nickname you're goin' by nowadays."

"Oh, aren't you just a barrel of laughs?"

"Figure it's the least I can do."

A dry smile tickled Spike's lips, and he shook his head. "You really don't get it, do you?" he demanded. "You daft bint."

"Get what?"

"Who I am. What I am. A slayer's supposed to feel her fear and use it to her advantage." He cocked his head. "If anything, your lack of fear's gonna be your weakness."

"And when did you get so educated on slayers, huh? Just because you bagged a couple and fucked another? Please. It has nothing to do with the moves, Spike. And you know it." Faith's eyes flashed as she edged forward. "It's all about the gut. The feel of it. I'm not B. And I'm not some slayer sob story whose ear you'll bend before ripping it off. Know why I'm not afraid? Because I've seen you, William. You're about as pussy-whipped as they come. And sorry if I don't blink at the whipping boy. He's just too easy to kick when he's down."

Spike expected her to anticipate the first move before he made it, but from the look in her eyes, she didn't. He had her shoved to the ground before she could retaliate; though she didn't stay there long, recovering enough to buck him off and bounce back to her feet. But the bravado from before failed to brighten her eyes, and that alone told him how to win.

"Know why I'm here?" he snarled. "Because I'm not Angel. I'm not some useless sod plowing through the decades, moping and weeping about my poor, battered soul. I don't want redemption and I'm not a bleeding Samaritan. I am William the Bloody, and I have a reputation for killing slayers because I'm very good at it. Angel'll push you to the line, sure, but I'm the one who's not afraid to shove you over the edge. Get it, Faithy? I'm not here to rattle your chains. I'm not here to make a bunch of nancy threats. I'm here because I kill slayers. Because I *am* a vampire. A real one. Not a fledgling. Not a no-name looking to make a reputation for himself. I have my reputation. And you're about to learn how I got it."

Another smack to her jaw sent her to the ground, but she leveraged her position to sweep him off his feet. Then they were off to the races, leaping up on virtually the same beat, circling each other like hungry hawks.

"You see, I don't even know why you care," Faith said a minute later, not wavering. "From where I'm standing, I did you a favor. You know B's not gonna let-up until lover-boy is out of the picture, right? I'm really failin' to grasp where his dyin' equals bad for you."

Spike's eyes darkened. "This isn't about Angel, sweetheart. It's about you and me."

"Really? Well, isn't that sweet." She shrugged. "If that's the case then, Willy, put on your dancin' shoes, 'cause I'm about to take you 'round the town."

He scoffed. "We're not dancing. I know dancing. I've danced my lot with three slayers who knew what the dance was all about. Last one, 'specially. And honestly, if you can't tell the difference, maybe you need to look into a new profession."

"Think we're dancin' now?" Faith spat.

He grinned and wiped his mouth with the back of his wrist. "You haven't seen anythin' yet."

Faith advanced, twirling a stake between her fingers. "And I suppose you're gonna show it to me. Fucking arrogant asshole. Don't you get it? I own this town. And come two days, there isn't gonna be anything left to save. You and your girlfriend's friends are all gonna be fucking kibbles and bits—you're wasting your time with me." She moved with those slayer reflexes, grasped his throat and hurled him to the other side of the street.

And that was it. He was done playing. Spike roared, the bones in his face shifting, and he launched himself toward her. They met in the middle, a clashing fury of hits and misses. Connecting and clawing and fighting the way a slayer and demon should. All out fists and fangs.

"Come on, Spikey! Don't quit on me now."

And Faith came for him again in a mix of blows and low kicks. All hell unleashed, hardhearted and malicious. It seemed she was every-

where at once, scratching chunks of skin through layers of black fabric. Flesh tore and nails dug. Spike hissed his pain, kneeling her with the first open shot he could manage, before kicking her back. Again, she was tossed against the pavement, and the ripe scent of slayer blood filled the air.

Yet she got up again.

“Come on! Give it to me!” She pummeled a fist sank into his gut, her knee butting up to greet his fallen head. “You said you were a vampire, Spike. Give it to me! Show me how much demon you are! Don’t flake on me now!”

Spike roared again, swinging at her with a mixture of fury and instinct, blocking her blows and landing a few of his own, but this wasn’t as easy as he’d thought it would be. It wasn’t often that he encountered someone that could give him an honest run for his money—he had with Buffy, always with Buffy, but not like this.

And they fought. Harsh and real in ways it hadn’t been before.

The slayers in his past...those had been fun. This one was the line between life and death.

The world could come to a stop without him realizing it.

Again, they drew away, both panting. Spike felt a cut on his eye, right above the scar Number Two had given him. He just needed an in.

Faith wiped blood off her chin, her black eyes dancing. “Is that all you got, vampire? ‘Cause if it is, and I really hate to say this, then your fucking bark is definitely worse than your bite.” She grinned, somehow looking madder than Dru ever had. “Speaking of, I know I wasn’t here for the big soap and all, but honey, I’ve seen both sides up close and personal. The way she acts about you? Not really much for the carin’. You think she woulda sent Angel out here to hunt me down had it been you that was shot? Please. You’ve taken the passenger seat, buddy. Kinda pathetic when you think about it.”

“Buffy didn’t send me anywhere,” Spike snarled. “Came of my own will.”

“Oh. To stand up for Angel? How fucking sweet.”

He smirked. "Like I said, pidge, this isn't about the wanker. It's about you and me."

"I get the funny feeling that you're lying."

"That would be your problem."

It hit from nowhere then. The scent he could have identified anywhere. And without warning, everything went still. He felt his insides freeze and his blood run colder than normal. The art of falling in the worst way imaginable. A kid with his hand caught in a cookie jar.

A very big cookie jar.

"Oh, don't take it personally, Faith. Tonight's the night for lying, it seems."

Faith fell to the ground with the brunt smack of a hard punch, and Buffy stood on the other side. Her eyes were stormy with a plethora of emotion and studied him with a mix of hurt and anger that drove the proverbial knife into his chest before giving it a good twist.

He had known this would happen, of course. That didn't make it hurt any less.

"Ohhh..." Faith cooed, sitting up. "Somebody's in trouble. B, glad you could make it. And here I thought you were gonna miss all the fun."

That was all it took to drag away his girl's gaze from his. Better now.

Though he couldn't ignore the way she flinched when he attempted to approach.

"Wouldn't miss this," she retorted coldly. "Not for all the world."

"Your boy seems to think it wiser, otherwise."

"This isn't about my boy, and you know it."

The other Slayer shrugged, hopping to her feet once more. "His words, not mine. What, B? You here to gut me? Take back what I stole from you? Right then. Steppin' up in big sister's shoes. Gotta say I'm impressed."

Buffy smiled. He knew that smile.

"This isn't even about you, Faith. Not really. It's only about one thing."

"Oh. And what is that?"

A window of opportunity opened, and Spike leaped through without looking. Before either could react, he dove for Buffy's legs, ripped away the concealed dagger and turned it on Faith without a second's hesitation.

Strange. He was a vampire, and yet he was surprised at how easily the blade slipped into Faith's side. How effortlessly it sliced through skin and released the rich smell of her blood into the air. He had seen daggers work more times than he could count, yet watching Faith fall to the ground had him momentarily captivated.

Still, he managed to gather his bearings. The chit wasn't dead, and the Scoobies wouldn't allow her to become so. He instead turned his attention to Buffy, who was staring at him with a mixture of horror and awe.

"There," he barked, defensive. Easier that way. At least he would be prepared. "Are you happy now?"

Her face crumbled and he felt a familiar pang in his chest. This wasn't her fault. She had done nothing except what she said she would. And here he was, mucking things up even further.

*Stupid, heartless wanker.*

But that didn't mean he could stop. Not for her. Not even now.

There were more important things.

"Do I look happy?" she fired back, eyes brimming with tears. "You lied to me. I knew you had...but...God, Spike—"

"We got the bird. That's all that matters."

"No!" She covered the space between them and seized his elbow. "No, that is not all that matters. I can't believe you! First with earlier, and then...what happened? I don't get it! I don't..."

"You can't." Spike sighed, looking away. "This is not the time, sweetheart. Break my heart rightly when we get her back, okay? After all...that's all that matters, right?"

There was a long pause, and her confused anger burned him until it was his. Hell, it always had been. That knowledge of being in

the wrong for the right reasons reemerged. He didn't know what the fuck either of them was playing at anymore.

"Why..." she said a minute later, voice thick. "Why don't you trust me? I don't...I..."

For the second time that night, the sound of an arrow whizzing through the air caught his attention. For the second time that night, he knew its course without having to be told. And before either of them could react, the arrow tore through flesh and bone at his chest, inches from his heart, but a bulls-eye nonetheless.

He fell to the pavement in Buffy's arms, vaguely aware of her scream.

He suspected it was the last thing Faith saw. Lying there on the pavement with her crossbow curled in grasp. Last fucking hurrah. Watching Buffy sob and plead with her poisoned lover before the world tumbled around her.

They were truly even now.



## FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS

AN ENTIRE SELECTION of Giles's dusty old books went crashing to the floor. The next second, Buffy, trembling and doing everything in her power to keep from losing it, carefully lowered Spike to the newly cleared table. She could barely see him for the tears in her eyes.

"Hey!" Wesley protested, but she ignored him.

Willow was at her side the next instant, helping her calm Spike's mediocre struggles. "Where are Giles and Xander?"

Buffy said nothing. Should she try to elevate him or was flat better? If she shifted him a fraction of an inch lower, would that make him more or less comfortable? She didn't know. She was the Slayer. She was supposed to know things and she didn't.

The world was outright maddening.

Spike's mouth fell open, his eyes soft and kind. So far from his earlier outrage. Funny how death could put things in perspective. "Sweetheart," he said, capturing one of Buffy's hands to draw her attention home. "Love, Will's tryin' to talk to you."

"I don't know where they are," Buffy said shortly, tightening her fingers around his—anchoring him to her as she stroked his surprisingly soft locks of peroxidized hair with her free hand. "As soon as I saw Giles pull up, I grabbed Spike and ran."

"She means *grabbed* in the literal sense," Spike added, offering a weak smile.

Willow frowned. "Ran?"

Buffy met her friend's gaze and shrugged. The screeching panic in her head was beginning to fade into something worse. She couldn't think and didn't want to. Spike was hurt.

"Got here faster than they did, didn't I?" she replied.

"Those were antique volumes—Assyrian scrolls, mind you!" Wesley huffed. "And you just throw them to the floor as though—"

"Shut up, Wesley," Buffy and Willow said together.

Spike sighed and attempted to sit up. Attempted and failed. "Don't see what all the fuss is about," he offered. "I'm fine."

Buffy inhaled deeply. She hadn't stopped trembling. "What—"

"It's just a scratch, really."

"Spike—"

"A flesh wound, when you think about it."

"Spike!"

He closed his mouth and smiled up at her—like there were things to be smiling about now. But what scared her more was the possibility that he had already given up, and all of this was his way of saying goodbye.

"My girl," he murmured, skimming a finger across her cheek. "Don't cry, baby. It's all right. Things have a way of workin' out."

She shook her head and nearly choked on a sob. "No. They don't, Spike. Not where we're concerned."

His smile remained. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "It wasn't supposed to be this way. Not for us." He blinked and looked around. "Where's Angel?"

The question made no sense. "Huh?"

"At the mansion," Willow offered. "Oz and Cordy are with him. We were gonna bring him the blood after it... After we got it. Thought it best to have him comfortable."

"I can't do this," Buffy announced suddenly, though she didn't know who she was talking to.

"We got what we needed, right?"

She didn't understand the question. Then she looked at him and she did.

"Angel," Spike clarified, "got his remedy. Got—"

And just like that, she was gone. Buffy dropped his hand and moved back, the weight of what had just happened crashing down around her with such force she couldn't breathe. He still thought this was about Angel, after everything. Like watching him fall to the ground hadn't nearly killed her in the process.

But then, why should he believe otherwise? She'd told him she was happy with him, but also that she loved Angel. In his world, it would be Angel she would save. There wasn't another option. The door had closed.

"I can't do this," Buffy said again, trusting her feet to carry her away. She didn't breathe again until she was in Giles's office, the air ringing with the slam of the door.

Except once she got there, the floodgates in her mind opened, and her shock was shoved aside by fury.

How dare he?

How *dare* he?

Buffy whirled around before she could talk herself out of it and marched back into the library proper. "How the hell can you say that?"

Spike attempted to sit up and was more successful this time. "What?"

"How can you..." She wiped at her eyes. "You really think I'm going to sit here and watch you die? You think that's the reason I... Well, fuck you!"

He blinked. "Buff—"

"You know, I should. I really, really should. You lied to me, you didn't trust me, you stormed out of here and got yourself all wounded...and you smoke!" Buffy was shaking so hard she felt like she might wear a hole in the ground, but it was worth it for the dazed look on his face. "But...I...how can you think I'd do nothing?"

"Well—"

"And if you mention Angel one more time, I'll rip your balls off and shove them down your throat."

That seemed to stun everyone in the room.

"Buffy!" Willow sputtered.

Wesley looked pained. "I think I'll just...wait outside for Rupert and Xander," he decided before practically fleeing for the library doors.

Spike frowned. "What?" he demanded. "Is it so bloody beyond the realm of possibility to think—maybe—you'll wanna save your—"

"Don't even—"

"He has a soul, pet. A...reason. A bloody mission from God or what all. He was mojo'ed back once...because it's so important that he doesn't kick it...right?" He cocked his head. "You...think anyone up there will cry over me, love? Think they'll even consider steppin' up to the plate to save William the Bloody? A soulless wanker who killed heartily until he quit cold turkey 'cause he fell in love? You think the universe is run by a bunch of romantics?" He smiled a dry, insincere smile. "'Cause if you do, sweetheart, you're in for one hell of a rude awakening."

She could have screamed again; she didn't. Instead, in a tone so low it was nearly frightening, she said, "There are two slayers, Spike. No one has to die."

He blinked. "Not...gonna happen."

"You don't have much choice here."

"Oh, yes I bloody well do."

"You wanna try and stop me?"

He stared at her for a long second before offering a flat chuckle and shaking his head. "I won't drink from you," he told her flatly. "And if you even think of offering yourself to Angel...I'll stake myself, here and now."

Hell, he might as well have slapped her. "I wouldn't."

"Yes, you would," Spike replied grimly. "If it meant saving him, you would. But I won't let you endanger yourself for that."

Buffy's jaw dropped. "You said it didn't have to be to the death!"

“Yeah. People live as human vegetables. I will not let that happen to you.”

“You can’t stop me. If you’re dying, you’ll—”

“What? Cave? Don’t think so.” His brows arched in challenge. “You think you know how much I can...withstand? You haven’t seen anything yet.”

It was likely fortunate that Giles and Xander pushed through the library doors before Buffy could spit an angry retort. Not that she had anything to say because what *could* she say? The answer was nothing because this was what he believed—truly, wholeheartedly, and with good reason. All the things she’d kept inside, afraid of what they meant or what might happen if she said them—everything unsaid informed his conviction. She wasn’t sure she’d believe her, were the situation reversed.

Now she was going to lose Spike because she hadn’t been brave enough to tell him she loved him. To make him believe it.

Numbness set in, and she wasn’t sure whether or not that was a good thing. At length, Buffy turned and headed toward Giles’s office once more.

She wouldn’t be coming back this time.

THE SECOND BUFFY DISAPPEARED, Spike stopped fighting the disease attacking his bones and collapsed against the table. It was unlike anything he had ever before felt. A gnawing away at his insides. A foe he could neither touch nor see. He remembered fearing sickness in life, watching as it withered his mum away to little more than bone. And here he’d thought he’d left all that behind.

Willow placed a hand on his shoulder, reminding him she was there. “She loves you,” she told him. “I don’t know if she understands that’s what it is yet, but she loves you.”

Spike blinked, then smiled at her for trying. “She doesn’t...don’t know if she...can...or...”

“Don’t talk if it hurts.” The next minute, Red was sitting beside him on the table, casually ignoring the fuss as it happened behind

her—the watchers yelling at each other, and Xander's confusion. The witch was incredibly observant, and he tended to forget that at times. From the beginning, she had surprised him. This was no different. "Buffy does love you. I know you see it. You're just trying to be the big martyr here and everything...which, freaky, yes, but if you die, it's gonna kill her. You have to let her help you."

Spike sat back, eyes drifting shut. "If Angel..." he said, "dies...'cause...'cause I went...after Faith...lied to...betrayed...never forgive me." He released a trembling breath. "Said...never forgive. Don't want...loves him."

"Spike?"

A pause. "I'm here, ducks...goin' to sleep, though."

He felt her squeeze his shoulder. "No. No. No sleepies. You can't. We'll have the cure soon." Then her scent moved away, and he heard her call for Giles, though he didn't follow much of what was said. He was teetering closer to the edge.

"Love her..." he murmured. "Buffy. Love her."

Willow was back again, but it was only for a minute. He felt her hand on his forehead. She was cold where he was warm.

So strange.

"She knows," Willow said from a thousand miles away. "She loves you, too."

An empty promise. Of course Buffy would love him now. Now that he was dying. She would tell him once for good measure, shed a few tears, but move on. Inevitably, she would move on.

As she should. They had shared their heaven. They had been happy. Time had simply run out, but then, no time in the world would have ever been enough.

This was it, then. His punishment for spoiling her purity. He was a creature of the night. A thing born of evil. Presuming to touch her had been bad enough. But making her care? Making her cry? Making her bleed?

*Get what I deserve.*

That thought carried his consciousness away, and the world fell down around him.



WILLOW FOUND Buffy with her head buried in her arms, her shoulders shaking with sobs. The temptation to turn around and leave was a strong one. Seemed like the right thing to do. She knew from experience that crying was a very personal thing—tie in love and death just made it more so.

But she couldn't turn away. As the others worked hard to pump the antidote from Faith's body, she had to make sure that Buffy wanted what she thought she wanted.

One could never make good judgment calls in these situations. It was one or the other. One of them would die tonight. And the Slayer, the unlikely lover of both, had to decide which.

All things considered, the icebreaker she chose likely could have used a bit more work.

"He's out."

Buffy looked up in a panic, wiping furiously at her eyes. "What?"

"Spike. He...kinda passed out." Willow pursed her lips and stepped forward. "Said he loves you, though. But he thinks you'll hate him if he drinks Faith's blood and lives."

"That's ridiculous! Why would he..." Her face fell mid-tangent. "Oh."

"Yeah. Oh."

"I said I'd never forgive him if he got himself hurt...but..." Buffy shook her head and heaved out a breath. "I can't lose him, Will. I lost Angel last year, and it broke me. It broke me for a long time, but I got fixed." She glanced in the direction of the sick vampire's table. There was quiet for a long minute, then her face crumpled. "If I lose Spike, there will be no 'me' to break."

"You rely on him that much?"

Buffy looked down miserably. "More than I should. And I don't mean that all... He dies, he thinks it's because...I..." She shook her head again, wiping her cheeks. "Angel knew that...and he believed me."

"He doesn't believe you love him," Willow said, wincing when

Buffy jerked her head up. "He told me that you love Angel and that's why you would never forgive him if he drank Faith's antidote and left Angel for dead. I told him that you love him...because you do, whether you wanna admit it or not, but he doesn't believe it."

"Will—"

"And don't even try to deny it, missy. I've seen you. These few weeks...you've been reverso-Buffy. I didn't think it was possible or anything, but..." She trailed off with a hard sigh and sank into the seat beside her. "And now you're looking more like you. All teary and stuff. You can't tell me you love this and not what—"

"I'm not...I..." Buffy swallowed. "If I tell him now, he won't believe me."

"That you love him?"

She nodded.

"You know, there's this concept called 'trying.' I heard it's successful in many civilized cultures."

Buffy favored her with a particularly dry glance. "You don't know Spike."

"Actually, kinda do. And yeah, he won't believe you. But what have you got to lose?"

"Everything." She hesitated. "My love kills, Will. It killed Angel. Drove my father away. The last time I...let myself...I've been terrified of loving Spike because something like this might happen."

There was a brief pause. Willow wondered if strangling her friend would make her see reason. "But this *did* happen, Buff. The world doesn't just stop occasionally sucking because you don't tell someone you love them. Obviously. And now he might die *because* you didn't tell him!"

Buffy nodded, the motion stiff.

Then she burst into tears. The crying jag didn't last long, though—a few hard sobs and Buffy was on her feet again, wiping at her eyes, looking somewhat manic. "Well, I'm not going to let him die. I'll shove Faith's blood down his throat if I have to. He's gonna be okay. I'm not losing him." She released a deep breath. "In the meantime,



we better move him, too. Back to his place. Get him some blood or something to hold him over.”

Willow nodded slowly, hating that she had to ask but forcing herself to do it anyway. “And Angel?”

The color faded a bit from the Buffy eyes, but not the resolve. “I’ll be there...with him,” she replied. “What Spike said. It...he’s right. Angel is a champion. And the Powers don’t want him dead. They brought him back once...they stopped him from killing himself. They made it snow in southern California during a massive heat wave. That’s saying something. I just...I don’t think this is the end of it for him. He has a purpose. He...” She trailed off, gaze blurring over again. “And if it isn’t...I can’t stand to see either one of them die, Will. This is so unfair. I’m the Powers’ puppet, and they’ve locked me in a room where the walls are closing in and the doors are sealed shut. I know it’s selfish and I know it’s wrong, and it’s eating me up inside, but I can’t! I can’t—”

“Buffy—”

“If the Powers are so determined to keep Angel in the game, they will. But Spike has nothing. If I lose him, it’s forever.” Buffy shook her head again. “He has nothing...but me. And I’m not gonna let him die.”

Willow offered a soft, encouraging smile, relieved now that there was a plan. A plan that still kinda sucked, sure, but Buffy’s logic made sense to her. And it was what she needed. “Then let’s get moving.”

## EQUAL IN THE PRESENCE OF DEATH

“DRINK THIS.”

Spike offered Buffy a weak smile as she elevated his head and brought the mugful of pig’s blood to his lips.

When she wasn’t feeding him blood, she was softly stroking his hair and occasionally feeling his forehead. Whatever tension had separated them at the library had vanished since she’d announced that they were moving him home.

Strange. Earlier that afternoon, he had ambushed her in the library because he missed seeing her within these walls. Seemed fitting that the last thing he’d see would be her, sitting here where he wanted her all along.

God, he didn’t want to leave her, but death was better than the alternative. Her offering, Angel’s death, and her eventual resentment. There simply was no comparing what they had to whatever had made her relationship with Angel so bloody special, and Spike had been daft to think it could ever be otherwise.

Happiness and love, it seemed, could not coexist.

“Thank you,” he murmured when she moved the mug away, licking at his lips absently.

“Any better?”

"Makes it a little...more...doesn't hurt as...much." He closed his eyes and pressed through the pain. "But, Slayer, it's like keeping...a patient on life support. Just lemme go."

Tears flooded her eyes. He hated it when she cried. "No. I can't."

"Buff—"

"Giles called while I was warming the blood. He's taken as much from Faith as he thinks he can without killing her." She neared and brushed a watery kiss against his lips. "Xander, Will, and Wes are all on their way. You're gonna be all right, Spike."

It took a minute for that to register.

Then his eyes went wide.

"No. No. You can't. You—" He tried to sit up and was pushed back immediately. "Buffy...if...you'll regret it. And...I never...I never wanna be something that you...regret. Please, baby. Just...just give it to Angel. Give it—"

"No."

"Please—"

She shook her head, tears spilling down her cheeks. "No. You're not gonna die. I won't let you."

An exasperated sigh climbed through his throat, and he collapsed against the pillow in defeat, his own vision blurring. "Why?" he demanded hoarsely. "You know it's what you want."

"No, what I want is you," she replied. "Spike, I love you."

For a long minute, he thought he had imagined it. It wasn't until he noticed the tension in her eyes that he realized it was real. The words had been real. And she had spoken them.

She had spoken them.

"Can you..." he rasped slowly. "Can you...what did you say?"

She smiled through her tears, a fucking vision, and grasped his hand under the blankets.

"I love you, William. I do. I don't know why it took me so long, or..." Her tears were coming in stronger waves, her lips brushing softly across his. "I love you, and I won't watch you die."

Release. For a few blissful seconds, he felt it. He had needed to hear it for so long. It seemed he had been waiting for those words

since time began. Seemed he would always be waiting, in one way or another.

But he knew. Damn well, he knew. Things were never what they seemed.

Because there was more she wasn't saying. Hell, he'd told himself this might happen. It was the polite route to take, after all, when one was dying. And yes, while she might believe what she was saying now—that she wanted him to live, damn the repercussions—it would not always be that way. Not when she realized, really realized, what choosing him had cost her.

Despite everything they'd shared, he wasn't what she wanted. He was a pit-stop. A vacation from her regular life. That was all he'd ever be.

"Spike?" Buffy's voice was shaky. "Spike...did you hear me?"

He blinked and focused. "Yeah. I heard you, sweetheart."

"Well? Is that it? I just told you that I love you—"

"No." A faint smile crossed his tired lips. "No, pet, you don't. And that's...that's okay. But thanks for saying it."

Spike didn't particularly care to analyze the way her face fell, how her eyes widened with shock and hurt, filling to the brim with new tears. He hated himself for it—for saying what needed to be said. For acknowledging the truth she was either ignoring or couldn't see. He hated himself like he hadn't known to hate.

It was fortunate the others arrived before she could express her hurt.

"Here it is," Xander announced loudly. Buffy bolted from his side the next minute. Before he could rub salt in a wound that was already screaming.

Sound carried well in the house, as he knew from experience—had known since the day Buffy had caught him in the bathroom, wanking off in the middle of the night. Of course, that had turned out all right. She had been flustered that he still thought of her while masturbating, and oddly touched that he'd chosen to sneak off and deal with it rather than wake her up. Not that they hadn't surprised each other in the middle of the night with a lovely round of shagging.

She'd just had a particularly hard day that day, and he'd thought it wiser that she rest.

Spike found himself smiling. That hadn't been too long ago. Not really. And god, what a week or so could do to a relationship. Here he was at his deathbed, refusing the help he craved. Refusing her help when she at least pretended she loved him now. He couldn't go from love to hate and survive, even if the love wasn't real, and that's what would happen if he denied Angel his due. She had to know that.

But sound carried. He knew that well. Sound carried, and while he could guess that there were several people crowded in the living room, he couldn't tell how many. He couldn't feel them—couldn't hear their distinctive heartbeats or detect their separate scents. His senses were clouded with disease—the blood Buffy had provided rejuvenating him just to the point where the dullness had worn off. But there was no mistaking the tantalizing scent that filled the air.

They had brought him blood. Faith's blood.

*Bugger. All.*

Couldn't cut him a fucking break. Stupid sods were wasting time. Soon they would have two dead vampires on their hands, and all would be for nothing. Didn't they see that?

They were drawing nearer still. Close enough now that he could hear what was being said.

"...twenty-four hours. Three books all said the same thing."

"Giles was able to find it?"

"Wes, actually. Big with the surprise and all."

Wesley flustered. "I beg your pardon!"

There was a sigh and a head crowned in the doorway. Xander. "The longer he goes without revving the slayer juice, though, the weaker he'll get. By the time twelve hours rolls by, he'll barely be able to stand. And there might be fits toward the end." Another long, serious pause. "Are you sure you wanna handle Angel?"

Handle Angel? What did that mean? If she was going to do what he thought she was going to do...

"Yeah. I should be there." He hated the defeat in her voice. "It's

the least I can do." He heard her shuffle restlessly as another long sigh claimed her body. "I don't want to leave Spike, though..."

"It's okay, Buff," Willow assured her. "He'll understand. Really. With the way he was carrying on earlier about—"

"Yeah, yeah." Another heavy breath. "I just wish I...I want to be here when he's better."

"You will." A speculative beat. "How is he?"

A slight pause. Spike closed his eyes right before Buffy peeked in. "Looks like he drifted off," she said a moment later, farther away. "He's been in and out...saying things...I don't think he means."

*Oh, pet...*

"Like what?"

"Not important. Look, I need to run home and shower. Get an overnight bag, too. Will?"

"I'm coming with just to make sure you're all settled, then I'm coming back here."

"Good. Spike'll need you here." The direction of her voice changed again. "Xander?"

"Going to the library for much fun in the researching of Ascensions. If anyone wants to trade, feel free."

"Babysitting for vampires?"

"Perhaps not."

"Thought so," Buffy said dryly. "Guess that leaves Wes to look after Spike until Willow gets back."

The young Watcher had, evidently, not been expecting that. "What, I—"

"There's no one else, man," Harris replied. "Cordy and Oz are watching Angel. I have to leave, and Spike's all with the sick. You have to make sure he, you know, doesn't do that thing where he dies."

It was so bizarre hearing Stay Puft speak about him like that. He figured he was withholding all his 'How-I-Hate-Spike-Let-Me-List-The-Ways' commentary for Buffy's benefit. And for that, Spike was more than grateful.

"Wouldn't you be better suited for this?" Wesley asked. "I'm sure Rupert needs me in the library."

“Oh no, Watcher Man. I called library duty for a reason.”

Spike could practically see Buffy’s raising her eyebrows. “You forgot about the vamp babysitting alternative?”

“You are hasty but not incorrect in your assumption. Besides, vampires go with the Watcher territory. Wes here happens to be a watcher. An inept watcher, but a watcher nonetheless.”

“Yes, and speaking of...” A long pause followed. The reality of everything happening around her becoming too much for Buffy to bear—he knew that without needing to ask. And while Spike wanted to die with her by his side, he figured a small detour to Angel’s wouldn’t hurt. If he had his way, it wouldn’t make much difference.

But then, Buffy was talking—no, she was *threatening* the watcher git. “Anything happens to Spike that does not end in a happy, non-fatal way, and I will personally see that you suffer as no man has suffered before. You get me?”

“I—”

“I mean it, Wes. No screw-ups. No calling the Council. No would-be heroics. No nothing. If he’s not in that bed—or better—outside causing all sorts of Spikey hell by the time I get back, you better hope some magical Hellmouthy interference causes your green card to expire tonight.”

Words could not describe the extent to which Spike would miss her. Wherever he ended up.

“Y-yes, B-Buffy,” Wesley stammered in agreement. “Sure.”

Christ, how had this bloke survived primary school? Spike knew that times had changed drastically, but he wagered spineless wankers like this still got abused—both verbally and physically—by the tougher brutes. He had been up that road, himself.

Had a hell of a time getting back at the so-called bullies of his day.

*Oh yeah.*

“Right then,” Buffy was saying. “That settles that. I’m just...I’ll be right back.”

The next thing he knew, she had reentered the room and was at his side again. Drawing up blankets to see if that enhanced his comfort. Cautious fingers tracing his skin, making him burn even

more. Then her lips were at his, kissing him so tenderly that he would have thought it a breeze had he not known otherwise.

"I'll be back, Spike," she told him. "Please...just drink for me."

Spike's eyes remained closed. He refused to betray himself. Refused to acknowledge the mutinous cry rising in his chest.

He would hold on until she got back. Cruel as it might be, he wanted his last minutes to be with her.

"Please," she whispered again, her mouth at his forehead this time.

He still didn't move. He refused. And the seconds ticking by felt like hours.

Finally, Buffy sighed and pressed another kiss to his unresponsive lips. "Just...don't... I'll be back soon. I have to go do this thing. Willow and Wesley will be here for you...if you need anything." Another pause. "Just don't leave me, Spike. Please."

Then she was gone. And he was breaking. Surely death couldn't be any worse.

A few minutes passed. He listened as Buffy, crying softly, left alongside Willow. As Xander confirmed his plans again and told Wesley not to screw anything up.

Then it was just him and the watcher. Spike imagined the watcher was poking around, curious at how real live vampires lived. And he wasn't disappointed. A few minutes later, the bloke was in his room—something Spike felt rather than saw or smelled. His senses were going fast.

Time to give this wanker the scare of his life.

Then put him to good use.

"Subject's skin appears tinted rouge," Wesley was whispering into what had to be a tape-recorder. "Indicating an elevation in body temperature and stimulation of previously retired blood-flow." A pause, then the git inched forward. "Such suggests the poison rejuvenates the lifeline of a deceased victim in order to enact its effects. Breathing is minimal, but being that the subject is a vampire, superfluous. Note—researcher has observed the subject breathing numerous times over the past few weeks. A rather interesting



phenomenon. Researcher has yet to conclude if this is due to some ingrained human habit or a result of prolonged exposure to humans—”

“If you wanted to make a study outta me,” Spike growled, popping open his eyes and seizing the wrist closest to him with strength he didn’t feel. It provided the desired effect; Wesley’s jaw dropped and he released a shrill shriek, tape-recorder and notepad spilling onto the floor. “You coulda said ‘please.’”

The fact that Spike could speak at all served as evidence he could get through the next hour without falling over himself. What he was about to do demanded a certain measure of control. The same that he needed with such fervent desperation. Whatever else came about it, he knew this was the end.

Wesley, for his part, merely offered him a blank look. Then screamed again.

Spike flashed an evil grin for show. Might as well squeeze in a few kicks for old time’s sake.

“What’s the matter, mate?” he asked, gathering what was left of his strength to sit up. “You seemed so comfortable a second ago.”

“Spike, I assure you, I had absolutely no idea that you were conscious or—”

“Oh. So that makes it better, then?”

Wesley’s eyes widened further. The poor sod was positively terrified. It felt good. “I—”

“Don’t worry, Prissy. I’m gonna give you the chance to make it up to me.”

There was a pause. An intrigued pause. “Sorry?”

“A favor. Y’know...the kind you’re...volunteered for.”

“Spike, I have strict orders from Buffy—”

“But Buffy’s not here, is she?” Spike tossed his legs over the side of the bed, masking a frown at how badly the movement hurt. Oh well. Deep breaths and all that rot. He could do this. “She’s not...but I am.”

That argument seemed to serve as sufficient persuasion.

“What do you need me to do?”

“Simple enough. Don’t...have the strength, exactly, to navigate... myself around town. You’re gonna help me.”

“Help you do what?”

Spike smiled wryly and nodded toward the adjoining hallway outside his bedroom door. “Make a special delivery.”

## SWEET SACRIFICE

“No?”

“No,” Wesley repeated.

“You’re...telling me no?”

“Buffy wants—”

“Buffy doesn’t...know what...what she wants, you great big git.” Spike closed his eyes and felt his way through the sharp pain that decided to attack his abdomen. “Now...you’re gonna help me, or I’ll—”

“You don’t look to be much in the condition to do anything at present, if I may be so blunt.”

Spike blinked dully at him. What the hell was this? Had the wanker sporadically grown a pair in the last two minutes?

“Of the two of you, I am more prone to trust Buffy’s judgment when it comes to what she wants,” Wesley explained. Then his voice dropped. “Moreover...she threatened me.”

At that, Spike couldn’t help but grin. “Course...she did.”

“So, as you can see, I—”

“Y’wanna...know how I see it?” Spike willed his eyes shut for a long minute, his shaking arms pushing his body off the bed so that he

might rise to full height. While it hurt like hell, there was an odd mixture of relief in being in charge of himself once more.

Going to Angel's meant pulling all of his remaining strength together, and he intended to do just that.

"I see...a watcher...scared of his own Slayer...to the point where... where he'd rather save a soulless, murderous..." His mind searched for another adjective. "Evil vampire...rather than a bloke...who has... a sodding mission of redemption." He licked his lips and staggered forward. "This isn't about me...and Buffy...as much as I'd like it to be. You're a watcher. You're supposed to make good, emotionless judgment calls. Bearing that in mind...can you really, really say that savin' me is in the world's best bloody interest. Huh?"

The conviction in Wesley's eyes had wavered a little, but he said nothing.

"I am a killer, boy," Spike said with a bit more bite. *Mind over matter*. "I did me two slayers before...before Buffy. Killed them and liked it. I have...nothing." He staggered forward. "And yeah, while I'm not feeling proper...I could still snap your neck...before you could do anything about it. The...the only thing...keepin' me from not is...her. Angel...has a soul. He has more than a bloody...bloody girl to keep him in line. Innit right that...he get to live?"

Wesley's bravado dissolved. He looked again like a lost puppy. "But Buffy—"

"But nothing. Either you help me...or I'll leave on...my own. After I knock you out." Spike flashed an unpleasant grin. "And in this condition, mate...I'm liable not to get there...at all. Then you'd have two...two dead vamps on your hands. Don't think the Slayer'd be too happy with...that."

There was a long pause. "But Buffy—" Wesley protested again.

"Is not the boss of you," Spike interjected. "And if you're gonna be the man...of this relationship, Wes. I'd advise you start now...by helpin' me over...to Angel's."

He had him now; he could feel it. Saw resignation in Wesley's eyes, knowing that he had again been talked into a wall. Almost sad. Almost. Spike knew all too well how it felt to be pushed around. It

wasn't pleasant. In fact, had circumstances been different, he would have it in himself to feel sorry for the bloke.

But the circumstances weren't different. And time was running out.

"I do not understand," Wesley said finally.

"It's really not that—"

"No, I mean...why?" Wesley's eyes narrowed, and he cocked his head. "As you said yourself...you are a vampire, Spike. A nasty, soul-less vampire. Your relationship with Buffy is unnatural as it is—it goes against everything you are. A demon in love with the Slayer is bad enough. You're a demon without a soul. And here you are...in this relationship with your game—"

"She is not my bloody game."

"No," the other man agreed. "She is not. She is your lover. And you have everything you want, don't you? The woman you love, and even a chance to take out the only possible competition for her affections, with her permission. And yet you persist on...what? Giving that up? For what? To save the life of a vampire that you do not care for anyway, stating that it is because he has a soul...a mission for redemption...all the things that you claim to lack. Why? Why would you ever—"

"Because," Spike said, grasping his side in anticipation of the sharp pain that attacked his gut. "I love her. I...love her too...bloody much to ever have her resent me. And it's Angel she loves. Angel she's always loved."

"Did she tell you that?"

"No, she..." Spike released a long sigh, his mind dragging him back to the words she'd said—the words he'd lived to hear her say—but thinking about that was dangerous. He shook his head and released a long sigh. "Look, we're doing this. It's better that she feels whatever she feels now...than to resent me later. Hate me later...for cheating her boy from what he deserves. Are you gonna help me, or not?"

"Yes," came the reply. Low. Defeated. "I'll help you. But not because—"

"Good. I don't care why." Spike flashed a weak, but grateful smile. "Grab the goods. We gotta leave now."

"You can't walk in your condition!"

If there was one thing he hated, it was being told what to do. He scoffed. "We'll see."



SPIKE COULDN'T WALK in his condition.

Well, he could, but not very well. Truly, he didn't understand it. He had seen vampires in Prague run marathons while hours deeper into the illness than he was. Of course, said vampires were always hunting down a cure. Hunting down something that would stop the slow deterioration that would inevitably kill them. He found little need in pumping his dead veins with false hope and had accepted that he wouldn't be around this time tomorrow.

Perhaps that was why the disease was taking him faster than he'd seen it take others. Because, instead of pursuing means to an end, he had simply embraced it.

But now, he needed the last of his strength—all of it. Approaching Angel would be tricky business, but it had to be done. He didn't trust Wesley to do it on his own; the man was still deathly afraid of the Slayer, funny as that was.

Still, Spike had enough presence of mind to recognize that what he was about to do would likely speed up his own demise. Using whatever strength he had left to appear right as bloody rain before Angel would probably shave precious hours off his life. But he was willing to do it. He had to.

It was his last gift to Buffy.

Wesley's driving was erratic—either due to panic or for his admitted unfamiliarity with driving the 'American way', as he called it. Spike figured the former since the poor git looked seconds away from a heart attack.

"When we...get there," Spike said slowly. "Just...park by the curb. I'll only be five minutes."

“What of Oz and Cordelia?” Wesley demanded. “I thought they were looking after Angel until Buffy arrived. And—speaking of which—how can you be sure that Buffy herself will not be there?”

Spike couldn’t help but grin at that. “Have you...ever had to wait for her to get...ready, mate?”

“You believe she would worry with cosmetics, even in these circumstances?”

“Not consciously, ’course. But she...she thinks she has to tell Angel that... That I’m dying and she chose to save me instead of...of him.” Spike released a wheezing breath and wiped his forehead with the back of his wrist. “Not a conversation I’d...look forward to.”

There was a hefty silence at that. Wesley pursed his lips in thought.

“What?” Spike barked.

“Nothing.”

“Don’t get dainty on me now, Prissy.” He curled his hand around the handle attached to the passenger door as Wesley made another remarkably sharp turn. They were nearing their destination. All would be over soon. “What’s that...look for?”

“I just wonder.”

Another silence.

“About...?” Spike demanded, gesturing with his free appendage.

“Well...suppose you’re wrong...about what Buffy thinks.” Wesley tore his gaze from the road to toss him another glance. “Or, better yet, what she feels. You’re about to give away the cure to someone she left for you. Someone she has already seen die once. She knows what his death means to her...or will mean to her because she’s already suffered through it. Doesn’t it say something to you that, bearing in mind how harshly she took it the first time around, she still opted to save you instead?”

There was something rather freakish about the man when he got like this. Only—no—he never got like this. This was not Wesley. Not as anyone knew him. This was not the frightened little git who was too easily pushed around, too easily concerned about the repercussions to something that the others faced on a day-by-day basis. Spike

didn't know who this was, or why a watcher would try to talk a soulless demon as himself from doing the one selfless thing he could think to do for the woman he loved. For the first time since Faith's arrow sank into his chest, Spike began to wonder if life had turned into an allusion. If reality as he knew it was just another figment of his admittedly bollixed imagination.

"I'm not wrong," he argued.

"She dropped everything for you, you know. Everything. She stopped asking about Angel unless someone brought him up. The only reason she is going over there tonight is to satisfy her guilt in allowing him to die again when she knows she can cure him." Wesley hazarded another glance his direction. "I believe she knows what she's doing."

"Well, bully for you." Spike closed his eyes and mentally slapped himself. "I don't. She's worried...about me 'cause of...of us. And yeah, she cares about me. I know that. 'Course I do. But...it's Angel she loves. Not me. If it was me, she wouldn't've waited..." But he couldn't say that. "Whatever it is...it's worth it. She's worth it. Angel's her boy. Always has been. It's better for her to be angry with me...now and appreciate it later...than to hate me for stealing him away...for the rest of eternity. Besides, mate. I think I already told you...soulless wanker, here. You're...I'm not paying you to think!"

"You're not paying me at all."

"Well...and there's a reason for that."

Wesley frowned a little and cleared his throat. "Nevertheless, I—" Spike's eyes rolled inside his head. "Oh thank god."

"What?"

"We're here." He took in the sight of the old mansion as though it was the homecoming he had always dreamed of. The Watcher would be lucky if he didn't toss himself out of the vehicle as their speed began to subside.

"Are you going to need help with that?" Wesley man asked, indicating to the briefcase that was supplied with bag after bag of Slayer blood. It almost felt like a dirty transaction; the type he was always watching on the telly. So many unmarked bills in return for a death.



Spike shook his head. "No. But I'll need help back into the car."  
"Why?"

He paused meaningfully and clutched the briefcase to his chest. He closed his eyes and indulged several deep breaths before kicking the passenger door open. "Cause I'm using the rest of my strength to do this," he explained before hopping out of the car, near buoyant and versatile. It felt odd after even a few hours of mandatory immobility—and hurt like hell—but was strangely liberating in some fashion. His last hurrah. "After I'm back, my batteries'll be out."

And that was all he said. All he could say. Every second counted now.

His one shot at making everything right. For her.  
Before goodbye.



IN SUCH A STATE, Angel wondered when exactly he realized Cordelia and Oz had left. It wasn't as though he had been paying them much attention to begin with. But he felt it—the ripple through the house that told him someone else was here. A ripple to coincide with the scorching heat and the delirious waves of nausea. Somewhere in between, a change had been made.

It wasn't Buffy. He would know her anywhere.

No. It wasn't friends. Or ex-girlfriends. Or anyone he would expect.

It was family.

Angel blinked wearily as his unchanging view of the blurred ceiling was replaced with an equally blurry Spike. He didn't react; couldn't—but figured somewhere that the peroxide pest was here for a reason. Perhaps calling of a late truce—which seemed unlikely—to finish him off for good—more likely but he somehow doubted it—or to make effort in delivering Faith's blood. And in that, he allowed himself a sliver of hope. So much time had passed, it seemed. He'd figured Faith was gone, or dead, or her blood was unusable, and no one wanted to tell him.

The scent of blood hit the air then. Rich, bagged, slayer blood.

*He did it. I can't believe he did it.*

While he had been mostly conscious when Spike stormed out of the library earlier that evening, he had figured the better part of the performance to be exactly that—a performance. There was no love lost between them; never had been, and never would be. And, for the most part, Angel reckoned that was his shortcoming. He'd never treated Spike well, soul or no soul. He'd been condescending, mocking, and downright abusive. It amazed him that vampires with reputations such as theirs could act as they did and not find themselves at the wrong end of a stake. They behaved like children. Bickering, scorned children. And as the elder of the two, he had always taken it upon himself to make sure the baby in the family never stepped out of line. Never doubted his inferiority. The innate knowledge that whatever Spike had was only his because such pleased Angelus, and he could lose it any time.

It was different as Angel. He was different. While he'd still been dismissive and condescending, there had been something else at play. He recognized that now, and it filled him with shame.

He was jealous. Not of Buffy or the unusual understanding Spike had with the Scoobies—rather, he was jealous of Spike's humanity. Of his ability to be decent without depending on a conscience. It hadn't been like this the first time as he'd wandered around Romania, clawing at citizens, trying to force himself to feed. He had seen Spike just two years following the slaughter of his first slayer. No. There had been no jealousy then.

Jealousy hadn't come until he'd returned from Hell. Until after he heard accounts of Buffy's battle with him in all their wondrous detail. How Spike had come to her to save the world. How, were it not for him, Acathla would have sucked everything into a vat of endless torture and pain. How, though he'd ultimately bolted, Spike's presence had been pivotal in the winning of the day. Oh yes. Angel had been jealous. Fiercely so. If Spike could recognize the difference between good and evil, even to a minimal degree, how much more monstrous did that make Angelus?

Of course, he knew that answer already.

Buffy's involvement acted as the breaking point. The birthday ritual that went awry and the way she'd shut everyone out afterward. At first, it was as though she was missing a piece of herself. Then, as days had turned to weeks, her depression had become full-blown anger, and she'd taken it out on everyone. Anger for feeling the way she did. Anger at the person who had left her. Anger at anyone who couldn't help.

He had known then. Really, he had known since that first night, but despite the overwhelming evidence, he hadn't wanted to believe it. Had fooled himself into thinking he might have it wrong. That his mind had been playing tricks on him. That things hadn't been what they'd looked—or smelled—like.

And then Spike had returned and the truth had come out. The truth that everyone knew without knowing. Talked about without speaking.

Angel didn't like to consider how Buffy's attitude had completed a damn near perfect one-eighty since the night she'd told him the truth. How she smiled after she and Spike had gone public. How she laughed more. How she was more productive. She even spoke with Angel more now. As though it was okay now that the big bad secret was out in the open. As though the peroxide pest on her arm made everything just peachy.

But there was still so much hostility. So much. The same left there between him and Spike for over a century. So much that he'd never thought that when Spike had left earlier that night, it was to genuinely find a cure to save Angel's life.

And yet, here he was. Curling his hand under Angel's throat to elevate him. Persuading his mouth to the first bag of slayer-filled goodness.

His relief from the pain he suffered.

"Come on." Spike sounded very far away. "Open up."

For whatever reason, he couldn't get his jaw to cooperate.

"Time's a wasting, you big git."

Yes. Yes it was. That didn't make drinking any more or less feasible.

"Of, for crying..." Suddenly, the bag was gone. Gone—and opened. The scent intensified to the point where he didn't believe he could stand it anymore. Had no idea how Spike was making such easy game of it. But he was. He saw him clearly, now. And he looked irritated.

Then, the bag was coming back. Full speed.

"Open up for the airplane!"

For whatever reason, that prompted his mouth to oblige. And then he was drinking. Drinking, drinking...oh, and it was good. He downed three bags in less than a minute. Felt strength resurge with such intensity that it was a miracle his heart didn't start beating.

Angel blinked wearily, his own hand seeking out the next bag. He eyed Spike with skeptical gratitude before his fangs pierced the plastic.

His bleached relation wasn't making it any easier. The boy had a ridiculous look on his face. "That's my boy," he encouraged with such high falsetto Angel was afraid he might spit out a mouthful of blood for snorting.

But his pride wouldn't let him do that. "Shut up," Angel growled instead into the baggie.

Spike snickered, shaking his head. "What a way to show your gratitude, huh?"

"Mmmhpmhf."

"Don't talk with your mouth full, mate. Or did your mum never teach you manners?" He grinned and slapped his jean-clad thighs with exertion before forcing himself to his feet. "Well, delivery's here. Late, but here. And you're strong enough to guzzle the rest yourself. My work is done. I'm gone."

Angel discarded a drained bag and reached for another, sinking his fangs in before he thought to offer his thanks. And true, while it was totally uncharacteristic of him to even think to do so in the first place, he found he wanted to. After all, Spike had saved his life. Saved his life in a way he had never before fathomed.

It was with that sentiment that he said, "Sphff. Phfknk phew."

Spike stopped at the door but did not turn, as though considering his response. He sighed after a minute and nodded. "Don't mention it."

Then he was through the door. And gone. But Angel didn't mind. Solitude was infinitely better.

"Ahemph," he said decisively to himself as he tossed an emptied bag to the side and reached for another.

Much better.



SPIKE DIDN'T MAKE it to the car.

He didn't even make it to the street curb. He fell to the ground just yards outside the mansion's entrance, his entire body shutting down. His once firm muscles were pliant and sore. The burning in his gut extending to the length of his body and the waves of nausea hit him with full force. Over and over. One right after the other.

*I'm not gonna make it.*

"Come on." Someone was tugging at his shoulders.

Wesley. He had nearly forgotten about Wesley.

"Come on, Spike...dear me, you're heavy. Where do you hide all that—never mind. I must get you back."

Spike forced his eyes open, but everything was a blur. And the ground looked very far away. "Back..."

"Yes. Back to your house. Remember? I must get you home."

"Home," he repeated before everything went dark.

Home. Home was where he belonged. Home.

*Buffy.*



"BUFFY."

They stood opposite each other for a long minute. Buffy's eyes wide with surprise, her heart pounding.

Of all the scenarios she had envisioned, this was not one of them.

"Angel?" She took a deep breath. "You're...you're okay."

He nodded, frowning. "Yeah. It worked pretty fast. I still feel a little dizzy, but that will go away on its own. Really, by the time I was to the third bag, I—"

That was it. That second. That was when the world stopped.

"The third...what?"

Angel's frown deepened. "Bag. You weren't here with him? I didn't feel you near, but I thought you would be." There was a long pause. "Well, either way, I appreciate you checking up on me. Or...did Giles find something? Spike didn't mention...Buffy?"

"No."

Such a small word.

"Buffy?"

"No!"

She didn't wait to see Angel's reaction; didn't wait to analyze the lost look on his face. Didn't wait for anything. At her heel, she turned and ran. Ran hard. Ran as fast she could remember running. Put shame to the old adage that people ran with Hell at their heels. She had more than Hell chasing her. She had Heaven, too.

But not for long.

## CATCH ME AS I FALL

“YOU STUPID, tweed-wearing, two-faced, son of a bitch!” Buffy screamed as she exploded into Spike’s home. “I ought to rip your throat out.”

Wesley, who was seated on the couch, blinked at her owlily before bringing up his hands. “Buffy! I—”

“How could you do that?” She braced herself over the couch and shoved with all her strength, sending it crashing against the wall about six feet behind it. “How could you? I told you! I told you what—”

“Spike said—”

“Spike is sick, Wesley. Or didn’t you notice?”

“He insisted on—”

“Look at me. Look at my face. Does it look like I’m interested in knowing what he insisted on?” By the look on *his* face, she could only imagine what hers looked like, and it wasn’t pretty. “What I’d like to know is how in god’s name you thought that I’d ever let you get away with this. How you thought I wouldn’t find out. ‘Cause I gotta tell you, Wes...that took real balls. You get them on loan or something?”

“I—”

“Shut up. Get out. Shut up and get out. I can’t look at you

anymore.” Buffy sighed and turned toward the bedroom, the raw pain that had chased her out of the mansion finally catching up with her. When she looked back, Wesley was still there, looking at her dumbfounded. And that was it. The final thread snapped. “I mean it!” she screamed. “Get out! OUT!”

Wesley jerked, nodded, and broke in a fast run for the door.

A slam rang through the air, and then they were alone. Buffy was still for a long minute, calming herself before looking to the bedroom again.

Xander had told her the poison had twenty-four hours of damage before it killed its victims. She had held onto that, though still half-expecting Spike to be dead by the time she arrived.

But he wasn’t. He wasn’t, and she could save him.

She *had* to save him.

With a deep breath, she clenched her fists and approached. The door was slightly ajar. Of course he had been expecting her. He had known that she would come here directly after seeing that Angel had been cured. After seeing that he had taken the decision upon himself.

Spike didn’t believe her. Didn’t believe that she loved him. And it was all her fault. Of course he didn’t believe her—of course he believed that she’d only said it to get him to drink. Of course all of that was true.

But it hurt. God, it hurt. And she didn’t know who to be angrier with. Him for not believing her or herself for giving him reason.

It was strange, the stupid little things that people did or didn’t do because they thought they had all the time in the world. Now, no more than two hours after she’d finally said the words, she had absolutely no idea what had taken her so long. There had been nothing before this. Nothing before loving Spike. He had given her everything. He made her feel *everything*. When she wanted to argue philosophy, he was her sparring partner. When she’d had a bad day at school, he was her masseuse. When she wanted to gripe, he was her shoulder. They were equals in everything they did. They entertained each other with inane conversation, appreciated the same movies, experienced the same irritation if patrol went too slow, and on those



nights, they enjoyed trying to take each other out. And there was no pressure for conversation. No pressure for anything. They had enjoyed lively discussions and companionable silences. They fought and fucked and made love with more passion than she thought it possible to experience.

He had given her so much without asking anything for himself.

And tonight, he had done something she hadn't even thought him capable of. He had sacrificed his life, at least in his way of thinking, to save her old lover. He had placed his own belief of her wishes above himself. Beyond whatever they had, simply because she hadn't given back to him.

Something had to be done.

Buffy drew in another deep breath and pushed the door open, allowing a mini river of light to draw across the artless carpet. Spike was lying on his back on the bed, eyes closed. The room was heavy with silence except the deep gasps sharpened with pain that reverberated through his chest. His eyes were clenched tight with pain, and he was grasping the mattress as though to anchor himself to an earthly plane.

*Oh god.*

"Spike."

He jerked at the sound of her voice, blinking hard. It took him a few seconds to find her, but he smiled when he did. "Buffy," he said, his voice burdened and hoarse. "I...I held on...for you. Had to..."

She was crying before she realized it, her chest breaking. *No, no.*

"You're here," he continued. "So glad. Need you, baby. Need you with me."

"I'm here," she agreed, tugging at the collar of her shirt. Spike was a man of many things, but he was never weak. Never weak. It broke her to see him like this. "I'm here. I'm here and I'm not leaving you." She was at his bedside the next minute, giving him a watery smile as she cupped his cheek. "I have what you need. You're gonna be fine."

A long minute passed, his gaze burning hers.

"No."

Buffy shook her head, prepared. "You have to. You're not leaving me."

"I'm...not..." His face clouded with pain as he moved to sit up, his arms trembling with effort until she neared and helped him. The tremors intensified when she didn't pull back. "I...told you, sweetheart. Won't...won't drink. Not from you."

A choked sob rumbled from her lips. "Why?" she demanded. "Why won't you? You won't hurt me. You won't. Faith's fine. She's recuperating and everything. She—"

"Faith's. Not. You," he replied, eyes burning hers. "Take chances... with slayers...who aren't you. Who aren't my Buffy. Not with you, love. Besides..." His gaze fell to her throat. "Couldn't...demon...couldn't stop. I'd hurt you...I'd..."

"You wouldn't." She grasped his hand and held it to her chest. "I know you, Spike. You wouldn't hurt me. You would never hurt me. Not like that." When his expression refused to soften, she released another sob and shook her head. "But this... *this* is gonna kill me."

A humorless chuckle sounded through the air. "Me, too."

"Don't you dare crack jokes, you son of a bitch!" She was at her feet the next minute. "You're...they do this to me, Spike. They do. Not you. Not anymore. You did once, but you came back and you promised me... You promised me you'd be here. That the only way you'd leave is if I left, too."

He chuckled again. "Quite a talker, wasn't I?"

She slammed her fists slammed against the mattress, fresh tears raining down her face. "Dammit! You can't do this to me! This is what they do. But not you. Not you."

"Do...?"

"Leave me. Everyone I love leaves me...in one way or another. You can't do it, too. Not when I can save you." Buffy collapsed to her knees beside his bed, tilting her head so that her jugular was inches from his lips. "Drink. Me."

There was a heated pause. His eyes absorbed her. Revved her to life. Made her...just made her.

"No."

She had never hurt like this before. Hadn't known it was possible. "You can't do this to me. You can't. It's not fair. You can't make me fall in love with you and leave me. You can't."

He caught her eyes again, his own staunch in their resolution. "You don't love me."

Another sob strangled her throat. "How can you say that?"

"Cause...if you did...you know it'd kill me...if anything happened to you. If you did..." He ran a long finger down her throat. "You'd never ask me to do this. Not with what it risks. I *kill* slayers, you hear me? I don't know...how to not. And I'd never forgive myself...if something happened to you."

"Stuff happens to me, Spike. Every day."

"I don't hurt you, Buffy. Not anymore."

She looked at him incredulously. "You don't think this hurts? You don't think I feel this...you...with everything I...well, fuck you." She shook her head, sobbing again, trying to ground herself with all the success of a leaf in a hurricane. "What can I do? What can I do to convince you that it's real? That I love you? I'll do anything. Please."

There was a long minute. He watched her, sliding his hand into hers again. Then, slowly, he lifted her skin to his lips and caressed. Every inch of her tingled at the contact, but she knew what was coming.

"Let me go," he whispered. "And live."

"I can't do that."

"Would do anything for love, but you won't do that." Spike laughed again like any of this was funny. "But you gotta. And I gotta rest."

"No! You can't—"

"Tired, pet. Very tired. Waited ...for you. Rest now." He smiled at her once more. "Love you, Buffy. So much. Rest."

"No! Spike, you—"

But it was too late. He closed his eyes, tightening his hand around hers. Holding her there. Anchoring her to him.

And he rested.



SPIKE HAD BEEN asleep for thirty-seven minutes. And every second of those thirty-seven minutes, she died just a little more.

It was a battle of wills with them. Always had been. Buffy was so accustomed to getting her way that it hadn't really occurred to her, him saying no. She could prod and push him all he liked, but the vampire at her side was just as stubborn as she was. This was something entirely different.

It wasn't as though she didn't know why he was worried. She knew the risks. Hell, she had been reciting them to herself since the minute Faith's arrow had pierced his skin. She had known it would come down to this on some level. Her offering. Her blood being the thing that saved him.

But not him saying no.

Thirty-eight minutes.

Had she been honest with him from the start, it wouldn't have come to this. She wouldn't be lying in his bed, a bed where they'd made love more times than she could count. Where just a few nights ago something profound had shifted between them. She wouldn't be crying tears that wouldn't stop. She wouldn't be breaking all over. She wouldn't be watching him die.

Thirty-nine minutes.

The few breaths he took were reassuring. They had stopped her from making a scene when he drifted off, thinking that his exertion had cut down his remaining time and that she had lost him forever. He wheezed into the air as though his lungs were fighting for life. She wondered if he breathed so much because of his nicotine habit, accustomed to inhaling and exhaling, so much so that for his body it was natural.

Cigarettes made Spike seem more alive. There's a thing that would floor the anti-tobacco lobby.

God, it wasn't supposed to be this way. Vampires weren't supposed to die long deaths. That was what was so great about them. Stake through the heart, decapitation, fire, sunlight. They had the easy life.

No rules. No regulations. As much unprotected sex as they wanted. They were creatures of the night—sure—but so was she. Inherently. The Slayer was nocturnal because her prey was nocturnal. It was as simple as that. Lying by the man she loved, listening to him suffer, watching his strength abandon him, knowing he was going to die had not been in the brochure.

She couldn't do this. She wouldn't. She was Buffy Anne Summers, and she wouldn't stand for it. Not when the answer was so simple.

Not when she could save him.

Forty minutes.

She wouldn't wait any longer. Something had to be done and it had to be done now.

Buffy pushed herself to her feet slowly, steeled herself, and left the bedroom.

A year ago, she had been preparing to battle Angelus. She and Spike were nearing the anniversary of their unlikely truce. The move that made her being here with him now feasible at all. She remembered well how her heart had failed her as she shoved the sword through her first love's gut. How it felt like the world had turned its back on her and nothing would ever be right again. How the only way to face herself was to run away from everything that made her Buffy. Her friends, her Watcher, her mother, and her duty. Most importantly, her duty. It had torn her in two. She had never thought anything would be right again.

The pain she felt now took a peek at that pain and laughed. Laughed hard, cold, and long. *You call THAT pain, little girl?* it jeered.

She drew in a sharp breath as she stepped into the bathroom that was stocked full with her unmentionables. Spike insisted on keeping things for her at his place at all times. Made it easier for when she needed something, he'd said. Made it so she didn't have to go all the way home to get them.

She had always wanted a boyfriend who would give her a drawer. With Spike, she practically got the whole damn house.

The mirror above the sink opened into a cabinet full of her girly

things. Mydol, aspirin, tampons, perfume, hand lotion, bath gel, and a whole bag of unused razors.

Buffy bit her lip and grabbed one of the razors. Then, as if in a trance, she turned and walked back to the bedroom. There, she divested of her clothing—it seemed weird being in Spike's bed, wearing stuff anyway. Once everything was on the floor, she fisted the razor and climbed back into bed.

She took a long look at her sleeping beauty before sliding the protective covering from the blade's teeth.

This was it. She drew in a deep breath and pressed it into her palm. Pressed until it hurt. Pressed until blood oozed around the broken skin and dribbled down her wrist. And yet, she dug deeper. Dug until she was bleeding in earnest. Dug until she was certain it wouldn't dry up on her in seconds.

Then she shimmied up to Spike's back and waved her reddened palm before his nose. He murmured and shifted, but did not awaken. Buffy pursed her lips but did not dishearten. She dabbed a little directly under his nostrils, then moved until the wound was directly in front of his waiting mouth.

Forty-six minutes.

The first sweep of his tongue sent a shiver down her spine, and her heart leaped fully within her chest. A whimper rumbled through his throat and he took another taste before she was done reacting to the first. And that was it. She had him. His hand closed around her wrist, holding her to him. He licked and sucked and vamped at some point, tugging her closer. As close as he could get her without flipping her completely over his body.

But it wasn't enough. Not yet.

"Spike..."

He had buried his face in her palm. He wasn't answering her anytime soon.

"Spike."

He nibbled a bit at her flesh—not biting, but coming dangerously close. She felt her thumb press against an elongated fang and her heart doubled over.

Then she tugged her hand away, knowing that his nose would instinctively follow the scent of blood. Knowing that he could do nothing but what his body demanded.

It was with that knowledge that she pressed her bloodied hand to her throat. Then her arms were around him, pulling him on top of her as she encouraged his head to where she needed him most of all. Her fingernails ran lightly down his biceps, whispering little thoughts of wordless support. She felt butterflies fluttering about in her abdomen as he lapped at the mess she'd made. Felt her entire body respond when something hard pressed against her stomach. That she hadn't been expecting, but god, did she welcome it.

Spike, still sleeping, raised his head to nuzzle her hair and murmur, "Buffy," into her ear. One of his hands had broken free and cupped her sex. She nearly buckled when she felt him teasing her clit, thankful that she didn't have to support her own weight. God, he touched her so expertly that she thought for a moment that he was awake.

But no. Looking at him, he was definitely not awake. Not completely. Not enough to know what he was doing.

Spike dipped his head again, growling into her skin. She felt the barest hint of his fangs against her throat. She tightened her grip on him and nodded.

"I love you," she whispered. "It's okay. I want this. I love you."

And that was it. A shiver ran through him, his fangs pricked her, then slid all the way home. His fingers did too, slipping inside her pussy as his thumb found her clit. Buffy gasped, rolling her hips under him, and nearly sobbing the feel of it. And he was there, at her throat, drinking. Murmuring into her skin and drinking. Touching her, sending ripples of pleasure throughout her body as he took what his own needed. She had thought he would tear at her throat once he took a taste. He didn't. As though he knew what was happening and knew to be gentle. As though this had been the plan all along.

Tiny waves of pleasure coursed over her skin, and she arched herself to ground into his hardened, cotton-clad cock. He murmured into her bloodied flesh at that, his other hand coming up to gently

cup her face. He rubbed himself against her as he stroked the locks of her hair, brushing sweaty strands from her eyes. His mouth left her for a moment, then was on her again. Drinking her fully as he stroked her from the inside. Pushing her closer and closer to the edge.

Buffy sobbed softly and held him to her. The room was beginning to spin and she was more than a little lightheaded, but she honestly didn't know if it was the blood or what he was doing to her. All she knew was that it was working. So much that she didn't care when the world began to slip away. So much that didn't register when he snapped to his senses. So much that even the orgasm that slammed her out of their world and into the next couldn't force her back to consciousness.

"Buffy? Buffy! Fuck, talk to me, baby. Say something. Please! Buffy!"

Her blurred vision took him in. He was sitting up. Looking at her. Holding her. Sobbing.

But he was fine. He was fine. It had worked.

"Buffy!"

That was the last thing she heard before the world tumbled away.



## IF IT EASES ALL HER PAIN

A BLOKE COULD THINK some bloody strange things while panicking out of his mind.

In all likelihood, only a couple minutes had passed since he'd come back to himself. Since he realized that the nectar flooding his mouth was not the product of a dream. It was like seeing for the first time. Knowing that the body in his arms was his girl. That the twin puncture marks covering her healing scar belonged to his fangs. Knowing that every stupid sodding decision he'd made had led to this.

The minute that Buffy had gone limp in his arms, the boundary separating realities ceased to exist. All he knew for certain was the woman he loved was hurt. The woman he loved was dying. And it was all his fault.

He didn't know what to do. So he called Angel.

The phone rang forever, it seemed. And when the grand ponce finally picked up, he sounded far too carefree for Spike's liking.

"Hello?"

"Buffy's hurt," Spike blurted ineloquently. "What should I do?"

The words were such a bloody steppingstone. He didn't know if

the wanker was more surprised at the announcement or the fact that Spike had called him.

"What happened?" Angel asked urgently.

"Would you like to chat about it or actually help? What should I do?"

"Get her to the hospital. I'm on my—"

Spike dropped the phone. The hospital. Of course! Why hadn't he thought of that?

He knew the answer to that one without needing to dwell. Because he'd realized that Buffy was hurt, all logic had flown out the window.

In a fury, he ripped the sheets from the bed and wrapped her nude, bleeding body up in a protective bundle. He nearly couldn't see for the ocean flowing down his face. And then he was gone—not stopping to lock the front door. Hell, he doubted he even closed it. He was out and in the car, pulling her into his side as he tore out of the drive.

"Stay with me," he pleaded into her hair. His arm was around her middle, his other hand on the wheel. Tears tracked his cheeks, but he didn't care. He just had to get her safe. "God, sweetheart, you gotta stay with me."

Her heart was still beating; he clung to that hope. Her heart was beating and she was breathing ever-so-slightly. But time was running out. Every pound was like a clock chime, ticking them down to a perpetual nothingness.

Spike burst into the hospital like all Hell was following him. A room full of busybodies, all preoccupied in matters far too unimportant. Logic scrambled once more for control and told him quite clearly that he needed to find an orderly before he ran up and demanded help from a random patient.

Thank fuck for logic.

Spike broke into a run at the first person he saw wearing a nametag. "She needs help!" he all but screamed. "Someone help her! Someone!"

All was a blur. The nurse turned her full attention to him,

approached with a cool calm that only served to egg his nerves all the more.

“What happened?”

What happened? What happened?

Spike shook his head, his face a mess of tears. “Just help her! Please!” The next thing he knew, a bed had been wheeled to his disposal, and he was told that he had to put her down. God, the last thing he wanted to do was let go of her. What if this was the last time he got to hold her? What if? What *if*?

But he knew he had to. She would die unless he gave her up.

“Sir, we need you to stay calm,” the nurse told him, stepping to accommodate the doctor as he took stride alongside her. “We’re going to take care of her, all right?”

Yes, all right. As long as she lived, they could do what they liked. Spike focused on the sight of his Slayer as they wheeled her away to the emergency room. All rationality failed.

*God, please.*

“You found her?”

He blinked and realized the doctor was addressing him. “I was... she...she did it for me.”

The nurse and the doctor exchanged glances.

“Sir, we’re going to do everything we can for your friend,” the nurse was telling him the next minute. “But we need to know a few things first. Could you help us, please?”

Spike let out a quivering breath and fought his mind back on track. His gaze landed on the doctor once more.

“You found her?” came the question again.

*Found her. Found her under me, her hands around me. Found my fangs in her throat. Felt her come around my fingers. Felt her drift away from me. Yeah. I found her.*

*Then I killed her.*

That was all he could take. Spike fell to his knees in tears that were second away from becoming loud, throaty sobs. The questions kept coming—questions he couldn’t answer because he’d been out of his mind because he didn’t know because this was something that

didn't have human answers. Questions that, in the mind, meant rot because they needed to *fucking help her*.

"Buffy?" he heard distantly. "Where is she?"

The voice broke through the fog. Spike blinked and glanced up to see Angel hovering over him.

"You know the victim?" the doctor was asking the next minute.

"Yes. She's my... She's a friend."

Spike felt a hand clamp on his shoulder. A big, Angel-like hand. Wait. Since when did Angel put hands on his shoulder? This was far too confusing for his mind to handle.

"This is her boyfriend," Angel continued. "I believe he found her. He called me just ten minutes ago to let me know she was hurt."

The doctor and the nurse exchanged another look. Like they doubted Spike could have tied his own shoelaces for the way he was carrying on, much less make a simple phone call.

"We need to know if she was conscious when he found her."

Angel glanced down again. Spike on his knees. Weary. Tears that couldn't stop. And the scent of fresh blood hovering all around him. Fresh slayer blood. He saw it when Angel put the pieces together.

"She was. I believe she was." A pause. "Spike? Was Buffy conscious?"

Why did that question make sense now that the git was there?

"Y-yes," he answered hoarsely.

"Okay." The doctor again. Muttering away things he didn't understand. "I need a type, I need cross-match. Get her on two lines of Wringer's lactate, and watch for hyper-bulimic shock."

The nurse was jotting something down, and Angel was helping Spike to his feet.

"The doctor needs to ask you some questions," he said with amazing calm. "Okay?"

Spike traded a long, knowing glance with his elder and nodded, reining his emotions in.

"What happened?"

"I..." Deep breath. "She was... She lost blood. Lots. Think something... I dunno."

"You told me something bit her," Angel said quietly.

Spike started again, meeting Angel's eyes again with all sorts of understanding. And, distantly, he felt himself nod.

"Yeah. She was bit."

*Me. I did it. It's me. Kill me now. Someone please kill me now.*

If he was looking for volunteers, Angel seemed ripe to step up.

"I need a rabies shot," the physician said. "Does your friend have any allergies?"

Spike shook his head. "No." And something snapped. Why were they out here talking about it? Buffy was in there, and she needed help. She needed help now. No more questions. "God, just go. Now! Save her! I need...I—"

The doctor nodded to the nurse, who was gone the next minute. His next question was aimed at Angel.

"Are you staying?"

"Yes."

"Your friend needs help. You got her here quickly, so the odds are in our favor." He eyed Spike again wearily. "Do you need something to calm your nerves?"

Angel answered for him, laughing dryly as he closed a hand around Spike's arm again to steer him away. "Trust me," he noted, "won't help. We're going to the waiting room. Please keep us posted."

There was a final nod from the physician, and that was all.

"No. No!" Spike tore his arm away and broke into a run toward the ER. "I'm staying with her. I—"

"It shouldn't take long," Angel said shortly.

"She needs me. I—"

"After tonight, Spike, the last thing she needs is you."

That stopped him in his tracks. "So you do know," he said, not needing an answer. He didn't even know why he'd asked.

"What do you think?" Angel snapped. "I can't believe you. The girl gives you everything, and you...what? Decide that you want that much more? I—"

"I was... She thought she was saving me." Spike drew in a breath and turned back around. "She *was* saving me."

That was it. Angel blinked. "What?"

Spike didn't realize he was trembling until Angel's hand clamped down on his shoulder again. It wasn't out of comfort—he wouldn't fool himself—but there was something comforting about it. About not being alone in this. "Buffy... She... When I found Faith..."

"Faith poisoned you," Angel surmised in a flat voice. "Faith poisoned you, and you drank from Buffy."

Spike's defenses flared at that. "I didn't mean to! Bloody hell, I told her to let me die. Told her it was too risky. That's why I brought you your cure, mate. She was—"

"What? *That's* why you brought me my cure?" If possible, Angel had paled even further. He looked truly dead under the lights. "She was going to... Give Faith's blood to you?"

"She wanted me to drink from her at the start," Spike continued. "Drink from her so Faith could cure you. Told her I wouldn't. It's too dangerous. So she told me to drink Faith's. Couldn't do that, either. Tried to convince her... Didn't work, though. Didn't work."

There was a moment where nothing was said. Where they were simply looking at each other, as though anywhere else in time. It didn't last long. "All evidence to the contrary," Angel said slowly, "why would you try to convince her... Why would she..."

"Didn't mean anything," Spike said. "Slayer just...wasn't thinking."

"What?"

"She loves you still, you great big pillock," he all but growled. "In ways she'll never love me. That eats me away inside. She fancies me, yeah, and cares, but if she let you die because of me, she'd eventually realize what a bloody mistake she'd made. Better off dying the bloke who saved the git she loves than sticking around only to have her hate me."

"She was really going to let me die?"

Spike rolled his eyes. "Well Christ, you aren't dead, are you? Don't get your knickers in a bunch. Like I said, the daft girl didn't know what she was doing. Thinking about the short-term, not the end-

game. So yeah, she was ready to let you snuff it now. She'd have the rest of her life to regret it."

A numb look faded over Angel's face, as though he had finally realized something that he had known for a long time, but never thought possible.

"I've lost her."

Spike frowned at him.

"I guess I never really... I've lost her..." Angel shook his head, closing his eyes. "To you. It's not enough that I've lost Buffy, but I had to lose her to you."

"No, you haven't, mate. Haven't you been listening?"

"Yes, you idiot. Have you?" Angel snapped. "And if you knew Buffy half as well as you think you do—"

"I know her plenty," Spike snarled. "More than you ever will."

"Then you'd know she wouldn't make a decision like that unless she loves you." He made a face and tore his gaze away. "She loves you. Loves you enough to do something incredibly stupid, like offer you her blood when she knew your demon was beyond desperation and would come close to killing her, if she was lucky enough not to push you completely over the edge." A snicker rang through the air. "I always knew you were stupid, boy, but I didn't peg you for dense, as well."

Spike stared at him for long, empty minutes. He was unsure if he wanted to tear the git's head off his shoulders or give him a hug. Then he decided Angel was barking, unable to grasp that, yes, Buffy had wanted to save her lover first because she hadn't thought it through.

And yet, despite all his condescension, Angel had given him a smidgeon of hope. Hope that Buffy's confession earlier that evening had been heartfelt. Hope that she could feel for him any of what he felt for her. Hope that her gift to him—her stupid, awe-inspiring, wonderful gift—had been more than her being bloody stubborn. That sharing her blood had meant to her what it had always meant to him.

"I think you should leave," Spike said.

"What?"

"Buffy's gonna wake up, mate," he continued. Of that, he had to be certain. There could be no other truth. Buffy *would* wake up. "And when she does, I wanna be the first face she sees."

Angel paused for a long moment. "You don't deserve that."

"Not from her, maybe. But from you? Just saved your life, mate. Show a little respect."

A heavy beat passed between them.

"Right," Angel said. "Fine. I'll head to the library to tell Giles and the others what's happened. I'm sure they'll want to know."

If Angel thought bringing the Scoobies into this was going to strike fear into his long unbeating heart, he was sorely mistaken. Buffy's friends couldn't hurt him any more than he'd hurt himself.

Hell, Angel underestimated a lot of things. He didn't know that Willow liked him, didn't know that Giles had come close to treating him with near-respect. Closer than he had thought to come before. He also didn't know that Wesley had been with him, that he knew what Spike's intentions had been.

"It's settled then." Spike nodded and felt a small rush when Angel blinked in surprise. The wanker wasn't used to others exhibiting authority when he was around. "You go get the Scoobs and I'll stay here with Buffy."

They stared at each other for a minute longer, willing the other to break. Then Angel nodded and was gone before any other words could be exchanged.

"Good," Spike murmured, wishing for a cigarette but not willing to chance being tossed out of the hospital because of it. "Don't remember inviting the wanker, anyway."

Though he did, and that thought did not rest well with him. Now that all was said and done. Now that he had control of his emotions. Now that he trusted himself not to break.

*Flash. Buffy, lying motionless in his bed, her perfect skin punctured with his teeth. Her blood on his sheets. Blood that he put there.*

*Oh god.*

His vision blurred again before he could prevent it.

God. She had to be all right.



## EYES OF CHINA BLUE

THEY TOLD him that her improvement was remarkable. They told him that they had never seen anything like it. They told him that she was a certified miracle. They told him everything was going to be all right. That she was one lucky, lucky girl, and that she would be just fine.

And Spike heard none of it. What little he did pick up was of minimal comfort, for despite the glowing report of success, she was still unconscious.

Spike had absolutely no grasp on how much time had passed. He knew it couldn't have been too long since the Scooby brigade had not yet arrived.

He wasn't watching for them, though. He didn't care.

There was nothing he could do but sit by Buffy's bedside and wait. His chin rested against his wrist at the bed so that he could study her face. His other hand was curled in hers.

He'd promised her. And he'd failed. His insides ached. She'd said that she loved him. They had shared so much, and with every day, he had waited. Waited. Waited. Fucking waited. And when she'd finally told him, he'd thrown it back in her face.

But she'd saved him anyway.

The white of the room was bloody blinding. Hospitals were like that, he supposed. Bright with false light. Spike licked his lips and kissed Buffy's forehead, his eyes falling shut. "You gotta wake up for me, sweetheart," he whispered softly. "Please, baby. It's time now." There was nothing. He hadn't been expecting anything, but it felt like a failure all the same. "I can't do this without you, love. Wake up for me."

He waited again, racking his memory for something that she might hear. She liked it when he sang to her—something she'd discovered one night after he'd had one too many glasses of whiskey. Spike inhaled and glanced at the door.

Couldn't bloody hurt, could it?

*"And I love you so," he sang softly. "And people ask me how. How I've lived till now. I tell them I don't know." A poignant smile crossed his lips. "I guess they understand how lonely life has been. But life began again...the day you took my hand."*

Oh, and how he remembered that day. Standing in the foyer of Angel's mansion. holding his hand out to her, waiting. And she'd threaded her fingers through his and life had never been the same.

*"And yes, I know how lonely life can be. The shadows follow me, and the night won't set me free." His eyes fogged with tears. "But I don't let the evening bring me down...now that you're around me."*

He paused, swallowed.

*"And you love me, too," he whispered, eyes falling shut. "Your thoughts are just for me. You set my spirit free. I'm happy that you do. The book of life is brief, and once a page is read, all but love is dead. That is my belief." A long, trembling sigh pressed through his lips. "And yes I know how loveless life can be. The shadows follow me and the night won't set me free." Spike willed his eyes open again, tightening his hand around hers. She didn't look much changed, but he wanted to believe he was helping. Reaching her wherever she was, telling her what he should have yesterday. "But I don't let the evening bring me down, now that you're around me." He pressed a kiss to the back of her hand. "And I love you so. People ask me how. How I've lived till now. I tell them I don't know."*

The air went still again, feeling heavier than before. Still, she did not move.

"Spike?"

He started, jerking his head toward the door. "Willow," he said. "Lo, pidge."

She offered a halfhearted grin. "Hey. How goes?"

"Same old, same old." He glanced down, bracing himself. "The others here?"

"Yeah. In the hall." She stuffed her hands in her pockets and moved forward. "Angel said that you..." Her eyes drifted to the unconscious blonde and down again. "Anyway, Giles asked me to come in here and get you. We have stuff to talk about...and stuff."

Spike snickered appreciatively. Stuff. Yes. He had seen this coming.

He only wondered which version of *you murderous wanker* he could expect first.

"Right," he said. "But only for a minute. When Buffy wakes up, I'm the first one she sees, got it?"

Willow nodded her agreement. Willow was the one friend of Buffy's who understood. After all, she loved a monster as well.

"How is she?" Giles demanded the second he stepped into view. And the whole merry lot was there. The Watcher, the ex-boyfriend, the wolf, and the boy.

"Bloody fantastic, from what the meds tell me," Spike retorted. "It's a wonder she's not running laps."

"Yeah," Xander agreed. "Vampiric high. And we all stand aside in astonishment."

Spike snickered and shifted his gaze to Angel. "You told. Can't say I didn't expect it, but I'm calling you a tattletale all the bloody same."

"They deserved to know what happened," Angel said.

Yeah. I'm sure that conversation was well-rounded and fair from all angles," he replied. "None of you have a bloody idea what happened tonight, so don't go preaching about something you can't possibly understand."

"Trust me, Spike," Giles retorted coolly. "My imagination is not as limited as you believe."

"Yeah. I'm just surprised you had the guts to stick around as long as you did," Xander snapped. "After all, shouldn't you be out hunting your fourth? Hey! Here's an idea—attack Faith while she's out of the game. You can be the only vampire in history to wipe out two slayers in twenty-four hours."

Spike glared at him but managed to hold his tongue. As much as it smarted his pride, he deserved whatever they gave him.

"What happened to Wesley?" Willow asked, drawing his attention back to her. "I thought he was watching you."

"I dunno where he went," Spike replied. "He wasn't there when I... I didn't see him."

"Sure you didn't inadvertently eat him on your way out?" Xander asked. "You know? Wash down a little slayer with watcher blood?"

Oz offered a non-committal shrug. "Accidents happen."

Holding his tongue apparently was an easier said than done thing. Spike rolled his eyes. "And I had the nerve to think the lot of you would overreact."

"Overreact?" Xander yelled, practically vibrating with energy. "Buffy trusted you. She wanted us to trust you. And here's the funny part—we did! We let you into our lives and went along with it. And the first thing you do when the chips are down and things look grim is feed off the girl who loves you to save your own ass!" He shook his head. "I would stake you right now, but I wouldn't want to deny her that pleasure."

"Stop it!" Willow screamed. "Just stop it, Xan, you don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, I think I can read patient charts, Will. Can you?"

"I am so bloody tired of being on the outs with you people." Spike released an emphatic sigh and shook his head. "Look, I'm going back in there to wait with my lady, all right? You all can piss off."

"No," Giles said softly. "You better go. We'll watch over her."

Spike stopped and glared at him. "Like. Hell."

"The sun will be up soon."

"Then thank god they invented indoor hospitals. You're off your rocker if you think I'm leaving her."

"What?" Xander asked. "This your perverse way of paying pilgrimage to her?"

Everyone stopped and stared at him.

Giles cocked an eyebrow. "Errr, pilgrimage?"

"It's a new age trade, consisting of monetary compensation through the sale of fifteenth-century separatists," Oz offered without batting an eye. "Very favorable if you know the right people."

Willow grinned and pecked the wolf's cheek, then turned to Giles. "Look, I know tempers are running high, but I also know that Buffy wants him here." She snapped her gaze to Xander. "She wants him here. With how she was talking before she went over to Angel's and..." A frown stole her fire, her brow furrowing. "How exactly did that happen again? The last I knew, Spike was supposed to drink Faith's blood and Angel would die. That's sort've what we..." She caught herself three seconds too late, looking worriedly to the older vampire. "Whups."

All eyes fell on Angel, and he shuffled uncomfortably.

"Well," Willow added belatedly. "It's not like she *wanted* him to die. She just...well..."

"Spike came by with Faith's blood," Oz told her. "Cordelia and I didn't know he was sick. Which raises an interesting question..." He turned to Spike. "If you were poisoned, then—"

"It wasn't easy," Spike replied. "Had to make like I wasn't. I told Wes I'd rip him apart if he didn't get me over to the mansion. He was too daft and running scared to know better. I pulled all I had together and shoved it down dear ole pappy's throat." He leveled a glare at Angel. "Was gonna let him live and everything."

"It's funny how these details didn't make it into the explanation we were given earlier," Giles muttered, turning to give Angel a glare of his own.

Angel had the bloody gall to shrug. "I didn't think it was important. Buffy's hurt—are you really asking me for specifics on things that happened three hours ago?"

"Would help," Giles said.

"And that would explain why Buffy wanted Spike to drink from her," Willow said.

Spike's throat tightened. As much as he liked this turn of events, nothing would change the fact that his fangs had landed the woman he loved in the hospital, fighting for her life. "Don't try to help me, Red. I nearly killed her."

"But you didn't."

He waved a dismissive hand. "Technicalities." A long beat settled through the hall. "Look...there are things going on, right? Lemme stay with the Slayer. I swear on whatever it is you lot need me to swear on, I won't let anything happen to her. Leave Will if it makes you feel better, but Buffy'll want to get to business when she wakes up, and she'll be brassed if everyone's unprepared."

"As much as I hate to admit it," Giles said finally. "Spike raises a good point."

"I do? Erm...I do."

Xander arched an eyebrow. "Spike makes points?"

Angel rolled his eyes. "Oh, stop already. With as much as I am already not Spike's number one fan, you're really beginning to bug me."

Spike snickered. "Now you've gone and done it. Daddy's very angry."

"Oh yeah," Harris said, "really making with the points. We're all very impressed."

And for whatever reason, that sent Angel over the bloody edge. His eyes flashed yellow and a growl tore at his throat. "What, Xander?" he spat. "Did you stop to think that if Spike wanted her dead, he would've killed her when he had the chance? She gave herself over willingly, and no one was there to tell him to stop. Could you have? Hell, could I?" He shook his head and barked a laugh. "You know what slayer blood is to vampires, boy? The most powerful stuff we'll ever taste and you gave it to us when we were dying. Like water in the goddamned desert. And this is twice, mind you, *twice* that he's gotten a taste and deliberately chosen not to kill her. So maybe you

should take a breather and start respecting your elders before we take offense."

Spike couldn't have been more stunned if Angel had popped the bloody question. And from the looks of the others, he wasn't the only one.

But Angel wasn't done, apparently. "I know Buffy. I know her well. What happened was stupid, yes, and could've gotten her killed. Guess what? It didn't. She's alive, and the doctors have reassured all of us that she's going to be fine. And everyone here knows that once she gets an idea into her head, the last thing she does is let it go until it's done. She saved Spike last night. Spike got her here. End of story. You're standing with the only two vampires in the world who would die for her, so stuff it."

It was a moment before the yellow faded from Angel's eyes, but longer before Spike could shake off his shock. Tonight had been the night for a whirlwind of emotions. Granted, he wasn't daft enough to let whatever Angel said get to his head. After all, the git had insulted him just recently, as well as brought the cavalry along for the ride. But the sentiment was appreciated nonetheless.

"It's a good thing he doesn't need to breathe," Oz finally said.

Giles smiled grimly. "Touché. Now, with that said..." He turned to Willow. "I want you to stay here with Spike and Buffy. It will most likely be early morning when she awakes, and Spike will need your assistance in leaving without burning up."

"Thanks, mate."

The Watcher ignored him, glancing instead to Angel. "You can either return to the mansion and collect your strength," he said, "or adjourn with Xander, Oz, and myself to the library for the final preparations."

Angel shrugged. "I'm as ready as I'll ever be. Let's make sure she is, too."

"I thought so." At last, Giles turned to Spike, his eyes serious but oddly warm. "Buffy will need you when she awakes," he said simply. "She will need to know that you are all right, and she will depend on you for strength."

Spike scoffed at that. "Slayer doesn't depend on anything—"

"She depends on you. And us. All of us." Giles nodded mutely. "And, though I am ignorant of the extent to last night's events—and wish to remain so indefinitely—I feel safe to gamble that what she did for you should prove at least that much." A long breath slipped through his lips. "I want you to call us on the hour with reports until she awakes."

Spike nodded, still somewhat thunderstruck.

"We will," Willow said.

"Good. I am going to pop over to tell Joyce what has happened. Not everything," Giles added, holding up a hand. "But what she needs to know so that she does not worry. I also know that Buffy would want me to persuade her to leave town, in case things go awry."

"In case things go awry," Xander echoed. "Is it just me, or is he way too casual about that?"

"We're on the plan formation team, then," Angel said.

Giles nodded. "It's counting down to the crucial hour." Another long beat, then he juttied his head in the direction of the front and addressed Xander, Oz, and Angel. "The three of you better get going. I will be along shortly."

The wolf hugged Willow goodbye, and Angel favored Spike with a significant look, but no words were shared.

Once they were gone, Giles turned back to Spike, his expression soft. "You didn't mean to do it?" he asked softly.

Spike cleared his throat, and everything came crashing back down without warning. "I'd never hurt her. It kills me to think...she... I told her I wouldn't, Rupert. Wouldn't drink from her. I knew the risks. I knew what...I just knew. She's my everything. To think that I—"

"I know, Spike." The words were so soft he thought he'd imagined them until he read the sincerity behind the Watcher's eyes. "It's taken me a long time to trust you," Giles continued. "I'm still not certain that I do, to be honest...but... She gave you something that you didn't want, and when you could have, you didn't kill her. You—"

"I'd never—"



"Oh yes, you would. You nearly did several times last year."

There was nothing to say to that.

"I didn't want to believe that a vampire could experience the feelings you claim to possess," Giles went on. "I still don't. This goes against everything Watchers have known and trusted for years. But tonight...you proved yourself otherwise. You put her above your own needs and you did it with no thought of yourself."

Spike snorted. "That's where you're wrong, mate," he replied. "I did it all for me. I didn't want to become her regret. I didn't want her letting Angel die just to resent me...and—"

"She wouldn't!" Willow protested.

"Red—"

"Oh, good grief, Spike! The girl loves you. She told me so. She told me that she told you so. And in case you didn't notice, Buffy's not the kinda person to say that unless she means it."

Giles offered a grim snicker. "Well, I believe I will leave you two to it," he said. "I want my phone to ring every hour."

He didn't even wait for acknowledgment. He was gone the next second.

Spike sighed, turned to Willow fully. "Look, I—"

"She loves you. I mean, how dumb, deaf, and blind do you have to be to not see it?" Willow shook her head. "You really hurt her feelings, you know? It took her this long to finally realize that, yes, she loves you, and you...what? Degrade it to some bedside confessional? You're a heartless son of a bitch."

"I figured it myself, pidge. You're right."

"I am? I mean, I am. I so am." She straightened her shoulders and jutted her chin in the air. "So...tell her when she wakes up that you're sorry and you love her and all that other stuff."

"Just one of many things I plan on telling her." Spike paused. "So...Willow?"

"Hmmm?"

"The wolf finally popped your cherry, did he?"

Willow froze, her eyes widening. Spike just grinned and pointed at his nose.

"Vampires suck," she muttered. "You're lucky Buffy loves you."

Spike offered a small smile at that, something in his chest twisting. "Tell me something I don't know."



SOMEONE WAS SQUEEZING HER HAND. The air was cold and smelled of antiseptic. Like a hospital. Ugh. She hated hospitals.

"Come on, sweetheart. That's it."

But god, she loved that voice. She'd heard him singing, but that was the past. This was now.

"Buffy... Buffy, please wake up for me."

Buffy slowly opened her eyes and was instantly engulfed in the warmest shade of blue she had ever known. An ecstatic smile burst across his face and he cupped her cheeks to press his lips to hers.

"I love you," he whispered before breaking from her mouth to pepper her face with kisses. "You beautiful, bloody idiot."

"Spike."

Her voice sounded raw, but she didn't care. And from looks, neither did he.

"Fuck, baby, I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry. I..."

His arms were around her the next minute, drawing her into his chest. She saw Willow asleep in the chair over his shoulder, but she was slowly coming to. But then Spike had pulled back and was again peppering her face with soft kisses. "I'm sorry," he repeated. "I'm so sorry."

Buffy smiled weakly. "You believe me."

He nodded through muffled half-sobs. "I'm so sorry," he murmured against her lips. "I shoulda believed you right off. You never say anything you don't mean."

"You believe me now," Buffy replied, caressing his face and wiping away his tears. "That's all I need."

He smiled at her, and she smiled back because she meant it.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you, too."

“I know, love. I know.”

Buffy grinned. “Good. And...I’m good.” She glanced at Willow, who started squealing and jumped out of her chair. “Hey Will.”

“Buffy! You’re awake!”

“I am.” She glanced back at Spike. “And I have a plan.”

“A...plan?”

Buffy nodded. “Once we bust outta here and get to the others, I’ll tell you.”

Her dreams had told her everything. Everything and then some.

This apocalypse was so in the bag.

## DANCING IN THE CHEQUERED SHADE

“ARE you out of your bloody mind?”

Buffy smirked as she skipped over yet another puddle. She was so used to daytime strolls through the sewers these days that she could practically anticipate the icky parts before they came upon them. New superpower for the win. “So you think it’s a bad idea?” she said, trying to hold in a laugh.

“*Bad* idea? Bad doesn’t begin to cover it, love.” Spike barked a laugh and shook his head. “You’re going on the hope that Stay Puft firstly remembers something that happened well over a year ago, and secondly that you’ll get the support of the entire bloody graduating class? Sweetheart, have you seen the mindless prepubescent whelps that attend that bloody school of yours? I have. Hell, I’ve eaten a few of them. Most are lucky to be graduating at all.” He puffed furiously at the cigarette that he’d wedged between his lips almost the second they’d left the hospital. “Besides the fact, you have to lure the bloody Mayor to this arsenal that Harris may or may not be able to provide, just hours after you were released from the sodding hospital!”

“Glad to know that I have your support.”

Spike arched an eyebrow at her before his eyes turned soft. “I just...bugger, I wasn’t ready for the Ascension to be today.”

She grinned and squeezed his hand. "I don't think anyone was," she replied. "Well, the past twenty-four hours have been bizarre. The longest day of my life."

"Hear, hear." Spike pressed a kiss to her temple. "You do realize that you're asking me for the second time to put your life on the line."

"I'm not asking you to. It's what I do. I have to do it."

"I know."

"The Mayor has to be stopped. This is...I have a responsibility to—"

"I know, pet, I know." He glanced to the ground sheepishly. "I just don't want you to."

"Spike—"

"Any other day and it would've been fine. I knew it was coming, but fuck, you have no idea what I went through last night."

Buffy pursed her lips and drew in a deep breath. "Yeah...I do," she replied. "You have no idea what *I* went through yesterday. Yeah, Spike. I know it's too soon. It's too soon for me, too. But we don't get to choose. After tonight, everything—"

"Yeah. After tonight. Till the next power-hungry bloke decides to make our lives a living hell."

"This is who we are."

"I know."

Buffy bit her lip to keep from grinning. She was pretty damn sure that's what normal people would call a Freudian slip, but she also knew that not pointing that out would spare her a twenty-minute rant, so she kept quiet.

"Think I can persuade you in coming away with me this summer?" he asked her a minute later.

She frowned. "Away?"

"Yeah."

"Where?"

"Anywhere. I wanna get you away from here."

"Spike—"

He tugged her to a halt and anchored her to his side. "After the Ascension, before college...don't you want a break? A good, long

break? I'll take you wherever you wanna go. I'll dress you in Queen Elizabeth's gowns if that's what you want. I'll show you the Eiffel Tower or the Great bloody Wall or wherever you wanna go." He paused, and she felt herself melt just a little more. "I'll give you the world, Buffy. As long as you want it. I'll lasso the bloody moon. Just...come away with me for a little while. Let me get you out of here and pamper you brilliantly that the gods will tremble with such envy that anyone, anywhere, could love as much as I love you."

Dear freaking god. Buffy just stared at him, torn between bursting into tears and hysterical laughter—not because what he said was funny, but because the human body hadn't evolved enough to express such emotions. He was always turning her world upside down in one way or another—whether by rushing out there into the thick of it or doing her in with a look.

Or a big romantic speech.

"I love you, too," she whispered finally. "I just...I..."

He gave her such a brilliant smile it shook her to the core. "I know, sweetheart," he replied softly. "Me, too."

"You really want to—"

"Yes," Spike said with a fervent nod, not skipping a beat. "Anywhere you wanna go for as long as you want. A week, two, the whole bloody summer. Whatever you want, wherever you want."

"Spike—"

"Yes." A softness overwhelmed his eyes. "I just wanna spoil my girl. Don't we deserve it after the year we've had?"

There was definitely no debating that.

"All right," she heard herself say. "After the Ascension...after this is over, let's get out of here."

"You mean it?"

"I wouldn't have said so if I didn't." Buffy grinned. "Besides...all an-expense-paid trip anywhere with my hot boyfriend? Come on...the chances of me saying no being..."

"You're not gonna ask me where I'll get the money or anything?"

"Should I?"

Spike bristled and shook his head. "No. No. Just...surprises me, is all."

"I trust you." She neared to kiss his lips. "And I love you."

His eyes darkened in a way that told her she'd be halfway to a hell of an orgasm if they were anywhere else. "You've told me," he murmured.

"Yeah. And you've told me about a thousand and a half times. I have a lot of catching up to do."

"You'll never catch up, love," he retorted with a barked laugh.

"I'm the Slayer. No challenge is too great."

"My head start puts all others to shame. And since I don't plan on stopping anytime soon, you're just gonna have to face it that it's a lost bloody cause."

"I'll catch up when we're in on our vacation," she decided, entangling their fingers once more as they continued toward home. "I'll stay up at night and just say it over and over again."

"You do that and you won't get much sleep. And you won't make any headway."

"I will catch up. But first, the Ascension."

"The Ascension," he agreed with a nod, tightening his grip on her.

"And...honestly? How about my plan?"

Spike quirked an eyebrow and the corners of his mouth tugged into a small smile. "Honestly," he replied, "it's as good a plan as any, I'd wager. And you can count on me being there beside you."

"Well, technically, you'll be outside."

"Buff—"

"My job, remember? I can't do this and worry about you, too." A long sigh trembled through her. "Besides, other than Angel, you'll be the strongest person on our side on the outside. I need you out there where it counts, okay?"

"Right. 'Course, there is that pesky sunlight issue that—"

"Yeah, yeah. We'll figure something out."

They came to a halt at the entrance that led to the basement of 1630 Revello Drive.

"Right, sweetheart."

"Right," she emphasized with a nod. "For now...I have a mother to kick out of town."



SPIKE HAD NEVER BEFORE APPRECIATED how plans to save the world were crafted, outlined, and executed. Now, with only a few hours to spare until the Ascension, he stood alone in the library as the others fulfilled their tasks. Stood in the shadows and waited.

There would be an eclipse, Giles had said. That put him and Angel back in the game. Unfortunately, it also allowed for the Mayor to assemble a team of bloodsuckers of his own. However, trusting that Buffy's plan was even remotely successful, such wouldn't present too much of a problem.

After all, what were a few vamp cronies to Angelus and William the Bloody?

Everything else had gone just as smoothly, and that worried him. He and Buffy had not been able to spend much time with Joyce. After the woman found them in the kitchen, she had demanded explanations and left little room for answers. It had taken less than ten minutes to convince her that the safest, most helpful thing she could do was leave town.

Times like these, Spike prided the Slayer's power of manipulation. Joyce was gone—heading to her mother's until they contacted her. Persuading her had taken little more than reassuring her that, after nearly watching Buffy die the night before, Spike would kiss the sun before he let her get hurt.

That wasn't to say that Mrs. Summers hadn't voiced her reservations about the more recent developments. She was extremely apprehensive around Spike—more so than she had ever been. It hurt but he felt he deserved it. After all, were it not for him, Buffy would not have spent the night in the hospital. He had nearly gotten her only daughter killed.

Living that burden was enough for his own conscience. Asking



Joyce to live with it and—moreover—to accept it was blatantly cruel and unusual. But he could do more, and he expected no less. There was no way he was leaving Buffy. Not now. Not ever.

Spike reached into the lapels of his duster for his ciggies. The others were out and about. Xander, thrilled at being at the heart of one of Buffy's plans, had to assemble essentially a small army before showtime. Willow and Oz were helping and Giles was off doing god-knows-what. He had not seen or heard from Wesley since the night before, but the other Scoobies assured him that the younger Watcher was very much in on the game plan. He was just gun-shy about seeing the Slayer after their encounter.

At that, Spike had to laugh. The man was truly pathetic.

But he was one of them. For now, that was what mattered.

The plan rested on the hope that the Mayor would lose his marbles if he saw Faith's dagger, covered in his surrogate daughter's blood, in Buffy's hands. It was a small trigger but Buffy was confident that it would work, and after witnessing Wilkins's treatment of Faith at several unfortunate run-ins, Spike was inclined to agree.

If everyone played their part, the plan was nearly infallible, and that made him nervous. Buffy had been talking of the Ascension for what seemed like forever. They had been preparing for it their entire relationship. And now, all came down to a matter of a few minutes. A few minutes that would prove crucial in less than four hours.

And this was only the beginning. Even if he did manage to get Buffy away from the Hellmouth, even for a little while, there would be something waiting when they returned. Life with her would be too brief, and envisioning an eternity without her made him ache in ways he had never before fathomed. Forget Prague and the hell that had followed in finding a cure for Dru. Forget the public humiliation following Cecily's rejection. Buffy was the end-game for him. Last night, sitting at her bedside, that much had been made abundantly clear.

For now, though, he had everything. And he would hold onto it as long as he could.

Forever, if he could.

But she didn't have forever. Even if she survived every apocalypse for the next sixty years, she was going to die. That day would arrive in a flash, and he'd have to decide how to weather the pain of losing her.

He didn't have to think about that now, though. Not now.

Easy to tell himself, at least.

Her scent reached his nostrils just seconds before he felt her behind him, wrapping her arms around him and pressing herself to his back.

"I've been looking for you," she said after dropping a kiss on the nape of his neck.

A pleasant shiver ran down his spine. Spike grinned, wondering how in the world she'd managed to sneak up on him. He was perched on the veranda near the bookstacks but should have heard her enter the library. Maybe he'd been thinking too hard. "I've been here. Just biding time till you start your heroics."

"I was beginning to think you'd gone home."

Home? The place where her blood still stained his sheets? Where he had nearly taken her life?

No. He wasn't sure he wanted to go back there ever again

"Things coming along all right?" he replied. "We're running short on time, sweetheart."

"I know. Will and I recruited everyone we could find. She and Oz have taken over in between getting the supplies we need." Buffy swept another kiss across his skin. "They wanted some time alone, too."

"Can imagine. They've only...God, what are you doing?"

Buffy didn't reply, which was fine, because it was bloody obvious what she was doing, being that she was pulling at his belt. "Remember yesterday?" she asked before teasing his earlobe with her teeth. "Before...when I was in here, and you..."

Meaning when he'd nearly shagged her on one of the tables? Yeah, he remembered, though he felt he had aged years since then. So much had changed.

"We don't have long till the Ascension," he reminded her.

"I know." Buffy released him abruptly and huffed. Then she

moved so that she was directly in front of him. Spike sniffed a bit but kept his eyes glued to the text he had been thumbing through when she came in. That was until she reached for his chin and forced his gaze to level with hers.

“What’s wrong?”

He jerked a bit. “Nothing.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Like I’m buying that.”

He couldn’t help it; he smiled. “What are you doing here, pet? Shouldn’t you be out hunting recruits? We—”

“I told you, Will and Oz are taking care of it.” Buffy pursed her lips. “I just wanted some time with you before we had to...in case—”

“In case tonight’s it, right?”

She nodded.

“Thought we agreed it wasn’t.”

“It’s not. But yesterday, I learned not to take anything for granted.”

He said nothing to that, rather looked away, swallowing hard and trying not to burn from shame.

“Spike—”

“I’m fine, Buffy.”

“No. You’re not.” She forced his eyes to hers again, and he heard her breath catch in her throat at whatever it was she saw. “You’re not fine. But it’s okay now. See?” She took his hand in hers and pressed it to her face, then slid it down until he could feel the gentle hum of her heart beneath his fingers. “It’s okay now.”

He shook his head, alarmed when a choked sob crossed his lips. She had the power to drag out anything he wanted to keep buried. There was no hope at ever keeping anything from her.

“I almost lost you,” he whispered.

Buffy cupped his cheek and drew his mouth to hers. “I almost lost you, too,” she reminded him. “But I didn’t, and you didn’t lose me.”

“I almost—”

“You didn’t.” She smiled. “Why are you...I thought we were okay. We talked about this—”

Spike shook his head again. “It’s not...god, I...” He sniffed. “Yeah, love. You’re right. You didn’t leave me...but you’re going to.”

"What? I—"

"Maybe not now. Not tonight or tomorrow...maybe even years, but... Guess it just occurred to me that last night was just the warm-up act. Get to go through that again and again until someday it takes."

A pause. "You always knew that."

"Knowing and getting a preview are two different things. I live in the now, don't focus much on the future." Spike wiped at his eyes, feeling petty and small, but unable to hold anything in.

Buffy seemed to consider him for a long moment, her brow furrowed. Then her expression cleared and she shrugged. "Okay. We'll work it out."

"There's nothing... Work it out? Buffy—"

"You love me, right?"

What the bloody hell was she on about? "Do I...? Sweetheart, you know I do. I—"

"And I love you. Despite what happens, there will be a way to work it out." She favored him with one of this enigmatic Buffy smiles. "I've learned, over the past couple of years, that trying to plan things is just wasting time. And there's a solution to every problem, even the impossible ones. We'll work it out, Spike. Maybe not today, but we will."

That was rubbish. He knew it was, but god, her confidence could convince a bloke of anything. "You think so much of the world?" he demanded. "With as much as you've seen?"

"I have to. I have to." Buffy's eyes fogged over. "Let's just get through tonight. We get through tonight, and then we get out of Sunnydale for some well-earned QT, all right?"

Spike stared at her. There were times he felt his body couldn't contain how much he loved her, that it was too much for one man or vampire to shoulder, and he'd just pop out of existence. But those times were typically accompanied by reminders of why the risk was worth it. This was one such time. "I love you," he said heatedly. "Buffy...last night—"

"Was last night. We're both here. It's fine."

Buffy claimed his mouth before he could offer another protest,

and this time, he did not—could not—deny her. The taste of her had him drunk within seconds, easing the roar in his chest that had been at full volume since he'd awakened with her blood in his mouth. The softness of her lips against his and the feel of her in his arms quickly drove his senses into overdrive.

He had her against the wall the next minute, books forgotten as his hands wandered and explored. Her shoulders, her arms—her strong, powerful arms—then down to her waist and up again until he had a breast cradled against each palm. Spike growled into her mouth, tugging at her nipples and rolling his hips so she could feel how hard he was.

"Feel that?" he growled, one hand abandoning her breast to grip her ass and hold her as he rubbed against her. "You drive me outta my mind."

"You too." Buffy tugged at his jeans, the belt free now. "Every time."

Then her mouth was on his again, and the world melted away. And he realized she was right. Nothing was ever certain, especially where they were concerned. All they had was the moment. And stolen ones, such as these, made it all the sweeter.

The end of the world, in that regard, didn't seem so terribly far. He would travel it for her. He had to.

"Tell me again," Spike whispered. "I need to hear it." He skated his lips kisses across her chin, thrusting harder against her. "Tell me, Buffy. Please."

Buffy pulled back with a throaty gasp, arching against him with some need of her own. Then her eyes found his and she graced him with a smile that could drive even the toughest bastard out there to tears. "I love you, Spike. I have for the longest time. I just...I was afraid."

"Afraid?"

She nodded. "Like the universe would hear me and take it away. But it almost did anyway, in the end. It was stupid, but... That's why."

Spike stared at her a long moment, deep, shuddering breaths racking his body. The little witch had said something to that effect

—that Buffy was holding back because love scared the piss out of her. But until then, until that moment, he hadn't been sure if he believed it. The Slayer was scared of nothing...except he knew that was rubbish. Bravery wasn't the absence of fear—it was the defiance of it. Fuck knows he'd been out of his mind terrified when he'd realized he loved her, but still, things had been easier for him, even as hard as they were. He'd always been love's bitch.

Spike kissed her again, hiking her legs around his waist and dropping a hand to caress her through her jeans. "How long have you loved me?"

"Since you didn't go when I told you to. Since the second you walked into the mansion when they had me tied up."

The same night he'd told her for the first time. Spike grinned against her lips. "Hid it well."

"Just from you. Everyone else knew."

"I shoulda too." But he hadn't—Angel clouded everything. He always had. Spike growled at the thought and was suddenly desperate to be inside of her. Apparently, he wasn't the only one, because she was pulling at his jeans as he tugged at hers, getting in her way but unable to stop. But then she was in his arms again, skin on skin, her legs going around his waist once more. Where his jeans were bunched at the ankles, hers had been tossed somewhere down the aisle of books along with her shoes. The head of his cock skated along the damp crotch of her knickers and it suddenly seemed that eons had passed since he'd last been inside her.

"Now," she whispered hoarsely, wrapping her small, lethal hand around his erection. "Now. I can't take it anymore."

"Now," Spike agreed, fisting her panties and ripping them clear off her body. He hiked her a bit higher, sliding his dick along her wet, silky flesh until he was positioned at her entrance. "I have to feel you now. Have to be inside. Can't wait, love. I'm sorry."

"No. Not sorry. Need you now."

"I love you, Buffy."

She blinked open her emerald eyes and smiled at him. "I love you, too."

Spike took her mouth again with a groan as he pushed inside her. Her pussy, warm and tight and all his, clamped around him, dragging him in deeper and clenching so nice he nearly went cross-eyed. "I'm sorry, sweetheart," he said, voice strained.

"What?"

"I'm not gonna be able to be gentle."

And before she could reply, he pulled back and slammed into her so hard the bookcase behind him rattled. Buffy's head flew back, her hands finding Spike's shoulders and squeezing her encouragement. It had only been two days—two full days—since they had been together like this. Two days. And yet so much had happened.

Things had changed.

The pace was hard and brutal—flesh slapping, mouths warring, foundation-shaking. He was only aware of her, the way she felt every time his cock drove home, how those whimpers and moans she fed him tasted, the illicit cadence of their bodies coming together again and again as the air around them perfumed with the scent of sex. He wanted her to fuck his fear right out of him, and bless her, she tried. Her hips crashing upwards, hands wandering, lips pulling on his as he pounded into her again and again. Her breaths came hot and hard against his skin—he could feel her heartbeat as though it were his own, the rush of her pulse, healthy and strong, keeping the unstoppable machine that was Buffy Summers alive and warm and his. It was so good and not enough. He doubted it ever would be.

"Spike," Buffy gasped, and fuck he loved it when she said his name like this, with her cunt around him, so he decided to reward her with a particularly sharp thrust. "*Spike!*" she said again. "Oh god oh god oh god oh god oh—"

"Yeah, that's it," he rasped into her ear. "My dirty little Slayer. Give it all to me. All of it. Don't you...dare...hold back." His thrusts grew more frantic still, as though part of him wanted to punish her for making him worry so much. For making him fear the future. But she did not call him on it, rather answered with equal demand, with hip rolls and thrusts that he'd taught her—and he loved that. Loved that she was fucking him the way he'd helped her learn, answering his

need without question and feeding him back her own. Loved that she fucked the way she fought, with every bloody thing she had.

He loved her in ways that would make angels weep.

And then, yes, her pussy tightened and her body tensed, and she went wild in his arms, spasming hard around his cock, pulling harder, harder, until he had no choice but to follow. Spike threw back his head and roared, his fangs bursting through his gums without his permission, startling him so much he felt his balance tip. Then they were on the floor together, Buffy lying across him, panting hard but her body soft and pliant.

It was entirely possible, he mused, that they might one day shag themselves to death. Spare him the worry about the future—just go out with a bloody bang.

He could think of worse fates.

BUFFY'S BRAIN WAS FUZZY. Sex overload. It did that sometimes. Well, a lot of the time with Spike. Entered a space that was neither sleep nor awake, where the ground would move and, while she'd be distantly aware, she wouldn't clue back in until everything had a chance to reboot.

When she forced herself to reengage with the real world, she found she was on the ground, straddling Spike and being treated to a series of soft, oh-so-tasty kisses. He was still within her, partially hard and growing more so. It didn't surprise her. Nothing with him ever did.

He was trembling, too, but for an entirely different reason.

"Sweetheart?" he asked when he pulled away, sounding worried.

"Mmmm..."

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" He lifted his hands to her hips. "Tell me I didn't hurt you."

Buffy smirked. *Dork*. "That was not an ouchie sound I just made."

He didn't look convinced, studying the place where he'd gripped her just a few moments earlier. "There's gonna be a bruise. God, I held you too hard. I was—"



"You were fine."

"I'm sorry. I should've...you were just in the hospital. Dunno what I was thinking."

Buffy pursed her lips and, taking full advantage of their position, clenched her vaginal muscles around his cock, which went from semi to fully erect in a blink. His gaze fogged over and he released a soft groan, thrusting up on what had to be instinct.

"You didn't hurt me," she said again. Spike's eyes fell closed as she began moving over him in languid strokes. "Not even...god...last night. You didn't hurt me." She threw her head back and heard him gasp in turn. "It's okay."

He gripped her hips again, his hold more cautious than usual. "Buffy..."

"It's okay."

He released a long, trembling sigh, hips moving in time with hers. He made no effort to claim control, however, seemingly content to let her set the pace.

"You feel so good," she whispered, earning a long moan.

"You, too. Always." Spike exhaled, dragging his hands upward to cup her breasts once more. "God, I don't deserve you."

"That's for me to decide."

He lifted himself off the floor to tongue her nipples through her shirt. "Then I'll try to earn it. Every...sodding...day."

Buffy gasped, wrapping her arms around his neck and holding him to her. She began moving faster, need burning away the calm. After yesterday, she needed this too. The image of him in that bed, withering away and waiting for death, would take a long time to banish. Feeling him inside her, when she'd been uncertain if he'd even be here today, was the best reassurance a girl could ask for.

From here, they could only move forward—but not with last night haunting every step.

She dropped her mouth to his throat and lapped at his skin, not realizing, until she found Drusilla's mark, that she'd been looking for it. She felt him shudder, then buck in earnest when she teased it with her teeth.

"Fuck, Slayer!"

"Shhhh..."

This piece of his skin wasn't hers. She wanted to change that.

Spike's hands fell again to her hips, anchoring her to him as he pistoned in and out of her. "Christ Almighty..."

"I love you."

And that was it. She sank her blunt teeth into the wound and grasped his shoulders as he shuddered and spilled himself inside her. He bucked and trembled, holding onto her like he was afraid she'd float away otherwise.

"Oh, Buffy..." Spike blinked hard, gazing at her with slightly drugged eyes. Then he frowned, apparently realizing she'd not followed him over, and slipped a hand to where they were joined to tap her clit.

And that was all it took. That, combined with the way he'd lost control—something he rarely did. Spike was of the philosophy that ladies should always come first, so the knowledge that she'd gotten him there first was in itself a powerful aphrodisiac. Buffy bit her lower lip, clenched around him—and yeah, that had him hard again—and came.

Buffy lay against him for several long minutes, trying to collect her thoughts. It was important that understood this—understood that last night, when he'd slid his fangs into her throat, he hadn't scared her. That she'd liked it, mortal peril aside. That it was something she wanted.

"Just so you know," she whispered, "it was like that for me too. Last night, when you bit me. That's what I felt."

Spike went still. "What?"

"You don't hurt me. You never do." A small smile tickled her lips and she leaned back. "Last night...when you bit me...it felt good. I thought it would hurt, but it didn't. It felt really, really good."

"But—"

"No buts. I wouldn't lie to you." She looked to the place where she'd bitten him. "I'd never felt anything like it. And...it felt good."

A few seconds ticked by before his face lit up with the smile she

had wanted to see for what seemed like an eternity. That cocky sense of self that she'd fallen in love with.

"There's more where that came from, baby," he assured her. "If that's what you want."

Buffy smiled and kissed his cheek. "Trust me."

"Good. So let's try this again. Maybe we can do it right."

"Try wha—"

Talking was futile. Spike had her on her back the next minute and was moving again in slow, sensual strokes. "This," he said. "Not too rough, and I won't spoil the party by leaving early."

"I like you..." Buffy's eyes fell shut, a wrangled gasp escaping her throat. "Rough."

"You just got out of the hospital."

She opened her eyes and met the feral need behind his own. Demon lovers and their super endurance. "Slayer, remember?"

Spike grinned wickedly. "Oh yeah," he agreed, thrusts gaining momentum. "I definitely remember."

Buffy clutched at his forearms, ignoring the voice that whispered that once had been lucky, twice was pushing it, but three times was downright reckless, Spike had a way of pumping her good sense right out of her.

"Oh my GOD! What the hell are you guys doing?"

Yeah, if anything could kill the mood, it was Cordelia freaking Chase screaming at the top of her lungs.

Buffy went rigid, digging her nails into Spike's forearms.

But Spike didn't slow down a bit. If anything, he started fucking her harder. "What's it look like? Bugger off!"

"Spike!" Buffy hissed.

"Oh dear Lord."

"You too, four eyes," Spike said, rolling his hips. "Unless you wanna pay...for...sodding...tickets."

"We were...just...ummm...going to pack up books." That was Wesley, sure enough. "We'll—uhh—be back later."

"God, Buffy." Cordelia again, evidently unhampered by the awkwardness of the situation. "Exhibitionist, much?"

"Much," Spike answered with a growl of warning.

Wesley was not nearly as composed. "We're leaving, now."

There was a scuffle and a hasty retreat. It was only when the doors swung shut that Spike dropped his gaze back to her, that smirk in place. As if challenging her to berate him for his bad behavior.

When she didn't, the smirk melted into a smile, and he leaned forward to nuzzle her throat. "How long till Graduation?"

"A while," she responded. "But Spike—"

It was futile trying to speak. He had once again unveiled his mastery and rendered words completely useless.

Not that she minded. No. Not in the least.



FIRE BAD. Tree pretty.

It was almost difficult to believe that they had arrived at an end.

The sky was still dark, though Buffy didn't know if that was due to the eclipse or if night had taken over. In retrospect, it didn't matter. She had avoided Giles when he'd started talking about predestination, though not without noticing the smirk on Spike's face.

No. There would be no more arguing philosophy with him. At least not tonight.

For now, she and her friends had congregated to look at the place that had been her academic home of torture and maim for three years—or rather—what was left of it. Wesley was somewhere whimpering in the distance, having fallen three seconds into battle. Angel had lingered to give her a meaningful look of farewell before fading off into the shadows.

It didn't feel like goodbye. Or perhaps it was too late for that. In many ways, goodbye for them had happened a long time ago.

"Well," Cordelia said, approaching as she wiped the ash off her arm. "That's the most fun you can have without having fun."

Buffy blushed and looked down, still not having gotten over what happened that afternoon. She looked up only when she felt Spike's eyes on her, her flush deepening when he winked.

“How about the part where we kicked some demon ass?” Willow suggested a little over-zealously. “I didn’t hate that.”

“Hear, hear!” Xander agreed.

Buffy smiled, exhausted in ways she hadn’t known were possible. “So...you guys wanna take off? I think we’ve done pretty much all we can.”

Willow caught her gaze. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay,” Buffy replied, relaxing as her vampire wrapped an arm around her shoulder, dragging her into him. A small happy noise escaped her lips when he kissed her forehead. “I could use a little sleep, though.”

“Sleep being the one thing we can guarantee you won’t be doing tonight,” Cordelia noted, completely ignoring Spike’s glare of warning.

“Not the picture I needed, Cordy,” Xander said.

“Trust me. It could be worse.”

Buffy tensed again but decided ultimately that she was too tired to be embarrassed. Graduation was over, the day was won. It was time to move on.

“Guys,” Oz said, “let’s take a moment to deal with this. We survived.”

“It was a hell of a battle.”

“Not the battle—high school.”

A poignant observation. Yet another thing that she was too tired to deal with. Thus instead, as her friends took their moment, she turned to Spike and kissed his cheek. “So...” she said slowly. “What were you saying about a vacation?”

He smiled his secret, just-for-her smile, his eyes dancing.

“Ready when you are, sweets.”

## THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

*Eight months later*

THE NIGHT HAD NOT BEEN GOING WELL.

Of course, it being her birthday, she really couldn't say that she was surprised.

Buffy had been having a decent day up until a few minutes ago. A splendid way to spend one's day of jubilee prior to celebration events. A friendly breakfast with Xander and Willow—who gleefully insisted that skipping morning courses on birthdays was not a deadly sin—followed by two hours of chick-flicks before the guilt-ridden trek to the study hall, which was simple in itself. Class was fantastic; her three o'clock exam was canceled and she learned that she had aced her history paper.

Though for that, she couldn't take all the credit. She enjoyed the privilege of a good tutor.

It was also her anniversary with said tutor. A year had passed. Only a year—an entire year. A year since that fateful night that had found them pitted against each other in a fight to the death. A year since her life had changed for good. Changed for the better.

Changed.

When she wasn't being pampered by friends or bored by one of her professors, her mind took to serious reflection. After all, anniversaries were nothing if not a time for reflection.

So much had happened in the past year. They were in college—all except Xander, who had taken a hermit-like status in his parent's basement and was currently entangled in a bizarre relationship with Anya. Willow and Oz had split after she caught him naked with another werewolf and he consequentially decided to leave town to find a cure for his monthly problem. Giles was unemployed but still her Watcher and enjoyed semi-regular visits from a British woman named Olivia. Wesley and Cordelia had both left directly following Graduation and were evidently now employed by Angel in Los Angeles. Word had it that a half-demon had even had the wonky notion that Cordelia should inherit his power of Sight before he'd martyred himself to save the town.

Stranger things had happened.

Things on the Hellmouth were currently at a lull. Well, except for the strange Commando guys running around and kidnapping random demons. Buffy had enjoyed one or two run-ins with them of the personal nature—both times when they had tried to nab Spike while on patrol. They were a cattle-prod happy group.

But no one messed with her boyfriend and got away with it.

It seemed so much more time had gone by than one measly year. At the time, she had been so angry and overwrought. Suffering the loss of her slayer powers plus Giles's deception, all to be put against a vampire she'd despised. Now, when she considered it, the thought that it could have gone any other way made her feel uneasy. Made her more levels of grateful than she knew existed. Everything that had transpired since relied on the events of that night. She would not be here otherwise—wouldn't be so blissfully content. Wouldn't have everything she had ever wanted.

She was intent on making the most out of this anniversary. At least, that had been her plan. They had arrived at the dorm relatively early to indulge some much-needed alone time, and acquired said alone-time for perhaps two minutes before a panting, panicked

Willow burst through the door to announce that something had happened to Xander.

Of. Fucking. Course.

Buffy suspected on some level that blaming Xander for being accident-prone wasn't exactly fair, but she had waited all day for something of the mega-bad to happen. When it hadn't, she foolishly squandered the idea of luck to a mini-revelation that her curse had passed.

It was Spike who had tugged her to her feet. He flashed an understanding smile and nodded his head in agreement to follow the frightened redhead to the scene of the crime.

"So it was a demon?" Buffy asked, shrugging a jacket over her shoulders as her boyfriend pulled her hair free of the collar. "What'd it look like?"

"Big," came the short reply.

Buffy and Spike exchanged a long glance.

"Oh, I know just the one! The one with the claws and the thing, right? A little help, Wills, if it's not too much to ask."

"It was big and greenish yellow. Or maybe purplish blue. Or grayish brown." Willow threw her hands in the air. "I really can't remember. It happened really fast. Just...come quick, okay? Giles is looking it up."

"Off your FBI-like description? I'm sure that'll get us on the case in a jiffy."

Willow rolled her eyes. "Less fighty, more findy Xander, okay?"

Buffy heaved a long sigh and offered a quick nod before turning to bustle toward the darkened foyer on her best friend's heels.

The moment they switched on the light—and really, that should've been the first clue; the light in there was never off—a chorus of "Surprise!" nearly knocked her off her feet.

Well, it did knock her off her feet. Buffy tumbled back against Spike, who promptly swept up in a hug and a birthday kiss. The traitor had been in on it.

Buffy twisted in his arms and gave him a very deserved whack on the shoulder.



"Happy birthday, sweetheart," he cooed between chuckles and unsuccessful attempts to evade her non-threatening slaps.

"You jerk!"

"Oh yeah. Real jerks are defined by a need to surprise their girls on their birthdays." He paused to point at Willow. "Besides, it was her bloody ideal!" He turned to the attentive audience and announced dramatically, "Everyone here's a witness. I'm automatically the guilty party. If that's not ingrained prejudice, I don't know what is. Equal rights for vamps!"

Buffy's gaze narrowed. "Oh please."

"Breaking my dainty heart, pet."

"You're the evil one here. Not much deducing actually needed."

He rolled his eyes good-naturedly, wrapping an arm around her in one of his loving gestures that she didn't think he was even aware of anymore. "See what I have to put up with?" he teased. "Where's the sodding trust?"

The comment earned a laugh from the crowd, which was comprised of mostly strangers. Those who knew Buffy and Spike well enough to know that they were nearly inseparable, even if they spent a good part of that time taking jibes at each other. More often, they were accused of being too cutesy.

And for the most part, neither she nor Spike gave a damn.

Willow shrugged with an easy smile, taking Buffy by the arm to steer her away from her boyfriend—a task that had grown increasingly difficult over the past few months. "Sorry, Buff. We couldn't resist. Besides, when's the last time we got down and partied?"

There was no sense arguing with that. Buffy offered a somewhat abashed grin. "Yeah. Sorry."

"It's okay, Buffster," a perfectly unattacked, unharmed Xander replied as he approached. "We know that you've been...distracted."

Her flush deepened.

Spike was at her side in a flash. "Hey now," he said as the guests began to disperse into their respective groups with cake and punch. "Lay off my girl. All criticism of our relationship can resume as scheduled after tonight. Savvy?"

"How about 12:01?" Xander asked. "No longer birthday, no longer special treatment, right?"

"Not in this lifetime, Stay Puft."

Willow snickered. "Nice try, though, Xan. Remember, when it comes to babying, no one gets it better."

Buffy's jaw dropped along with Spike's in perfect syncopation.

"He does not baby me!"

"I do not baby her!"

"We really should do something to separate them before they get scary," Xander stage-whispered.

"Too late," Willow whispered back.

And from there, the night went splendidly well. As good a night as Buffy had ever had for her birthday celebration.

But tonight was special to her in ways that far surpassed the anniversary of her birth. And she wanted to celebrate it with Spike for reasons that would either go ridiculed by her friends—excluding Willow, who knew practically every skeleton in the closet with frightening familiarity—or ignored for the sake of her party. So she smiled and laughed and socialized, avoided the slimes from her classes that were always trying to get her consent on a date despite numerous reminders that she was in a serious relationship with someone else, and let the night slip through her fingers.

When the party finally began to die down, Spike pulled her aside and asked if she wanted to escape before her face cracked from smiling. She nodded her enthusiasm, made her way through the remaining guests to say her goodbyes and repeat her thanks before collecting her presents with her boyfriend's help to deposit them in her dorm.

"Sorry our evening was interrupted," Spike said when it was all over and done with. "Red was just adamant on throwin' you a party. Couldn't say no. She needed me to get you here and—"

"No. Thank you. I had a great time." Buffy met him in the middle of the room, wrapped her arms around his waist. "I don't spend as much time with them as I should."

He waved a dismissive hand. "Piffle."

"I don't! And really, after Oz left? Insensitive Buffy, much?" She shook her head. "I wasn't there for her. And she could've gone further off the deep-end than she did."

"Yeah," Spike retorted, rolling his eyes. "We might've actually made it down the sodding aisle."

"That's not what I mean and you know it. Besides...Xander with the demons and whatnot? Not of the fun." She rested her brow at his chest, enjoying his calming caresses against her back. "We're just lucky it didn't get any worse."

"And that Rupert knew how to stop it?"

"That too."

Spike sighed and turned to rest his cheek upon her crown. "So, on top of everything else, you get the guilt-game on your special day. Right."

"Well, come on. When was the last time I even stayed here for a full night? Honestly?"

"Does that mean you don't wanna come home with me?"

Buffy stiffened in alarm. "I didn't say that."

"Then let's get outta here."

No need to ask her twice. Better to get out now before another disaster impeded the road. Tonight was about them, and she was determined that he know it, too. While there was no doubt in her mind that he obviously recognized today as their anniversary, he was acting aloof and doing everything he could to make sure that she had the perfect birthday.

Which, really? Appreciated. Much. But she loved him, and she wanted him to know that today—this date—would always be something more to her because of him. Because he was in her life, at her side, and would always be so.

They took to the streets of Sunnydale at a leisurely pace, despite her urgency to make the evening up to him. Hand-in-hand, they toured the sites—minimal as they were—and paused often to share kisses that quickly became too indecent for public.

All. She had it all. The cake was in front of her, she had a fork in

hand, and she was being granted the largest bites anyone could ever imagine. And nothing would ever take it away from her.

"Favorite gift?"

"The blouse Wills gave me was nice." She paused, hand going to her throat. "But really? The sword."

"Sweetheart, I promise I won't be offended if—"

"I mean really. Weapons are so the way to this girl's heart. I can't wait to make with the decapitations."

He grinned. "Gotta say, you look bloody hot wielding it."

"You're just saying that because it's penis-shaped."

"Well...yeah." He smirked and kissed her temple. "Mmm. Those blokes, the ones drooling all over you tonight..."

"They weren't drooling. There was no drooling."

"Buffy, I might be irrational at times, but I'm not blind." He tightened his grip on her hand. "And I can't say I blame 'em, of course. You're what most men spend their whole lives—or unlives—not having."

"Spike—"

"I just wanna know if they give you any trouble."

She couldn't help it; she giggled. "You think poor wittle me can't handle a couple of horny coeds? Gimme a break. Besides, these guys are decent. They know that no means, well, no."

Spike huffed. "Most."

"Riley's harmless."

"Riley's a wanker."

"Well, even still, he's harmless."

"There's just something about that bloke that rubs me the wrong way." He shifted. "The way he looks at you...then me...then you. I wanna tear his balls off and shove 'em down his throat."

"Maybe you got it wrong. Maybe he likes you."

"Cheeky wench."

"Not that I could blame him, of course." She tipped upward to kiss his cheek. "You've got a really great ass."

He just smiled and kissed her. Then went stiff and turned to cast a wary eye over his shoulder. And just like that, the merriment of the

evening vanished. She knew that look well, and it was anything but good.

“What is it?”

“Saw somethin’.”

She knew that tone, too.

“Sure it’s not just a cat-something?”

“Bloody positive.” The look was not going anywhere, and evidently, neither were her plans for anniversary goodness. Spike’s temperament these past couple of months had danced along the border of noble, though his determination to be everything she deserved, at times, wandered into annoying territory.

After all, it wasn’t like she had seen anything.

“Went inside that building, whatever it was,” he was saying. “I’m gonna go scope it out.”

“Coming with,” she said, more out of habit than an announcement.

“No, you’re not.”

Okay. Strange. “What?”

“You’re staying here...keeping an eye out. It might come out through the back or what all.”

“Spike, are you—”

“It’s probably nothing. I’ll be in and out in a bloody jiffy. Sit tight.”

Only it couldn’t be nothing. It was never nothing on her birthday. There was always, always, something.

And yet, that knowledge did nothing to change the fact that Spike left her with a kiss and disappeared inside the building that looked old and condemned and certainly gross enough to support his claim. Definitely of the demon locale—she couldn’t think of any other species of anything that would consider it habitable.

Such was her life. But Spike was right. If he thought he saw something that tingled his vampire senses, it was worth investigating.

Duty, and all that.

So she waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Though there had been no noise, Buffy started to worry after ten minutes.

When fifteen rolled around, she could wait no longer. The invisible manacles of panic that held her back in these situations retreated to the shadows. It was her birthday. She was foolish for taking any chance.

Particularly with someone she loved.

It was strange, though. She never worried about Spike. Well, she worried that he would get into a fight with a big demon at a pub or something like, but she knew he could take care of himself—for the most part. He was a big boy. He had survived things she couldn't even imagine. With him, the lines of love and worry were separated.

But tonight—right now—that was not the case. With no thought for herself, Buffy raced toward the house, kicked the door open and screamed, “SPIKE!” into the nest of shadows that greeted her.

Her voice faded, echoing through the rooms before dying altogether.

No answer.

*Oh god.*

“No,” she gasped, her eyes widening with before settling on the stairs that looked far too unstable for her liking. It didn't matter, though. She followed her senses and her senses took her to the second floor.

Took her fast.

Took her to a long, dark hallway. Empty.

Buffy choked back a sob, willing herself not to panic. This couldn't be happening. Not now. Not to them.

“Spike?”

Her voice again echoed down the dark corridor, but there was no answer.

No.

“Dammit, Spike!” she snapped, stomping with more force than the foundation was prepared to accept. “If this is a joke, it is nowhere near the county-line of funny!”

Well, obviously. Her voice was rattling and her hands were shak-

ing. God, why had she let him come in here alone? Spike could take care of himself, sure, but not now. Not on her birthday. Things always went wrong on her birthday. Horribly wrong.

“Spike?” she asked again. “Answer me!”

Okay, she was probably panicking for no reason. Knowing him, he was likely outside. Or out of earshot. Or enjoying a gag for kicks.

God, if he made her worry for no reason...

“Please?”

There was nothing.

Nothing.

Then a big something, in the form of a soft glow coming from the end of the hallway.

And instantly, Buffy was smacked out of the dark with enough force to shake her bones and melt her reserve. She couldn’t believe she hadn’t seen it before.

To his credit, he had set her up. And well.

This was their place. A year ago, Giles had pulled up at the curb outside. A year ago, Spike had backed her into a corner before chasing her into this hall. Right here. A year ago, they had tumbled into the safe room. A year ago, her life had changed forever. Here. In this place.

In the place where Spike had brought her.

Their room was still there. The safe room. Only a blanket was set on the floor this time. A blanket, a couple of candles, a picnic basket, and a bottle of wine on the ice.

All of her anxiety and anger—everything—simply vanished.

Then the door behind her shut. Buffy turned and Spike was there, gaze holding hers.

“Hi,” he said softly.

She smiled. “Hey.”

“Didn’t think I’d forget, did you?”

Her smile broadened. That thought itself was laughable. She had learned long ago that he never forgot anything when it came to her, or their relationship. “Never,” she replied. “I just figured you would ignore it.”

The corners of his mouth tugged into a gentle smile and he began toward her, his hands reaching for her face to bring her mouth to his. And then words were overrated—his lips and tongue teasing her with a softness that she had previously thought no man capable of. He tasted her fully but slowly, making that soft whimpering sound that drove her out of her mind.

"Ignore the anniversary of the night my life changed?" he said after their lips parted. "The night you introduced me to paradise? The night I came home for the very first time? I could no sooner give you up." He paused. "Or blood. I need blood, too."

She grinned, drawing his mouth back to hers. His tongue teased hers knowingly, tasting, teasing, doing its damndest to drive her up the wall. God, she loved kissing him. She could spend hours doing nothing but.

"You didn't say anything," she reminded him.

He buried his face in her hair, lips dancing across her cheek and down her neck. "Wanted it to be a surprise," he replied. "And to be fair, you didn't say anything, either."

Buffy made a low murmur in the back of her throat in response, but nothing else.

His answering chuckle filled her completely. "I'm sorry for scaring you, though," he said.

"I know."

"Thought you'd recognize the place right off."

"If someone had told me that I wouldn't, I would've argued the point until I was blue in the face." Buffy pulled back and pursed her lips. "I don't have reason to come down here all that often...and it's been a year."

"But it's our love nest," he teased, teeth skimming her skin. His hands had found the hem of her dress. "Honestly, sweetheart, I'm shocked and appalled that you could've ever forgotten—"

"It's been a year!"

"You're talking to the man who's approaching his bicentennial," Spike reminded her, whisking the dress over her head. "One year's sodding nothing."



“Yes, well I am nineteen as of today, so bite me.”

His eyes widened and he immediately jerked forward to sink his blunt teeth into the proud mark on her throat. Buffy turned to silly putty and thrust her hips against him. The answering hardness that ground her stomach made her fingers and toes go numb. With as much as they had shared, she would have expected his thirst for her to quench eventually. No. Never. If anything, their lovemaking seemed to intensify. As though every time was the first time but not.

He never got over the fact that she was with him.

“God, Buffy.” Spike began planting feverish kisses along her neck. “I can’t imagine what would’ve...where I’d be today if we hadn’t...if I—”

Her vision blurred and she clutched him tighter to her, rolling her head back as he ran his hands over her collarbone before dropping to cup her laced breasts.

“I know,” she gasped. “I don’t like thinking about it.”

“Keep expecting to wake up. Even now.” He lapped at the mark on her throat. “You’re so soft. So warm.” A hand slid up to stroke her cheek. “Beautiful. My goddess.”

She glanced over his shoulder at the flickering candlelight as he began to edge down the straps of her bra. “Spike?”

He buried his face between her breasts, nuzzling and licking at her perspiration. He pushed the cup of her bra aside and wormed a hand around to fiddle with the clasp. “Mmmm...” Then the bra was gone, and his mouth engulfed one of her nipples.

Sensation overrode whatever she’d been about to say. Buffy pulled him tighter into her, pushing her pussy against his cock in fervent need.

Then her eyes landed on the picnic again, and the thought returned. A little fuzzy, but there nonetheless.

“Don’t—ahhh...you...wanna... eat first?”

Spike dropped a hand dropped to her panties at that, then slid under the elastic to tease her sodden flesh with nimble, dutiful fingers. He encircled her clit once, twice, then eased an eager digit into her. She gasped and clutched him tighter as his teeth scraping

the tip of her nipple. "Mmm..." he replied into her skin before turning to give her neglected breast a nibble. "Don't mind if I do. You smell delicious."

He slipped another finger into her as her back found the wall.

He pressed the heel of his hand into her cunt, and she bucked enthusiastically. "Oh my god."

"Still? Even after all this time?"

"Always," she replied. "Love you, Spike."

He released her breast with a wet plop and looked up, his blue eyes dancing. While she had done her best since the night of her high school graduation to catch up with his many admissions, she still had much to make up for. There had been the trip to Europe. The Christmas minibreak to New Orleans. His random weekend road trips that never went by the itinerary that he insisted he thought over before whisking her off. Everything. Everything that made him Spike. Made him hers. Forever.

That word wasn't as frightening as it had been once.

"I love you too," he whispered. "You'll never know how much."

And, without ceremony, he began to slide down her body, dragging her panties along with him.

"What are you doing?"

Spike quirked an eyebrow and licked a wet path up her slit. "If you don't know by now..."

"What about the picnic?"

"Sod the picnic. Want you." He nibbled her inner thigh. "You're all a man could ever need."

"I wanted to taste the wine," she retorted with a pout.

"I'm tasting your wine right now. My golden girl."

"Yours," she agreed.

"Taste so fucking good."

"God, Spike. Oh my god."

He parted her labia and darted out his tongue to taste her. She fisted his hair and pulled him as far into her as she could, felt him slide a hand under her bare hip to anchor her into his mouth. He murmured and mewled and suckled at her, scraped his teeth

against her, stabbed his tongue into her and stroked her to perfection. His mouth made love to her with tenderness. With intensity. With every fiber of his feeling. And when her orgasm hit, she rode it out for waves. Her grip on his hair tightened and her mouth dropped open.

And he licked her up.

Charged and overwhelmed, Buffy fell against him, suddenly sans bones. Spike hauled her into his arms and curled on the floor, where he caressed her cooling body with hands that knew her so well. His cock nudged her ass, reminding her that he had gotten her naked but hadn't yet so much as kicked off his shoes. And while she wanted to remedy that, she found she couldn't move.

"Don't ever tell me," she said a few minutes later, pressing back against him, "where you learned to do that."

Spike brushed a kiss across the nape of her neck. "Jealous, sweetheart?"

"Yes." The ability to move returned to her. She twisted in his arms. "You're wearing too many clothes."

"Was wondering when you'd notice that."

Buffy dragged his shirt over his head and threw it to the other side of the room where she presumed his duster was, then immediately took to caressing the skin he had so cruelly concealed from her. "Mmmm," she murmured. "Like this much better."

"Appreciate the sentiment."

She smirked and stole a kiss from his lips. "That, too. I was talking about this." She gestured to the room. Their surroundings. The place it had begun for them. "Being here with you...it's surreal."

A kind smile swept his eyes. "I know, baby. Only wish we had had the presence of mind to do it like this the first time around."

"Like this?"

He nodded.

"Fall in love in the first hour? Please. I was totally into Angel then."

His expression darkened and he mock-growled at her. Buffy poked her tongue out at him before dropping her hands to his fly.

"Besides, we would've missed out on all that much-needed growth."

"Not helpin', love."

She reached up to caress his face with one hand, the other pulling his jeans down his legs until his cock bobbed freely, rubbing her stomach and begging her for attention.

"I love you," she whispered, pressing a kiss to his shoulder and closing her fingers around his dick. His own hand was tracing patterns against her thigh, traveling downward slowly to hook under her knee and drape over his own so the head of his cock was teasing the mouth of her pussy.

"You were saying?"

"I love you. You make me happy. You...more than...anyone." She sank her teeth into his shoulder blade as he began to edge inside, his hands on her hips, holding her against him. "I never knew it could be like this until..."

"I love you, Buffy."

"I know. I love you, too."

She rested her brow against his, intermingling whimpers and gasps and nods of encouragement. When they began moving together, it was a symphony of pure bliss. The feel of him inside her as he caressed her with loving hands and worshipped her mouth was sensory overload. No matter how many times she experienced it, she couldn't get enough.

Pressure began building without warning, and he rolled them over so that she was under him within a second. The pace he set was slow but hard—clasping her hands in his and spreading her arms wide as he slammed into her with moans of feral possession. He released her hands the next minute, trailing his fingers up her arms until they found her breasts again. He laved her nipples with his tongue and placed sweet kisses along the underside of her sensitive flesh. Her legs were wrapped so tight around his waist that he would have been crushed were he anything less than a vampire. And every time she clamped her slayer muscles around him, squeezing him, he

moaned and babbled in ways that made her fall in love with him all over again.

It shouldn't have been like this with them. It shouldn't have been anything. But it was. A dance they knew well but never took for granted. He picked the song but she knew the moves—always and beyond, vice versa and everything in between. She lifted her hips to recapture his cock every time he pulled away. She battled him and conceded, then turned around and conquered. And it only got better. With every breath, it only got better.

A ball of ecstasy sparked to life in her gut as Spike's thrusts became deeper, more frantic. He reached up to brush strands of dampened hair from her eyes.

Then paused, his cock poised at her opening, and said, "Your favorite movie still *Ferris Bueller*?"

Buffy's eyes went wide. "You remember that?"

"I remember everything sweetheart. You know that."

She did. Of course she did. But it surprised her all the same.

"No," she replied, and he thrust inside her again. She cast her head back and welded her eyes shut. "It was for a long...oh god...time...but you...uuhhhh..."

"What's your favorite...movie now?"

"*The Holy Grail*."

"Told you. Monty Python...brilliant."

"What's...yours?" Her eyes opened again. "You...you never...told me."

"Don't have one," he replied through his teeth, hands going to either side of her head, palms pressed against the floor as his thrusts grew quicker still. "Favor...ooooohhh, fuck. You feel so good."

"You too. Always." She paused. "And how...can you not have one?"

He smirked. "Live as long as I do, love, and find out. Favorite color?"

Buffy's hands flew to his forearms, digging her nails into his skin, which only encouraged him to thrust harder. "Blue," she gasped. "And yellow."

"Why?"

"Your eyes."

"Buffy..."

"You?"

"Green." He nodded, wrestling a hot, needy kiss from her lips. "Your eyes. Oh god, Buffy. Buffy. So much. Love you so bloody much."

"I..."

He collapsed his left arm onto his elbow, his other hand traveling the expanse of her body to caress her where they were joined. Encouraging. Needing. Pleading.

"Come for me, baby. Please."

"Spike..." She threw her head back. "Bite me."

The request alone, the sound of her sweet voice asking it of him, pushed Spike over the threshold. He glued his eyes to the heavenly alabaster at her throat. At the blood rushing through her veins. Blood that she offered him. The most coveted blood in all the land.

Not because she was the Slayer.

Because she was Buffy.

He shouldn't. He knew he shouldn't. They had talked about this—about what it would mean. While he had no qualms drinking from her now, it was dangerous when they were fucking. Dangerous because he was so close to being out of control that the thought of what he could do frightened him.

His fangs had already decided, though. His demon wanted blood. Her blood.

It also wanted to claim her. And he didn't know if he could stop himself.

"Oh fucking Christ—"

"Do it."

"Buffy...you know what you—"

Her smoldering eyes found his. She cupped his cheek and nodded.

"Buffy!"

"I know what it means, Spike," she said, throwing him with the steadiness in her resolve. And there it was. There, buried within her

gaze. She knew what she was doing. She wanted this. This, and everything that came with it.

Forever.

The thought was almost more than he could comprehend. The weight of her gift. What it meant for him. For them. More than he had ever hoped to have. Too late. Too late to turn back. This was it.

"I want this," she whispered as his head descended to her throat. "I love you. I want this."

He kissed brushed the mark he'd given her. "Buffy..."

Then he could wait no longer. His fangs slid into the buttery softness of her skin.

And she exploded.

The minute her blood touched his tongue, he followed her over. Her body quenching him. Bucking into him. Her cries of pleasure filling the air. Her nails clawing at his arms and back. It was everything. She was everything. And she was giving him what he had wanted for so long.

"Mine!" he roared, hips pistoning against hers as she milked his cock for everything he was worth. "Always mine! Always mine. Buffy. My Buffy. Oh god..."

"Yours. Yours, Spike. Always."

His demon rejoiced and his man broke down weeping. And his body kept coming.

And she held him.

At last the waves began to recede. Prickles of aftershock raced through his body, his pelvis still rocking against. Heady gasps colored the air. Her blood was in his mouth, and she was his.

Spike rested his forehead against hers. Holy fuck, she was his.

Then something unexpected happened.

Buffy pulled back to look at him, her eyes filled with love and acceptance, and she smiled. Smiled, then lurched forward and latched her own teeth onto the mark Drusilla had left him over a century before.

He had never hardened nor climaxed so quickly in his unlife.

"Fuck!"

"And you're mine!" she said as his body sought comfort, numb from shock, winded from excursion for the first time in the whole of his existence.

Spike saw his blood on her lips and wanted to cry.

"Yours," he whimpered before ravaging her mouth with his. "Always. Yours. Yours yours yours yours. Fucking god. Love you so much. Christ, Buffy."

Her eyes met his in the soft glow of candlelight, and she was so vibrant, shaking with the foundation of her love that he knew he'd never know the dark again.



"I WANNA TRY THE WINE."

Spike grinned, climbing over her naked limbs to retrieve the bottle and two glasses. The food in the basket remained untouched and the candles were burning so low that it would be a surprise if they lasted the next half hour.

"It is an excellent brand, if I do say so myself."

Buffy smiled and propped her head against her palm. "What is it?"

"Fuck if I know," he replied, pouring a single glass and hailing it to his senses before indulging a small sip. Then he adopted a pompous, upper-class accent that should not have turned her on but did anyway. "Embodies complexity and delicacy at the same time." His twinkling eyes found hers. "The best of which are seductively enchanting in their intense aromatics...much like yourself...complex in flavor and long silky texture." He took another sip. "Mmm... wonderfully rich, full-bodied but graceful. Just how I like my wine."

"And your women?"

"Only one woman in my life, and the wine is nothin' compared to her."

She sat up, reaching for the glass. "Wanna try."

"Sorry, love. No can do."

Her smile melted instantly. "What? Why not?"



"You're only nineteen. That would be scandalous." He took in a full minute to enjoy the look on her face before obligingly handing her the glass and rising to his feet.

"Mmm...this is good."

"Told you."

"But I'm better?"

"No comparison."

It took Buffy a minute to notice that he was slipping into his jeans.

"Where are you going?"

"Outside for a smoke. Be back in a jiffy." Off her look, he smiled gently and pressed a kiss across her forehead. "Won't smoke in here, love. Too cramped. Know you don't like it."

"I don't mind."

His smile turned devious and he wagged a finger at her. "Little liar," he replied, reaching for the doorknob. "I'll be back in a flash."

Then he yanked—and stumbled against the door.

Spike looked at her over his shoulder, smiled, and began to tug in earnest.

Nothing happened.

Buffy frowned and set the glass of wine aside. "Spike?"

"Uhhh...funny story."

"Don't tell me..."

"Yeah." He thumped a fist against the closed door, shoulders sagging. "Bugger all."

