

NAILED



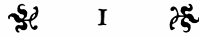
HOLLY DENISE





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SCREWED





## FOREVER IN DEBT TO YOUR PRICELESS ADVICE

“PLEASE TELL ME YOU FOUND SOMETHING.”

“I found something.”

Buffy opened her mouth, a thousand arguments and reprimands ready on her tongue. She’d been practicing, too, had learned some good ones to whip out in the event Giles told her what he’d told her every night for the last week. Or rather, ever since the Council had swept in and then out of their lives again, right after dropping the sort of bomb that could wipe whole countries off the map.

All things considered, Buffy had taken the news about Glory with as much aplomb as a thoroughly fucked person could manage, and in the days following, had had exactly one question for her watcher. He, in turn, had had exactly one answer. That answer being a thoroughly unsatisfactory “I need more time.” And while not an unreasonable request, that answer did not inspire much confidence. As it was, finding out that she was facing a god rather than a demon had Buffy debating the virtues of booking a flight to Myanmar for the whole fam until the Glory thing was of the past. Add in the fact that she was the recipient of exactly zero answers from Giles as to how she was to go up against such a creature, and the prospect of putting at least one conti-

nent, maybe two, between herself and the potentially world-ending problem seemed better and better.

This was not a very heroic impulse, she knew, but no one had ever told her that gods were a thing she might come across in the wild, or at all. It seemed like that should have been discussed at some point prior to one bulldozing their way into Buffy's life.

The only hope she had was that the resources the Council had dumped on the newly reinstated Rupert Giles would yield some results. The kind of results that would make her feel good about staying in one place rather than bolting for the border with Dawn strapped to her back.

And now, finally, Giles had something. For the first time since the evaluation from hell, courtesy of the Council, Buffy felt the tension in her muscles actually letting go, and a rush of pure, addictive hope exploded inside all the dread.

"What is it?" she asked, forgetting to close the door she'd just come through in her eagerness for answers. His apartment was a mess—packed full with books the Council had sent over, as he'd decided they were safer here than at the Magic Box. Less chance of a customer picking them up by mistake and Anya deciding that the store's bottom line mattered more than the upcoming fight. "Please tell me it's a shrinking spell that'll make her, like, the size of an ant and I can just squish her under my shoe. I like squishable monsters."

"This involves no, ahh, squishing," Giles replied, barely looking up from the book he was poring over. Or books, she should say, as there were three, all monstrously thick and spread out across his table. "However, there is a spell in the Namurot codex that was copied from the original Coptic into Latin when referenced in the Silvanus scrolls. I believe there might have been an error in that translation."

None of that made any sense to her, but that was okay. As long as it made sense to Giles, she'd consider it a win. "Okay. Great. What's that mean?"

"Generally that some of the original meaning might have been lost."

"For *us*, Giles. What does it mean for *us*?"

“Oh, quite right.” Giles looked up then, meeting her gaze for the first time since she’d stormed into the place. As though only then realizing she was indeed there, and he wasn’t just rambling to himself. “Silvanus refers to a spell that forces creatures to their dwellings. Most scholars agree that this is literal. A rather handy tactic one might employ if facing whole armies, for instance. Perform the spell and effectively compel all non-human entities to return to whatever place they consider their home. The Scourge, for example, are considered a tremendous threat, widely feared even in the demonic world. Perform this spell correctly and it would banish them back to their place of origin, which could displace them for days, if not longer, and allow yourself time to mount a proper defense.”

“Okay, great,” Buffy said, not bothering to hide her disappointment. Insofar as brilliant plans went, that was just a hair above kinda okay. “Except Glory’s camp is out here. So, what, we could banish her back to her evil lair? That might get us a couple of hours, but it’s not exactly the smoking gun I was hoping for.”

“I said it was a translation,” he replied, removing his glasses. And at that, she perked up a bit. It was hard not to. Glasses removal in this context was Giles code for *I wasn’t finished*. “The Namurot codex predates the Silvanus by at least a thousand years. If it *was* mistranslated, as I believe it was, the implications could be significant.”

“How significant?”

“I must finish translating it myself, understand the full meaning, to be absolutely certain.”

“But you think you know?”

“I do.” Giles straightened his shoulders. “If I am right, then the original text of the spell was designed to banish all interdimensional beings from this world back to their world of origin. It would effectively send Glory back to her original plane of existence.”

Buffy’s breath caught. Hell, everything caught. She wasn’t sure she’d heard right. Or if she had, that she’d understood. Because this was more than just a tactic to win—it was a way to avoid needing to fight at all. Instant victory, no fuss, no muss, no blood spilled. Nothing spilled. Just a return to the life she’d had to place on hold. A maybe not

perfect life but a life minus one deranged god. And with everything she'd been asked to give up, the possibility of being handed a win like this was just...

Too good to be true. She knew it. Not even ten seconds passed before reality set in, and she remembered that she was, in fact, not that lucky. Never had been.

"It's not certain," Giles said in his don't-get-your-hopes-up voice. "Coptic has never been one of my strongest languages. However, I am learned enough to understand how to translate it, *and* I have a friend who is an expert in the field. She has agreed to review the original text and provide an independent translation, or at the very least verify that mine is accurate."

"I can't believe it's real," Buffy said. She'd fallen all the way back down from her high and didn't see how she'd climb back up. It had been nice, those five seconds or so, but the odds were too stacked. "If there's a discrepancy like that, how is it that no one has ever figured it out in comparing them before?"

"I think you are overestimating how frequently gods from other dimensions pose a threat to the one we call home," Giles replied, nudging his glasses back into place. "And that anyone would believe there was a reason to compare the two. As it is, the passage in the Namurot codex stood out to me specifically due to my familiarity with the Silvanus. It's in, ahh, a sort of rhythm that is most unusual and distinctive."

The fall kept on falling. "So that's it? Just it looked the same even though you don't know what it says?"

"It shared a unique structure—anyone familiar with the Silvanus would have spotted it." Giles paused for a moment, then stiffened. "And I'll have you know that my Coptic is good enough to recognize a few relevant words. I'm managing my translation just fine."

Yeah, well, it still sounded a little too good to be true. Reviewing the texts the Council had sent and just happening across something that made him think of another passage in another book in another language? And though he was being all the-watcher-doth-protest-too-much now, Giles *had* said his Coptic wasn't all that and a bag of chips.



Buffy nodded to prove she wasn't entirely a spoilsport, but privately, she'd be holding her breath for the phone call from his friend. Who she would not be asking about because she didn't need to know any more about Giles's sex life than she already did, which was unfortunately a lot.

"Anything else?" she asked instead. "No other pearls of wisdom from the metric ton of stuff they dropped?"

"Nothing promising," Giles said, not picking up on her tone. "Just confirmation of what they told us about Glory." He hesitated and met her gaze again. "You are still certain you wish to tell the others? The more people who know, the higher the likelihood that Glory discovers—"

"No, they need to know," Buffy replied, and there was no uncertainty in her voice this time. She understood the risks, understood everything Giles was cautioning her against, but she also knew that her friends would do whatever they could to protect Dawn. "They *deserve* to know. They're going to be in the fight with me. They always are. They will need to know why I'm mother-henning her, why she can't just go off and do whatever she wants. Why it's important that I know where she is at all times. And it's not like they haven't noticed something's different. Willow keeps asking me why I'm on Dawn's case constantly."

"Nothing new there," Giles muttered.

"Maybe not but it's different now." Or not different—the same. Because all those times that Buffy had wanted to tear her sister's head off were fabrications. Scenes from a life she remembered but hadn't actually led. Conversations and screaming matches and tattling to Mom and clothes that had been borrowed without permission and that time Buffy hadn't been able to go to the mall because Dawn had been sick and thus her sleepover had been canceled... A whole lifetime that hadn't been lived but felt like it had.

Buffy had more or less accepted this. She'd had the time to. Had sat with the knowledge for months now, all while watching her sister and trying to imagine what her life had been like before Dawn had been inserted into it. If there were differences between that version of Buffy

and the one she was now, and if so, what might have been lost. Or gained. Was it all just Dawn-centric or were other parts of her life just not what she thought they were—or *only* what she thought they were as a result of what was happening now?

If she didn't flunk out of college, she might take a philosophy class to help unclutter her overcluttered head.

"When do you think your friend will have a translation for us?" Buffy asked. Small hope was better than no hope.

"I need perhaps another hour on my own," Giles said, returning his attention to the open texts. "Then I will send her what I have as well as a copy of the original. I expect to hear from her sometime tomorrow."

Buffy nodded and turned back toward the door. "In that case, I guess I'll hit patrol and maybe see if the gang wants to go to the Bronze." Really, anything that would rescue her from her thoughts and the chance of psyching herself up for something that didn't exist. Normally, Buffy's faith in Giles's translating ability would be extremely high, like her faith in Dawn's tendency to leave her wet towels on the bathroom floor. Giles had rarely let her down in the translation department, maybe not ever, but there had also never been odds like this.

And in Buffy's experience, the higher the stakes, the more brutal the fight. Kill her ex-boyfriend to save the world from being sucked into Hell. Stop the mayor before he initiates demon rule on earth. Prevent Adam from creating an army of human-demon hybrid soldiers. Angel had still been the hardest, the most difficult to see life on the other side of, but at the end of the day, he'd still been just a vampire. Glory was in a league beyond anything Buffy had ever fought. The idea that there might be an easy fix to her god problem that Giles had stumbled over by accident was too much. She couldn't.

Giles didn't try to stop her as she left, nor did he call after her with any calm, Gilesy reassurances. Not that he made with the reassurances all the time, and rarely on things like this, but Buffy decided it was a bad omen anyway. Just another nail in the coffin of her excitement.

Still, it wasn't over yet. Right now, at least, they had time. Maybe he'd find something else, something a little less nebulous that would

help. That original spell could still be helpful. Anything was possible. And in her world, that truly meant *anything*.

The closest cemetery to Giles's place was Twin Pines, and she could hit Restfield easily enough after that. She wasn't sure she felt like a city-wide tour of the cemeteries tonight so she might skip out once she'd done a pass. Or, more likely, go Bronze like she'd said she would, then make the rounds at the cemeteries she'd skipped in her rush to do something not slayage-adjacent. Because god forbid Buffy Summers ever get one night off.

The sound of a scuffle broke through the hum of her thoughts, and Buffy glanced to her right in time to see a vampire careen headfirst into a headstone. It wasn't a vampire she knew, but from the telltale tingles at her nape, it had sure been thrown by one. She sighed and crossed her arms, turning to face the barreling form of Spike as he practically skipped to her side to admire his handiwork. Looking extra buoyant for reasons that made no sense, but such was Spike.

"Evenin', Slayer," he said with a broad grin, seizing the vampire ragdoll he was playing with by the collar and dragging the poor thing to its feet. "This one's mine. You fancy a good kill yourself, I'm afraid you're gonna have to look elsewhere."

His plaything—a vampire that looked to have been a middle-aged, balding stockbroker when he'd died—just blinked bleary, unfocused eyes. Buffy could practically see the cartoon birdies flittering about his head.

"Just what I needed," she muttered, and pulled her stake out from where she had it secured between the waistband of her sweats and the small of her back. "If all you're going to do is throw him around, I'm gonna put him out of his misery."

Spike scowled and jerked the arm holding the vamp back in a new twist on the *keep away* game. "Ah ah, don't think so. Go find your own. Took me long enough to scare this one up."

Buffy rolled her eyes, then dropped to the ground to sweep Spike's legs out from under him. Then he was flat on his back, and his little punching vamp squealed and stumbled away in a dazed bid for freedom. She'd say the little fledge's mistake was looking at her with some

combination of hope, but who was she kidding? The poor thing was never leaving this cemetery alive. Or undead.

"Can't let me have anything, can you?" Spike complained loudly, sitting up. "Not like I was hurtin' anyone!"

She ignored him—well, kind of. She ran at him, jumped, and touched off his shoulder with her foot to perfect her aim as she came down on Mr. Stockbroker. The vampire's eyes flashed open wide, taking in the last thing he would ever see, as the stake pierced through flesh and bone, and by the time she was on the ground again, there was nothing left of him but the dust coating the grass blades.

"Oh, that's nice, Slayer," Spike said, slapping at his duster as though she were the reason it was filthy. Did he *ever* have that thing cleaned? "Real nice."

"You were taking too long," she replied, stuffing her stake back inside her waistband.

"And how was that botherin' you? I'll tell you how—not at all. Not my fault you're so miserable you can't stand to see *anyone* havin' a good time." He straightened, pinning her with every watt of his burning glare. "I'd say you were hard up for a good shag but wasn't like you were gettin' it good before you chased another fella off. Oh wait, actually, that explains a—"

But Buffy couldn't hear what it explained—she didn't really need to, context clues giving the punchline away—over the sound of her knuckles smashing into his nose with the whip-fast precision that he had been so instrumental in helping her perfect. His head shot back as it always did, and he brought up a hand to inspect the damage by way of course. The routine exchange.

"One more word, Spike," she said, in what was also comfortable routine. "One more word about me or Riley or my dating track record and I will make your nights a *lot* quieter. Like *dead* quiet."

Spike snickered and shook his head. "Yeah, right. Haven't heard that one before."

"You've enjoyed an incredibly prolonged stay of execution because *I* allow it. Don't forget that."

"Oooh, someone's feelin' big in her britches tonight." The scowl on his face melted just like that, blooming into the borderline gleeful

tease that only he could pull off. "You get high marks on your test then, did you? Was there an oral report and everything?"

"You're a pig."

"Yeah, and you cuddle a pig every night. No use tryin' to pretend you don't fancy creatures that roll in the muck."

Buffy wrinkled her nose, thrown. How the hell did he know about Mr. Gordo? Ugh, it didn't matter. When in doubt, ignore the neutered vampire.

Granted, that was easier to do when said neutered vampire didn't make it a point to tail your every move. Spike was hot on her heels the second she turned to resume her patrol, because of course he was. Just as Buffy got no nights off, she also got no nights pest-free. He was just lucky she'd already taken the edge off by staking Mr. Stockbroker.

"So how did it go, then?" Spike went on. "You do a song and dance for them? Ask *how high* when they told you to jump? Make yourself nice and subservient?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

So much for ignoring him.

Spike huffed as though actually offended. "Never heard the end of it, is all. What those Council gits were here sniffin' out."

Oh, right. Buffy had forgotten Spike had been a part of that process at all. Probably because he'd been the opposite of helpful, as per her expectations. She'd had to assure a few people that no, she did not in fact let him feed off the odd victim. Not that they'd believed him, they'd said, as no sane person talked with vampires while expecting them to tell the truth. Being that Spike was a notorious slayer hunter, kept in check only by virtue of a chip in his head, pretty much everything he'd told them had been accepted as bullshit.

Too much to expect him to ever be helpful.

"They didn't get what they wanted," she replied. "But I did. That's all you need to know."

"Course you did. Never doubted you would."

Buffy frowned. That almost sounded like a compliment. Which was weird. Spike didn't compliment her. And if he did, he did so with an agenda. "Yeah, well, don't forget it," she replied weakly. There wasn't much else to say.

“Not like any of your lot ever tells me what’s what. Would think after all I do for you, you might keep me in the bloody loop every now and then. Put in a good word for you and everythin’.”

“If that’s what you call a good word, then...” Buffy shook her head, letting the thought go. It probably *was* what he called a good word, which shouldn’t be surprising yet was. Spike’s depravity had no bottom, just outcrops you hit as you fell to heretofore undiscovered lows.

“So, they tell you where that slag got all that muscle from?” he asked conversationally. “Haven’t met her myself, but I hear she knocked you around a time or two. Sorry to have missed that show.”

“Don’t get too excited. I’m still here.”

Buffy started marching away before he could respond, fully expecting him to yell after her or hurry to catch up. It wasn’t like Spike to just let her have the last word, especially on the matter of her death. Even more especially since, just a few weeks back, she’d plied him with drinks and spicy buffalo wings on top of a nice wad of cash all for the privilege of hearing the stories of how he’d beaten the other slayers. But Spike didn’t yell after her, or sprint to join her as she continued her patrol route. He just let her go, which was hands down weird.

Not that she would look a gift vamp in the mouth. Spike-free nights weren’t easy to come by. She’d take what she could get.

Which ended up being not very much. An hour later, a thoroughly unsatisfied Buffy helped herself into her house, having slain apparently the only vampire prowling the night tonight. She hated slow weeks, almost as much as she hated hating them—fewer vampires in the graveyards meant fewer people had died due to severe neck trauma, which was a net good—but a slayer needed a decent workout, and the local baddies were not providing. It was almost enough to make her wonder about trying to hunt Spike down again just to make sure her punch didn’t lose its punchiness, but seeking him out for the purpose of hitting him always made her feel a bit ooky.

Not that she did it much. She just thought about it. Probably more than she should.

“Hi, dear,” her mom said as Buffy traipsed into the kitchen in search of a post-patrol snack. “You look... You know, there’s probably

not a safe way to end that sentence, so let's just forget I started it at all."

Buffy snorted appreciatively, throwing open the fridge though knowing it was no good. Grocery store day was tomorrow, which meant the yogurt had yet to be replaced. "Just your average really slow day at the office," she replied. "Extra book learning and no baddies for me to beat up, unless you count the one I stole from Spike."

"Sorry," Joyce replied. "But, for me, please don't pick a fight with your sister to make up for it."

Buffy closed the fridge door, perhaps a bit harder than was warranted, her hackles getting hackly. "Why, what did she do?"

"She hasn't done anything. I just know you tend to be extra... *tense* when you haven't been challenged in a while."

If her mom had any idea how much she sounded like Faith right now, she might be tempted to wash her mouth out with soap. Unfortunately, she was also right, and Buffy knew it. Everything Council plus slow patrols and a big question mark on the Glory situation did in fact make Buffy a dull girl, and dull girls were quick to get mad over things like borrowed hair brushes and tubes of lipstick that ran out well ahead of schedule.

"As long as I don't find any Dawn-sized messes in my room, I will resist the temptation to slay my sister," Buffy said. "But I make no promises if she's stolen anything larger than a tank top. I've seen her eyeing my new cashmere sweater and you know she'll spill something on it within five seconds and just my luck, it's the hardest stain of all the stains. Resistant to Tide and magic."

"Buffy."

She brought up her hands. "I'll play nice."

"Good," Joyce retorted, not bothering to hide her amusement. "Because you just got irritated with her for a hypothetical."

"A likely hypothetical." Buffy mimed zipping her lips shut, though, then shifted her attention to the cupboards. While the refrigerator was a bust, there had to be something in here to satisfy a growing slayer's appetite. Nothing big, just a snack to tide her over until she made it to the Bronze. And also take the edge off her hunger so she didn't pig out in front of any potential future exes. It was time to get back

onto the dating wagon, and all. She'd been without serious relationship angst for almost a whole month.

She was just debating the virtues of a peanut butter sandwich when the phone rang. Mom was already on it by the time Buffy turned around, heading toward the cordless on the other side of the kitchen. She picked up and chirped the familiar "Hello" that Buffy caught herself unwittingly mimicking on occasion, then followed it up with, "Oh, hello, Mr. Giles. Yes, she just got in. Just a second."

Giles already? Buffy whirled again, arm already outstretched and her heart leaping into her throat. She wished it wouldn't; there was almost no chance he was calling to say anything worth getting excited over. "Thanks," she muttered as she took the phone, then tried to steady her stupid nerves before raising it to her ear. "Bad or good?"

It probably said something about their relationship that he didn't slow down at all. "It is the same text," he replied in his *but* voice.

Buffy waited, her pulse starting to pound outright. The same text. The same text meant the spell he'd mentioned was possible, right? Except he didn't sound like the good news bear. He sounded like the giant caveat bear, and she personally didn't like that bear at all. "Tell me."

"It is possible that in my excitement about the structural match and the larger implications of the spell itself that I...overlooked a few crucial elements."

"Such as?"

"The steps required in the spell itself."

Of course. Something that large couldn't be easy. They were talking about forcibly evicting every demon in this world that called another dimension home. A spell like that would probably involve a ritual sacrifice or maybe swearing over the first-born son, which she'd really thought she would have encountered more of by now, considering how often it popped up in the movies. "What is it?"

"In order to fulfill the terms of the spell, you must engage in...relations. With a creature of the night."

"Excuse me, I have to *what?*"

There was a pause, then a sigh. "You have to have physical relations with a vampire."



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Buffy's skin had started to burn, and her heart to pound. That couldn't mean what it sounded like. "Define physical relations."

"I would rather not."

"Giles..."

"Sex, Buffy. You must have...*carnal* relations with a vampire."

Exactly what it sounded like, then.

Well, fuck.

# I DON'T BELIEVE YOU, YOU'RE NOT THE TRUTH

IT HADN'T BEEN A BIG HOPE, BUT IT HAD EXISTED, AND BUFFY HAD clung to it like a spider monkey. That was the possibility that either Giles was pulling the world's unfunniest prank or had made a huge translation blunder the likes of which she would never let him live down. Like, "Wanna know how bad Giles's Coptic is? He nearly made me bone a vampire for a ritual this one time." Not that it was a great joke or anything but it would still be a *joke* as in funny and not a real thing she had to really consider for the very real fate of the world.

Yet here she was, back at Giles's place, and he didn't look like he was confused or joking or any of the other things Buffy had tried to convince herself after their phone call last night. He'd wanted more time, he'd said, to triple-check his translation and for his friend to provide her independent translation, which would, god-willing, debunk the crazy, disgusting thing he'd told her she might need to do to save the world.

No such luck. Buffy had done her best to busy herself that morning—to think about anything else—but her brain had not been in the mood to help and had instead started going through the list of potential candidates to proposition if worst came to worst.

Not that there was really a list. A list tended to have more than two things on it and her list did not.

Really, just one thing since the other thing was impossible.

But Buffy wasn't going to think about that until it was absolutely necessary.

"Tell me something good, Giles," she said after collapsing onto his sofa. Willing herself to believe that he hadn't disappeared into the kitchen because he wanted to avoid her but because there had been some sort of toaster emergency. "I came here for good news only. If you have bad news, sorry. The Slayer shop is closed. I promise all the translation jokes heading your way will be measured in proportion to how much you freaked me out last night. So, shave five years off my life, that means I get five years of giving you grief. Does that sound fair? I think that sounds fair. Of course, when we consider the exchange rate for Slayer over regular people who aren't going to die an early—"

"I didn't make a mistake."

An honest-to-god whimper tumbled off Buffy's lips before she could stop it. "What?" she asked, shifting to her knees and twisting so she was facing the window that linked the kitchen to the living room. "No, you have to have made a mistake."

"Believe me, I truly wish I had." There was so much sincerity in his voice that it killed all her remaining hope. "It is definitive. Pamela's translation confirms it." A pause. "Actually, it does more than confirm it. I missed a few crucial but imperative details."

"You're telling me it's worse than what you said last night?"

Giles didn't reply, but he didn't need to. The whole avoiding eye-contact thing he had going on did enough speaking on its own. Like really, enough. More explanations were not necessary.

Except, of course, they were. She knew they were.

"The spell calls for the Slayer to prove that she is the master of her dimension," he began slowly. "It is by this authority that she can command interlopers back to their dimension of origin. The text specifically says that this is done by 'doing the deed of darkness' with her demonic counterpart."

"Doing the deed of darkness? Really?"

“It is a rather archaic way to say—”

“I know what it means. Archaic or not, it’s not exactly subtle.” Buffy crossed her arms, feeling suddenly vulnerable, like she was sitting there in nothing but her underwear. For all intents and purposes, she might as well be. Turned out she could defeat Glory easy peasy—she just had to whore herself out to do it. “And demonic counterpart means vampire. We’re sure of that.”

“Yes,” Giles said without the barest hint of hesitation. “Vampires have a unique relationship with the Slayer, more so than any other demon or creature you have been known to hunt. There is a reason you feel them the way you do. Why they call to you specifically.”

Buffy nodded but didn’t reply. She wasn’t sure why it mattered, except that vampires were at least a known entity. That made them preferable to some creature she’d never heard of, probably. If anything about this could be preferable.

“Furthermore,” Giles went on, his cheeks starting to go red, “the Slayer must ‘see the face of God’ seven times to demonstrate that she has completely cleansed the dimension.”

“I have to what now?”

He didn’t look up. “In this context, it means to...ahh, experience physical release.”

“Oh god, never say any of those words ever again.”

“Do I look like I’m enjoying myself?”

No, he really didn’t, but that didn’t make Buffy feel any better. Not only did she have to fuck the undead, but she had to listen to Giles dance around old-timey code words for orgasm. Maybe this world wasn’t worth saving. “Is that all?” she asked.

“It is not.”

Of course it wasn’t.

“The text goes on to say that the vampire with whom you couple must refrain from ‘breaking his arrow’ for the period of one hour.”

“And I’m sure that means nothing gross or pornographic.”

Giles still didn’t look up. “It means that the vampire you are with must refrain from reaching his...pinnacle—”

“Okay, I’m officially barring you from euphemisms. It’s worse than the actual words.”

“—for an hour.”

If he got any redder, Buffy thought his face would just catch fire. Or maybe melt off à la Indiana Jones. Either possibility was likely preferable for both of them at this point. Hell, she might have thrown herself out the window to spare them further awkwardness if her brain hadn't hiccupped once she'd processed what he'd actually said. But her brain had hiccupped, and now she had questions she really didn't want the answers to but knew she needed all the same.

“An hour? I'm supposed to have sex with a vampire, and he needs to get me to”—she made a rolling motion with her hand in lieu of saying the actual words—“seven times, without”—another rolling motion—“himself for an *hour*? What the hell is this, Giles?”

“And at the end, he must take your blood,” he concluded in a rush.

“What?”

Giles didn't reply for a long beat, rather studied a spot on the floor as he ostensibly tried to reclaim his composure. She didn't know which part, exactly, had thrown him over, or if it was a culmination of everything. He very clearly hadn't wanted to share any of this. The fact that he had in itself proved how serious it was. How serious *he* was. It wasn't some incredibly creepy practical joke or mistake or anything else that would make it not exactly what he'd just described. The spell, the translation, everything was real.

“There are other ways,” Giles said after a beat. He still wasn't looking at her. “There *must* be other ways to defeat Glory. This is... No one can expect you to use your body in this fashion.”

No, just use her body in some other fashion. It wasn't like it was even hers. Hadn't been since she'd been fifteen.

“Why does the vampire need to take my blood?” Buffy asked. “Why the hour? Why the seven times?”

“I'd really rather not discuss this.”

“Yeah, me too, but the time to stop was before you started. If this sends Glory back to the hellhole she came from, then we'd be stupid not to consider it.”

“It's insanity to consider it at all!”

“More so than the fact that I can remember the day my parents brought Dawn home from the hospital and every day after that

and *none of it happened?*” She sighed and twisted back around to fall against the sofa cushions. The first pulses of a headache were starting to form behind her eyes. “Giles, if this spell works, if there’s a chance... It could save the world.”

“But at what cost?”

At the cost of her. The cost of what she was willing to do or have done to her. She was expected to stand between the world and Armageddon, sacrifice her life if necessary. Die young. An upcoming footnote in an upcoming edition of her watcher’s personal diary.

It wasn’t what she wanted—nothing about this was—but she couldn’t discount it just because it involved doing something gross. At the end of the day, if she had to choose between seven orgasms and an early grave, she’d take the orgasms. And probably the world’s longest shower after the fact, but she could worry about that after the world was saved.

“Tell me why the vampire needs to take my blood,” she said, and pushed herself to her feet.

Her tone must have changed, or Giles must have realized she was serious, for by the time she’d joined him in the kitchen, he was in glasses-polish mode. “Please understand that—”

“Just tell me.”

A pause, and then he relented. Closed his eyes and dropped his brow into his hand and began speaking at a clip. “All of these actions are to solidify yourself as the master of this dimension and grant you the magical authority to expel interlopers back to their places of origin. A slayer who has tamed her enemy to the degree that he will prioritize her pleasure and honor her blood... The number seven is likely owing to its prevalence as an important number in numerous myths and beliefs across the globe. The hour-length duration of the act itself demonstrates that the vampire’s intrinsic selfish nature has been duly conquered as well, as vampires are creatures of pure id, commanded by their need to satisfy the self. The vampire must take your blood at the end of the exchange without ending your life. Blood is one of the oldest and most powerful magical seals and taking that blood in a way that shows respect and reverence rather than a desire to destroy

is necessary to consider the magic binding. But Buffy, you don't—"

"It has to be Spike."

Giles whipped his head up, his eyes wide and his face twisted into a grimace. "You can't be serious."

Buffy pressed her lips together, balling her hands into fists tight enough that her nails dug into her palms. She had to get through this next part and preferably without her watcher looking at her like she was insane or disgusting or some combination thereof.

"Spike will do it," she said with calm she absolutely did not feel. "We know it can't be Angel and any other vampire... It *can't* be just any other vampire. It has to be Spike."

"You're actually considering this."

"I don't have a choice, Giles. Of course I'm considering it. We're talking about an hour out of my life versus the world."

"But to debase yourself so—"

"I need you to stop with that," Buffy snapped, a bit more forcibly than she would have liked but it was out there now and she wasn't about to take it back. "I get it. Do I look like I'm doing backflips? This might be the most degrading, disgusting thing that I've ever... But if it's this or let Glory win, then it's this. And we have leverage. Something that Spike wants enough to go along with whatever we ask."

"You mean the chip," Giles replied tonelessly.

"What else?"

"You can't seriously be suggesting we offer to help him remove it."

"I'm not." At least not yet. "What I am suggesting is that if he has a price, and he will because he's Spike, and if that happens to be the price, we tell him we'll play ball." Though the second she said *price* in conjunction with what they were discussing, Buffy's gut gave a violent twist and she thought she might lose her lunch. Sure, she wasn't strictly a prostitute in this scenario but it felt close enough to be uncomfortable. Better not to think about that, lest she start giving into her second, third, and fourth thoughts.

"You would truly consider unleashing a vampire of Spike's reputation, one who has tried to kill us all numerous times, in order to see this through?"

Buffy shifted her weight between her feet. This was exactly the sort of attitude she didn't need right now, lest she lose her nerve. "Well, we'll have to do something about the chip anyway," she said. "So he can bite me for the last bit."

"And let him bite you. You must be out of your senses."

"Do you have a better idea? Or how about a better plan? 'Cause from where I'm standing, it's this or we take our chances against a god that has already flattened me more than once. The best alternative I have at the moment is shoving Dawn into a trunk and booking it to Vancouver for a while." She snapped her mouth shut, having very much not meant to say as much aloud—now or probably ever—but it was out there now and she couldn't exactly take it back.

Maybe that was a good thing. Maybe he needed to hear that fucking a vampire right now was only the second worst idea she had up her sleeve. That for the first time since she'd been called, the thought of running away and leaving Sunnydale at the mercy of the bad guy seemed like not only an actual option, but perhaps the one she should consider. It wouldn't fix the Glory problem but maybe it would keep Dawn safe. The only reasons she hadn't acted on it were the vague hope that the Council would provide something useful and concern for her mom, still on the mend from her operation and probably not in the best condition for long-distance travel.

"I don't like this any more than you do, Giles," Buffy said when it became clear that she'd stunned the words right out of him. "In fact, I think it safe to say that however much you hate it, I hate it three times as much. *Infinity* times as much. But if it keeps Dawn safe... If it keeps *everyone* safe then yes, I have to consider it. And it's not like we have leverage over any other curse-free vampires."

Or like a chipless Spike was on the same level as a soulless Angel, but she didn't say that. Bad enough that she thought it.

Finally, Giles worked his throat and nodded. "The spell would still need to be cast. It is not simply the matter of, ahh, performing the deed. The energy generated in that act is what fuels the magic, but the magic itself is separate from the ritual mating."

"Which means we need Willow. And probably Tara." Not exactly the happiest of thoughts, considering, but things could easily be worse.



Like, at least it wasn't Xander. Though the more people who knew, the less the chance of keeping this contained. This was already going to involve pretty much half her friend group.

"They would not need to know why," Giles said as though reading her thoughts. "Nor be anywhere near where this is taking place. The most they would need to know is that you are fulfilling a part of the ritual that will produce the magic needed to see it realized. This must also be carefully timed, so all, ahh, parties would need to be sure to synchronize."

And a stopwatch. That would all go a long way in removing any potential sexiness from the act of fucking Spike. The more rules, the better. "Okay. Is there anything else this spell needs?"

"Yes, but nothing that isn't readily available at the Magic Box. All of it would be rather unnecessary without the catalyst."

Which meant Spike.

"I'll talk to him," Buffy said, not realizing she'd started toward the door until she was back in the living room. And there she thought, wait, she didn't actually need to rush out and do this now. It was a pretty big decision insofar as decisions went. Maybe not for people who took sex less seriously than she did, but Buffy had never been a casual sex kinda girl. To her, sex had always meant something, and that something had always been *huge*. That was one of the reasons why her night with Parker had hit her as hard as it had—she'd been making strides, moving on, opening herself up to the possibility of something special with someone new, and he'd just shattered it.

Nothing about having sex with Spike could be casual, either. Not with so much between them. And odds were that he would be insufferable before, during, and after, enough so she might have to stake him just to shut him up. Which, put in those terms, would be kind of a bonus.

"Now?" Giles called after her as though reading her thoughts. "Buffy, isn't that a little—"

"Yes, now. If there's a way to get Glory out of my life, sooner rather than later..." she replied, and was glad when her voice didn't shake.

For as much as she knew she could wait, she also knew she shouldn't. All time would do was make things worse. Better to view

this as a band-aid in need of removal. Do it fast so the agonizing part was over before she had a chance to be agonized. It seemed like the safest bet.

And considering she was about to go proposition Spike, Buffy could use all the *safe* she could get her hands on.



GIVE HER ONE THING, the bitch did have excellent timing. Spike was just basking in the afterglow of his most recent wank—courtesy of the mental film reel he'd made of the Slayer's acrobatics the previous night—when his skin tingled in that telling way it had when a predator was near. And for him, there was only one kind of predator worth acknowledging.

So he made quick work of tucking his cock back into his jeans and quickly swiping at the denim—not that that would do anything but work the spunk deeper into the fabric, but his brain wasn't fast enough to come up with alternatives. As it was, he barely had time to zip up and adjust his shirt before the door flew open and a beautiful, brassy Buffy strolled in like she owned the place.

Good bloody thing he'd rubbed one out before she'd shown up. While his cock took notice of everything she did, it was easier to smother his innate reaction to her with the edge taken off.

"Well, well," he said, leaning forward in his armchair and trying to look like he hadn't just drained his balls to fantasies of her. "Someone just couldn't get enough, eh?"

Buffy didn't say anything, rather walked straight toward him with a face carved from stone. Jaw set. Eyes hard. Cheeks sucked in. He didn't know what he'd done to earn her ire this go 'round but from the look of things, it was staking business.

But she didn't get to staking. Beyond storming in with all that slayer swagger, she didn't get to much of anything. Just stood in front of him, studying him with that steely gaze that could probably make a lesser man cop to any number of crimes just to evade her scrutiny. Good thing he wasn't a lesser anything.

After a moment, though, he couldn't help but fidget a little. Wasn't like the Slayer to be this quiet.

"Uhh, Buffy? Somethin' I can do for you?"

She pressed her eyes closed at his voice as though begging for patience, and for a flash, he entertained a rush of actual concern. *Had* he done something stake-worthy and forgotten? The last infraction he could remember had been the soldier boy, but that had been weeks now, and his apology rehearsals notwithstanding, Spike had eventually decided that Buffy wasn't fussed. She'd never once mentioned it, not even in passing, or treated his nose to one of her special trademark punches. Water under the bridge, and all that. If she was choosing to throw a wobbly now, she must really be off her game.

Unless she knew and that was why she was here. Somehow, some way, Buffy had learned how he felt about her. Spike's throat tightened, his previously relaxed muscles going rigid. Christ, this couldn't be happening. Not now.

Then she opened her eyes again and he thought, *hoped*, she looked a sight calmer. "What we're about to talk about does not leave this crypt," she said.

"That a fact?"

"I mean it. I get even a hint, a *whisper* that you've blabbed to anyone—human, demon, alive or dead—and it's the last thing you do, Spike."

Well, let no one say Buffy Summers didn't know exactly what to say to get a fella's motor revving. Spike let the words settle, debating which path forward to take. Push her or placate her. Rise to the challenge or see what had her knickers in a twist this time, 'cause god knows it was always something. At length, he decided he should, at the very least, rise to his feet so if she opted to start swinging, he didn't make it easy for her.

Buffy didn't blink. She didn't back up, either. Just watched him with those steely green eyes and granite jaw. And that settled the matter—he was going to need to tend to his cock again after she left. Maybe in his imagination's replay, she'd throw a punch, he'd throw one back, and they'd go on exchanging blows until she decided to put her hands to better use.

"Where's Harmony?" Buffy asked, shocking him back to even ground.

"Sorry?"

"Is she here?"

"No. She's..." Hell, where *was* she? Harmony had been less a fixture in the place over the last few weeks, fed up with his waning interest though not saying as much. Yet. It was only a matter of time before she started nagging him to fuck her more, and sorry if being inside her while dreaming up various scenarios of how the Slayer might deign to give him the time of day was not his idea of a good time. At least when he was done wanking, he didn't have to deal with his hand prattling on about France or unicorns or what all.

"She's..." Buffy arched her eyebrows and planted her hands on her hips. "You guys break up?"

Why the hell did she care? "Not really together," Spike replied. It was true enough, as far as he was concerned. "She just comes 'round sometimes. And why is it you're suddenly interested in my love life, Slayer?"

That earned him a whip-like punch to the nose that had his head snapping back so hard the bones creaked. And in spite of himself, he felt a rush of actual anger along with the lust.

"What the bleeding hell is your problem?" he demanded, bringing up a hand to feel out the damage. "S not like I come bargain' into your house demandin' to know a load of rot that's none of my—"

"I am *not* interested in your love life," Buffy snapped, heat flooding her cheeks, and that was such an unexpected response that it melted most of Spike's anger. "We need to be clear on that. Crystal."

"Yeah, right, fine. You don't care so much you'll rough me up just to prove it." He glared at her. "What's this about, love? Practicin' how you're gonna chase off the next bloke unlucky enough to end up in your bed? 'Cause I find the nose bit pretty damn effective."

"That woman I've been fighting, the reason the Council came and did their stupid test." She spoke as though he hadn't—as though he wasn't dabbling blood from the unprovoked attack she'd levied against his face.

"The demon bint who's been kickin' your arse lopsided on behalf of

us poor sods who can't do the same. Yeah. Big fan of her work. Becoming a bigger one every day."

Amazingly, that comment *didn't* earn him another nose punch. What the hell was going on?

"Her name is Glory. You asked last night if the Council told me anything about her," Buffy said, all calm poise now. "And she's not a demon or anything I've ever faced before. Doubtful you have, either. She's a god."

Well, he could certainly say he hadn't seen that coming. Nice bit of knowledge to have, he supposed, but it left a few crucial questions unanswered. "Look, Slayer, you know I never say no to a good brawl, but even I know how to pick my sodding battles. Might be better just to give the lady what she wants, if that's the case."

"Not an option. Glory either gets killed or she gets expelled."

"Expelled?"

"From this dimension. She's not from around here. There's a spell that Giles found in what the Council sent us that's probably our best shot of getting her out of my hair."

"And that's fascinatin', really, but I don't see—"

"The spell involves a vampire. A slayer and a vampire, specifically." She paused, and for the first time, uncertainty flashed across her face. "And sex."

It wasn't possible, but Spike would have sworn his heart did a bloody somersault. Or maybe the floor had just vanished from under his feet, or more likely, he'd nodded off in his chair after finishing himself off and this was just another of those incredibly vivid dreams with Buffy in a starring role. He'd been fooled before, as his mind seemed determined to capture the Slayer in her exact likeness—the eyes, the hair, the tone and cadence of her voice, even how it felt when her knuckles smashed into his face.

But then, there were things dreams couldn't mimic for rot. The way she breathed, for one. How it hitched when she was nervous, and how her pulse raced in tandem with it. The sweet smell of her skin, ripening with the nerves she was desperately trying to keep bottled up. Mostly the vulnerability in her eyes—hiding there beneath all the

bravado and daring but there nonetheless. There and very real. Like everything else.

And as he realized that, Spike realized something else.

He had to be careful here. More careful than he'd ever been in the whole of his life. Because if she was saying what he thought she was saying, what it sure bloody *sounded* like she was saying, then he could not bollix this up.

Of course, tell that to his idiot mouth.

"Oooh, how the mighty have fallen," he heard himself drawl, his brain and heart and cock all at bloody odds, and the words coming out one after another. All terrible and not what he meant but *balls*, he couldn't stop himself. "So that's it, then. You've come to bed the Big Bad. Suppose it was always a matter of time. Need a fella who doesn't scare easy."

Honestly, he was glad she punched him after that. If she hadn't, he would've had to do it himself.

"Let's get a few things straight," Buffy said as he again assessed the damage. His poor nose would never heal right, the way she went at it. "I am here because I have to be. Because I am the unluckiest person in the goddamn world and also the one the world depends on to keep turning. I did not ask for this. The fact that I have to even consider letting you touch me is enough to make me want to shave my skin off, but that's the hand I was dealt. I'm screwed no matter how I look at this and since the only vampire in the world I'd like to ask for help can't for a very good reason, I'm left with the bottom of the barrel."

Spike arched an eyebrow. "The bottom, am I? Always admired a lady who takes charge."

"Spike, I swear to god—"

"Oh, unclench, will you? Just took me by surprise, is all." That was the understatement of the bloody century. "Never expected to be the Slayer's—"

"Do not finish that sentence if you value your life."

This time, his idiot mouth decided to be less of an idiot, thank fuck. He was about to talk his way out of her knickers when he hadn't even had to do anything to get himself there in the first place. In so many ways, Spike wagered he was his truest worst enemy.

Buffy waited for a beat, daring him with that magnificent glare of hers. Then, apparently satisfied he wasn't going to say anything else for the time being, went on. "The spell is specific. According to Giles—"

Spike's eyebrows winged up, a fact the Slayer most certainly did not miss. Again, though, he managed to keep his lips sealed.

"According to Giles," she said again, watching him carefully, "the point of the spell is to establish me as the master of this dimension."

"Ooh, the master. Fancy me on my knees, then? Should I call you Mistress?"

The question went over her adorable little head—or seemed to, at least, for the way she didn't wrinkle her nose or aim another punch at his. "It's to prove that I have the authority to send Glory back to where she came from. And since I am the Vampire Slayer, the way to do that is by taming a vampire."

At that, Buffy glared at him again as though sensing his thoughts, but seeing as *sensing* was the most she could do without his cooperation, she still didn't have a reason to resort to violence. More's the pity for her.

"A tame vampire is one that...honors the Slayer," she finished.

"Nice and specific, that."

"It means you don't kill me."

"Mite on the nose. Where's the shagging come in?"

She sucked in her cheeks, which probably wasn't supposed to make him moan and didn't, but only because he caught himself before the sound could escape him. Equally enthralling was the delicate touch of red spreading across her skin and the elevated rush of her pulse. The little lamb was trying so hard to appear unaffected, but her body was a living billboard.

"You have to make me orgasm seven times in an hour."

Spike smirked. "Is that all?"

The look she threw him was all bold dare, and god, he hoped the second part of this was they were to get started now. He couldn't wait to slaughter her incredulity.

"Is that all?" she echoed. "What, like you're some kind of sex god?"

He lifted a shoulder. "Sounds like you'll be able to answer that yourself here soon enough."

"This is serious."

"You see me laughin'?"

"No, but I'm about to."

He felt his smirk broaden. Oh, aside from being a fantasy made real, this was going to be a pure delight, watching her realize just exactly what she'd been missing with the tossers she'd let into her bed. Getting her as addicted to him as he was to her. She'd never want to leave, and that was just fine; he wouldn't either. "Do your worst, love," he replied.

Buffy stared him down a moment longer before a smile of her own stretched across her lips. "Well, that's the other part of the spell. You *can't* orgasm."

He snorted, then paused when she didn't follow suit. Bugger, was she serious?

"I'm supposed to have you off seven times in an hour and not burst, myself?"

She nodded, all high and mighty and holier-than-thou and gorgeous. "Yes," she said defiantly. "Not until the end, at least."

That wasn't much better but it was better. "Suppose this has to do with more girl power?"

"To prove that I am the master of this—"

"Yeah, that gets cuter every time you say it."

"It's not *cute*, Spike," she snapped, the haughty bitch gone and the fiery slayer in her place. Fiery in every sense of the word—she was pure bloody flame, and soon he would get to know exactly what it was like to touch the sun without dying. For god, yes, he was doing this. Of course he was. Even with its bloody ridiculous stipulation, there would never be another chance like this. Not that she'd allow, and from the sound of things, she had to do quite a bit of *allowing* for this to work. "It's gross," she went on, "and—and demeaning, and I hate every part of it but it's the best way we have to beat Glory so if I have to fuck you and let you bite me, I—"

"Bite you?" Bloody hell, at this rate he'd be lucky if he managed to avoid jizzing in his trousers. "Left that bit out, didn't you?"

"Well, of course you have to bite me," Buffy shot back, her eyes



ablaze now like the rest of her. “Because this needs to be as depraved as possible.”

“So you came here tonight to tell me you need me to make you come seven times in an hour and I get your blood at the end of it.”

“Don’t get excited. You’re not supposed to kill me. That’s the end. It proves that your natural impulses have been tamed.”

“Mhmm.” Just when he thought this couldn’t get any better. He’d get to feel the Slayer go to pieces all over his cock seven times—more, if he had his way—and sample the nectar that was her blood for the grand finale. A different sort of bloke might wonder what higher power out there had an eye out for helping poor, hapless sods sick with love for their mortal enemies. Of all the ways to get Buffy into his bed, her inviting herself there—demanding it—was something only out of his deepest fantasies.

Granted, in all this was a very obvious obstacle. “And, what, you just switchin’ off the chip for a night? Would be a right shame to go through the trouble of this ritual of yours just to bollix it up at the end.”

The twitch of her jaw told him she’d already considered this. More than that, she had a solution. So did he—in that he highly doubted she’d so much as flinch if he buried his fangs into her on the high of an orgasm—but there was no need to spill secrets if the lady had already decided on a workaround. Especially when he thought he knew what that might be.

“We’re willing to...deal with the chip in exchange for services rendered.”

Well, didn’t that make him sound like a proper whore? Spike scoffed and rolled his eyes. “Way to romance a fella, Slayer.”

“I am not here to *romance* you, and the sooner you get that through your thick—”

“Oh, it’s thick all right.”

“—*skull*, the better for everyone. Namely you, in the department of continued existence.”

He affected an offended gasp and touched a hand to his heart. “And risk losing the world itself? Never knew how much you really cared.”

“I swear—”

"Yeah, I got it. You'll do me the chip if I do you on your terms." It wasn't a bad trade—the very one he'd been angling for, actually—but under the lens of viewing this as a genuine transaction, it felt a little cheap. "Anything else?"

"Just that you know the second the chip is out, your options are to leave town or stay here and get staked."

Right. Should have figured as much. "Won't be toothless anymore. Could actually deal you some damage you couldn't walk off. So yeah, naturally, either have that dance we owe each other or—"

"There will be no dancing," Buffy barked, her eyes blazing. "I mean it, Spike. I've let you off the hook so many times when the easiest and definitely the smartest decision would be to kill you. If you push me, that's exactly what I'll do. Am I making myself clear?"

"As a bloody bell," he replied through a forced smile, his spirits sinking lower. Fuck, he didn't know what was wrong with him. No matter what she thought, Buffy was going to be in his bed, under him, around him, hot and wet and pulsing around his cock, and that wasn't something she did lightly. He knew that. Knew this was a once-in-a-bloody-unlifetime opportunity to make her see what was right in front of her nose, but somewhere over the past minute, the fun had been leached out.

No matter. He was good at finding fun. Just needed to get his bearings, was all. She'd thrown a bloody spanner in the works with this talk of *services rendered* and he'd just have to show her how wrong she was.

Or hell, he might actually not survive this.

"When's the happy occasion?" Spike asked, desperate to force his thoughts in another direction. Any direction would do. "Gotta make sure I clear my schedule, and all."

Buffy studied him for a moment as though to gauge his sincerity, then relaxed. Not entirely but enough that her shoulders dropped and the stick up her arse loosened. "Soon. Next few days. There's the spell part to coordinate with Willow and Tara."

"Oh, so the whole team knows. Better and better."

"No," she replied forcibly. "No, they'll know a spell is needed and that I have a part but they will never know what that part is or who it involves. *Never*, Spike. You understand?"

“Dunno. Why don’t you say it again? Real slow-like this time.”

She rolled her eyes as though he were being the unreasonable one, then, as brusquely as she’d let herself in, made to let herself out. “I’ll be by with the specifics when I get them.”

“I’ll be waitin’ with bated bloody breath,” he muttered. Then a thought occurred to him—one just this side of mean, but in the sort of way likely to make him feel better. He waited until she was almost at the door before calling after her. “Oh, and Slayer.”

Buffy paused and looked over her shoulder, and fuck, he hated how much he loved her. Hated how beautiful she was, how fury and disgust could do nothing but enhance it.

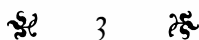
“Little ironic now, innit?”

“What’s that?”

“You sayin’ I’m beneath you, when you’re—”

He’d never seen her move like that, like she was flying rather than running. And he was so enamored with it that when she raised her fist and brought the blow down upon him, he didn’t even mind.

Some things were worth it.



## I AIN'T GONNA PUSH, WON'T PUSH YOU BABY

IT WASN'T UNTIL THE DAY OF THE RITUAL THAT IT HIT HER—SHE WAS really going to have sex with Spike.

She, Buffy Summers, was going to have *sex* with Spike. Hour-long sex at that. Sex that involved orgasms and biting, and he was going to be *inside of her* and moving and thrusting and coming. Everything up until now had been about preparation. Preparation and clarification that had given the spell context she hadn't known she needed until Spike had asked.

"So," he'd drawled on her very next follow-up visit, "these seven orgasms I'm to give you... Any requests?"

The question hadn't computed. "Huh?"

"I'm partial to eating, myself." Spike had raked his gaze up and down her body, settled on a very specific part, and licked his lips. "Always knew it was a matter of time before I got you in my mouth."

At that, Buffy had been too startled even to throw a punch—seriously, what was wrong with her?—and had skedaddled before she could do something even more humiliating, like ask him to elaborate. But Spike's question had remained with her, refusing to budge, to the point that she had to ask Giles if there were stipulations on how, exactly, the vampire got the Slayer to "see the face of God."

Once he'd understood what she was asking—much sputtering and glasses polishing and even more awful euphemisms—he'd consulted the text and concluded that the entirety of the spell required *vaginal penetration by the phallus* to abide by the more limited definitions of sex from the time of the spell's inception. Which meant Spike fully inside of her for an hour.

"Also," Giles had gone on in his *please don't make me say this* voice, "I believe this is intended to truly test the claim the Slayer has on the dimension. With endless, ahh, *stimulation*, the vampire refrains from—"

"You can stop there."

"Happily. But it adds another layer of complexity and control to the spell, you see."

Yeah, Buffy had seen. She definitely didn't need to have anything spelled out more. Especially since she would have to convey that to Spike and, god help her, hope he was still on board. If he'd agreed to this thinking that he could just bring her off while sitting next to her or something, the actual parameters of the ask would surely beg for reconsideration on his part.

Thankfully—or unfortunately, however she was prone to viewing the spell on a given day—it did no such thing. The news that he would need to spend the entirety of the hour hard and inside of her, not just giving her orgasms, didn't faze him at all. Except he'd seemed a little disappointed, eyes lingering again on a certain part of her body in a way that made her skin hot and the rest of her squirmy.

She hadn't wanted to ask why this wasn't a deal-breaker, though, too afraid he might actually tell her. And there had been other errands to run. Like broaching the subject of the spell with Willow and Tara without giving away that the heart of it revolved around vampire-delivered orgasms, gathering the needed ingredients, and then finally pulling Willow aside after the big talk for a smaller talk.

"I need you to find a way to deactivate Spike's chip," Buffy had explained in a rush. Aside from the actual sex-with-Spike part, the prospect of explaining to her best friend that they had to deactivate the device that kept the evil, soulless vampire from murdering and eating them was, well, overwhelming. Stupidly, she'd thought there was a chance Willow would look at her face and hear her words and jump

to the accurate conclusion of *vampire sexcapades* but that, thankfully, was not what had happened.

“Deactivate Spike’s chip?” Willow had frowned, looking more concerned than suspicious. Like maybe Buffy had fallen and hit her head on a sharp rock. “Why would we want to do that?”

“Ritual,” Buffy had rushed to explain. “He has a part to play, and that was his price. The chip.”

Insofar as cover stories went, this hadn’t been the worst. She’d been able to follow the train of thought and weave enough components of fact together into believable fiction. No, she didn’t want Spike unleashed, but she was much more prepared to take down a pesky vampire than she was a god. Also, Spike had agreed to motor out of town after his part was done and understood that he would be stake fodder if he so much as showed a single platinum hair on his head around here again.

Granted, he hadn’t so much agreed as been told, but either way, it worked out great for Buffy. If Spike made himself scarce, she could apply her energy to eradicating the night of gross from her head altogether. If he decided to stick around, well, she would show him how stupid he’d been to not take her seriously. Just because she hadn’t killed him over the past year didn’t mean she would hesitate now. Whatever happened, however it went, she’d handle it, and the net result would be positive either way.

No more Glory. No more Spike. If all went well, she was looking at the first calm spring she’d had since moving to Sunnydale.

And since Willow had bought the explanation easily enough, the only thing left on Buffy’s to-do list was the vampire in question.

*It’s just an hour. That’s all it is. An hour of your life, and then he’s gone.*

Only it wasn’t *just* an hour. She was heading over to set some stuff up—candles that needed to be arranged in a certain formation to help channel the energy produced from all the gross sex she was about to have. Plus, there was the *other* thing Spike had mentioned on her final pre-spell trip to the crypt. That *other* thing she had desperately been trying to pretend wasn’t a thing but was about to confront in a very real way.

“Been giving it some thought, and I’ve decided it’s a tall order,” he’d

drawled, all smirk and suggestion. Seriously, when she'd swung by the crypt that night, she would have sworn he'd known she was coming and had made an effort to look as provocative as possible, not sitting in his chair so much as strewn across it. Like, he'd had a leg stretched over the arm of the chair in a way that begged the eye to land right on his crotch. All bulgy denim with the button undone, so all he'd need to do to wave his dick around was lower the zipper, which looked like it was holding on for dear life, anyway.

"Wh-what's a tall order?" she'd stammered, forcing herself to pull her gaze from the bulge and to his face. She well remembered sitting on that bulge the previous year and feeling all its...bulginess. The fact that it looked just as bulgy as her memory insisted it had been had her wigged and curious and especially wigged that she was curious.

"You want me inside you, bringin' you off over and over again without gettin' any relief myself."

"Whoa, let's get something way with the clear here. *Want* is so not the—"

He'd rolled his eyes. "Doesn't matter what you call it, pet, that's what you're asking me to do."

"Are you saying you can't?"

"Sayin' if this is so important to you, to the sodding world, it might be good to be a little proactive."

"Define proactive."

Spike had just looked at her, all naked suggestion, dragging his teeth over his lower lip and flicking an eyebrow in an invitation to follow his thoughts. Which she had. Of course she had.

"You're disgusting," she'd told him.

"Slayer, don't think there are many blokes who could stand to do what you're askin' me to do for starters. You want this to work, or do you want to just shag me?"

That he'd had a point hadn't made any of this easier. Buffy might not have a ton of experience in the sex department, but even she knew an hour of intense stimulation without release *wasn't* something most men could do. The threat of Spike coming too soon and ruining the whole spell was not insignificant. If she did this and it didn't work then the whole degrading experience would have been for nothing.

Which was how she'd heard herself asking, "What do you suggest?" And he'd won. Didn't matter that she'd gritted it through her teeth. That she'd been glaring stakes. That she was sure every inch of her body had been telegraphing just how much she wanted to punch him. Spike had won and he'd known it.

"Little pre-show appetizer," he'd replied, dropping a hand to that bulge, fingers splayed across the straining denim in a way that could have been accidental—*oops, look where my hand fell*—but she knew full well had been intentional. Maybe even practiced. "You come 'round before we're set to start. Help me take the edge off."

"And why do you need *my* help taking the edge off?"

"Don't. Just suggestin' we do what's likely to be the most effective. Suspect you know how much better it is when it's someone else doin' the touching. Better you make it for me, the longer I'll last. All the safer to get to the end of your little ritual rather than poppin' my top in the middle."

Oh god, he wanted her to touch him. Probably more than touch him.

And *oh god*, she would probably end up doing it.

"You know." Spike had sobered. "To save the world."

Buffy had agreed to a half hour. That was it. She would arrive at his crypt—they'd decided on his crypt over a hotel room because she wanted to be able to actually stay in hotels in the future without gross memories interfering—a half hour early, light the candles and everything, and then *help* Spike...prepare for what was being asked of him.

And until now, right now, she'd managed to keep busy with spell prep and chip deactivation and planning the number of showers she would have to take after this before feeling clean again. Except all that was behind her and there was no more avoiding it. There was just the doing. Going to Spike's crypt with the intention of making him come so that he could make her come seven times without coming again, himself. She swore, whoever had come up with this spell must have been really hard up because it was *insane*. Completely, totally insane.

It was that thought she carried with her into Spike's crypt—a nice talisman, the knowledge that she was only here for one reason and it had nothing to do with the vampire standing in the middle of the place



wearing nothing but an open button-down shirt and a pair of black slacks. Like he'd just wrapped up a *Penthouse* shoot, and what the hell was up with his chest, was it, like, carved out of stone or something?

"Watch it, there, love," Spike all but purred, his voice low and his eyes trailing lower. "You're drooling."

That snapped her out of it. Buffy shook her head and forced her legs forward. "You said you have a bed somewhere?"

"Downstairs."

"Then let's get this over with."

"Now, now. None of that. You'll make me feel cheap."

"You are cheap, Spike. I'm not here to make you feel anything."

"No? Not even before the main event? Thought we had this out."

She willed herself not to snap. "I'll do what I said I'd do. But you have to do something for me."

"More than the seven you're already getting, you mean?"

"Stop talking about this like it's something I want. It's not. It's gross and degrading and I'm going to have to take an acid bath to get the *ick* off me." Buffy wandered over to the hatch she'd seen him pop out of before and hoped this was it because she didn't want to look up and ask. "You need to keep your mouth shut."

"Doesn't that defeat the purpose?"

She looked up anyway, dangerously close to the edge of an explosion. "I mean about this. About whatever we do down there."

"Know that, Slayer. You already told me the rules."

"I'm not talking about after this is over. I mean *during*. I already..." A swell of emotion she hadn't anticipated and definitely didn't want burned up her throat, her sinuses, until her eyes were stinging, and *god*, this was it. The death knell in whatever pride she'd brought in with her. Fuck Spike, save the world, sure. No problem. Cry in front of him and she might as well start writing her own obituary. Yet now he was looking at her full of curiosity and expectation and hell, it wasn't like she had anything left to lose, right? Might as well go all in. "I already feel about as cheap as I think it's possible for me to feel. I don't need you saying things that make me...that make it worse. Could you just not be *Spike* for a while? Can I pay you for that or—"

"Stop." The word was soft but his face was not. In seconds, every-

thing about him had hardened. His eyes. His jaw. Hell, even his cheekbones seemed sharper than usual. And when he opened his mouth again, she expected more of the same. The indignation or the verbal kicks at which he excelled, even if he didn't need them to substitute the real thing anymore. What she got instead was a gentle, "You don't have to do this, you know."

"What?"

Spike shrugged and gestured at the space separating them as though that meant anything. "Any of it. Can't believe this is the only way to get rid of the mega bitch. And yeah, I know she's pummeled you a time or two, but that has never stopped you before. You always rally. Find a way to beat the baddie and save the day. Just haven't done it yet with this one, is all."

Buffy stared at him, not understanding. There were times it seemed Spike's lot in life was to screw with her head, most of the time in ways that were refreshingly straightforward and other times...

Well, like now. Talking to her like she was someone other than Buffy or he was someone other than Spike. Like she wasn't his mortal enemy that he would rather see in the ground than triumph over this year's apocalypse. It was unnerving.

"Glory's a god," she said once she found her voice. "I've never fought a god before. I don't know if we can bank on what's always worked to work this time."

Spike seemed to consider that, took a step forward. "So...you're still plannin' on..."

"We need a truce."

"A truce."

"Like when we fought Angel." Buffy inhaled a rattling breath, slowly regaining that in-control feeling. "Just us."

"Thought we already had one of those."

"I'm being very specific here. Neither one of us wants to do this, right? I mean, last year when the spell ended, you were as grossed out by all the kissing and stuff as I was. We know this isn't the way it's supposed to be with us. You vampire, me slayer. We're not on the same side." She inhaled. "Except the times that we are. When we make a truce. So this, this is a truce. We're on the same side. Getting Glory

gone is something that's good for both of us. We just have to do this thing to make it happen."

Spike sucked in his cheeks and nodded, taking another step forward. He looked like he was measuring his words very carefully, which in itself was wigsome. This was not a man who thought about what he wanted to say before running his mouth.

When he did speak, though, he about bowled her over. "Wasn't the worst spell."

"What?"

"The one that made us think we were gettin' hitched? Didn't hate it."

"Umm, do you remember that spell at all?"

His eyebrows winged upward. "I remember having a gorgeous girl wigglin' on my lap, telling me she loved me. Snogging my lips off. Whispering all kinds of—"

"Don't."

He didn't listen. He never did. "I've always wondered what it'd be like, bedding a slayer," he went on, raking his eyes up and down her body now. He did that a lot, she realized, and it wasn't new. Spike was half walking innuendo on his best day. Most of the time, she'd chalked it up to him just being weirdly physical in everything he did. He'd make comments about her that, coming from someone else, might make her think he was interested, but from him, it was all for show.

Except maybe not. Maybe she was just an idiot and Spike really was looking forward to what they were about to do.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Cause I don't want you thinkin' I don't want you. That I'm not gonna enjoy every sodding second we spend downstairs. Even if I have to wait a bloody hour before I come in you, I still get to do it." Spike slowly raised his eyes to hers, the smirk gone. Everything gone. He was dead serious. "You want a truce, somethin' you can tell yourself when it's all over that made it all right for you to roll around in the dirt with me, I'll give you one. But I plan on giving you more than that before you leave."

Buffy swallowed hard. Suddenly, the air between them felt charged.

Electric. Like she could reach out and just the act of moving would give her a little shock. "What do you mean?"

"That by the time this is over, you'll be begging me for more."

She relaxed slightly at that. Okay, posturing-and-insufferable Spike was a Spike she could deal with. The other Spike, the one who wanted what was about to happen, was less manageable. She had no idea what to do with him. "You don't live anywhere near reality, do you?"

"I mean it, Slayer. You'll crave me after we're through here."

"Be more full of yourself. *Try*."

Spike huffed and shook his head, strolling toward her in a way that should have been predatory—and was, kinda, but not a predatory that triggered her *predator* tinglies. "Just remember I tried to give you an out. Send you on your merry way without sullyng yourself with the likes of me. You go down there, and everythin' that follows is because you want it."

"I do not want—"

"Stop pretending like I'm your sodding last resort. You're here for a reason, and we both know it's not the one you gave me."

Okay, so, he was insane. "Are you suggesting I *want* to sleep with you? That any of this is going to be fun for me?"

He just looked at her, smirking again slightly. It was enough to make a person trying hard to be non-violent very violent. "I think it's nice and convenient, me bein' here. You want a taste as much as I do. Deny it all you want, love, but part of you is curious and always has been. Not so much you'd give in, but you'd wonder. Think about it. Maybe even dream a little. Now you have this handy little excuse, gets you right up close to the Big Bad but lets you keep up appearances. You get what you want while tellin' yourself you're making some noble sacrifice, when the truth is somewhere in the middle."

"You think I've dreamed about you?" She, in fact, had. Many times. Dreams that had been as disturbing as they had been, well, *less* than disturbing. Or only disturbing insofar as they hadn't bothered her. On some nights, especially following a lackluster lovemaking session with her very dependable-except-apparently-not boyfriend, she'd even found herself hoping that her mind would take her to that forbidden

place where she was without her inhibitions and with someone who had the power to evoke strong emotions—from disgust to not-disgust.

“I think you know exactly what I’m on about,” Spike replied. “And I think you’re playin’ the hapless victim because you don’t wanna consider what it means to admit you’re here because part of you wants to be. Most of all, I think we’re wasting time we can’t afford to waste if you want this little ceremony of yours to go off without a hitch.” He strode around her without waiting for a reply, then bent over and heaved up the hatch she’d been hovering around, revealing a smooth tunnel equipped with a thin metal ladder. “Let’s go light the candles or what all. Then I’m havin’ myself off. You want me to last your entire hour, you might do as we discussed and lend a hand. Not gonna force the issue either way.”

And, without waiting for a reply, Spike stepped over the empty space and gravity did the rest, pulling him below ground. Leaving her up here with the weight of the decision she’d thought she’d already made. That she *would* make if she followed him down there. No more room for second thoughts. No turning back. Just moving forward with the plan that, if it worked, would send Glory back to her hell dimension and save Buffy from a fight she honestly didn’t know if she could win.

But there were other considerations, namely that Spike had a point. Whatever happened from here on was an acknowledgment of some sort, and though he might be an evil bloodsucking fiend, he deserved her honesty.

And, if she were being honest, she’d admit that part of what had brought her to him had nothing to do with Glory. For more than three years now, she’d been living with a question she’d thought would never be answered—a question that arose every time they faced off, starting with that first night in the school. There was a reason why she enjoyed going head-to-head with Spike—why, in the church, she’d felt a rush when he’d told her that he’d rather be fighting her. Why she’d experienced disappointment then relief that day on the quad when the stake had pierced his chest but he hadn’t so much as flinched. Why she punched him in the nose so often now, even though he couldn’t fight

back, and why Spike, not Angel, had been the first vampire she thought of when Giles had told her about this little spell.

He'd wanted to know what it would be like to fuck a slayer. She'd wanted to know what it would be like to fuck *him*. To bring all that passion and rage and hatred from the battlefield to the bedroom. It had all been fine when harmless, mostly subconscious fantasy, the kind that could never be real. It was real now, though, and she was wiggled by how much a very real, very alive, very *womanly* part of her wanted this.

But she did want it. It scared her, but she did.

Buffy inhaled and took a step toward the opening in the floor. Toward the answer to not only the Glory problem, but also one of the questions that had been burning in her for three years now.

Then, deliberately, she reached down and placed her foot on the ladder rung.

No going back.



SPIKE HAD PUT the odds at an even fifty-fifty. The Slayer needed a job done and all but there was every chance he'd overshot while running his mouth upstairs and she'd take off just to avoid admitting something to herself. So when he heard her on the ladder, he was both relieved and shaken. Buffy trying to run from the truth was a very different sort of slayer than a Buffy who was willing to admit it, even if only in action. He wasn't sure what to expect when she finally dropped to the floor, except he tightened the grip he had around his prick and fixed his gaze on her face so he didn't miss any of her reaction when she saw what he was doing. Or the fact that he was seated starkers at the foot of his bed while doing it. No masking the truth down here. Not if she wanted him to play.

He knew the second she realized what was happening, even before her gaze started tracking the strokes of his hand over his cock. And there was no denying what he saw there, either—the first thing that had flittered across her face before she blanked it away with cool purpose. The Slayer was interested.

Oh, and turned on.

It was a hell of a thing, keeping his mouth shut, the second the tell-tale fragrance of arousal reached his nostrils, but somehow he managed. Rather just watched her as she wandered around the crypt—all business, this girl—lighting the magic candles and doing all the ritual mumbo jumbo she'd told him needed to be in place before they got to the good part. Not saying a word, trying to pretend he wasn't there, except he could see more down here in the shadows than she could, which meant every time she sneaked a peek of the goods, he caught it.

Finally, she was finished, and had no other choice but to turn and look him in the eye.

"We have about ten minutes," she told him, and held up the bloody timer she'd brought like he needed a visual aid.

Well, certain visual aids, he wouldn't discourage.

"Plenty of time, then." Spike grinned and gave his cock an outrageous, showy pump, reaching down to fondle his balls just because he knew she'd look. And he wasn't disappointed—by her eyes or the darkening of her cheeks or the rounded shape of her lips, and definitely not by the slayer musk perfuming the air. "Can stay over there as long as you fancy, but I dunno how you aim to get this done with your clothes on."

He watched her throat work and somehow bit back a moan.

"You want me to get naked," she said.

"Just tryin' to do what's best for *the spell*."

Buffy shook her head, pulled her gaze off his cock and pinned him with a more familiar glare. Or not a glare, but it took him a second to parse what he was seeing. Another to accept it because if she'd decided to view this as something as pure and bold as a challenge, they might both be in trouble.

And the next moment, he knew that was it, for Buffy, still looking at him, lowered her hands to the hem of her blouse and tugged the material over her head. He remembered a second too late that she'd forgone the formality of a bra—the crypt was chilly enough he could always tell—and suddenly was presented with Buffy as he'd never seen her. The breasts he'd always imagined made real, real and better than

perfect *because* they were real. Real and almost close enough to touch. To lick. To suck. With her rosy little dewdrop nipples and that milky skin and Spike didn't realize he'd growled until the echoes reached his ears, along with the escalated thumps of his hand pulling on his prick.

Christ, she was beautiful. And his, if only for an hour.

"Like this?" Buffy asked in a tone of faux innocence—the sort that, by itself, would have had him coming if he'd thought for a second she was genuinely playing. But she wasn't playing—she was taunting. Might be a different interpretation of the same fantasy, but it wasn't quite enough to get him there.

Instead, Spike nodded at her skirt. "Wanna lose that, too? Save us time."

She arched an eyebrow but didn't argue or pop him in the nose—a triumph in itself. Rather she slipped her hands under the waistband and let the fabric pool to her feet.

"Love the shoes," he said hoarsely, starting to wonder if his cock would survive the next hour after all. Buffy standing there in front of him wearing nothing but a pair of knickers and petal-pink strappy heels. His balls were aching and his spine tingling, and all the rest of him so entirely attuned to her he doubted he would have noticed a bloody air raid. At least she was studying his prick again, the symphony of sounds her own body betrayed letting him know just how much she was enjoying the show.

"They're very impractical for slayage," Buffy replied, slipping out of one, then the other, and this time he didn't dismiss the note in her voice nearly as fast. Either his hearing was going or there was a teasing lilt there after all. Like she'd decided she wanted to play.

"Buffy," Spike spluttered, unable to help himself. The possibility that she might have left the bitch upstairs, that she might have admitted at least some of what he'd said was true, was too sweet to believe. Having her in his bed, fighting him the way only she could, but without worrying about her pristine veneer changed the game entirely.

She stepped forward again, and again, and then she was there, between his spread legs, her hair falling over her shoulder and her face and casting shadows by candlelight that made her look downright angelic. She dragged her teeth over her lower lip, uncertain, then



reached out and touched her hot little hand to his shoulder. Spike growled again and snapped his head back, the rhythmic *thwacks* of his strokes intensifying. This close there was no denying how hot she was for this—he had her in his nostrils, his throat, could see the damp patch in her knickers. She was here and real and *Christ*, she was going to touch him.

This part was his. Just his. Whatever came next couldn't change that.

"I think you might be going too hard on that thing," she said, her voice washing over him. "We need it working for the spell to work."

Spike scoffed, eye level with her tits now, wondering just how brassed she'd be if he took one into his mouth. "Trust me, love. It'll work."

"And it's good like this? You think you can last an hour?"

He had fuck all idea but—

"Actually, I'd rather not take our chances."

The next thing he knew, Buffy was on her knees in front of him, batting his hand away from his cock to take over. With a slow pump at first, her eyes wide, following the way his flesh moved as she pulled the foreskin over the head. "Like this?" she asked, blinking up at him. "It's better when it's someone else?"

"Fuck yes," he said, the words riding out on an exhale. "Slayer..."

"Good. We need it to be good."

It was like stepping into his own bloody head, the cathedrals he'd built there in worship of her. Buffy touching him, her hand rhythmically working up and down his cock, her eyes following the progression as though she were transfixed, all the while her body continuing a symphony of its own. Blood pumping, heart pounding, the air between them growing thicker and heavier with the sweet scent of arousal she couldn't hide. And soon he would be touching her like she was touching him—he'd get to feel her on his fingers, around his cock, bathed in all that wet fire. The questions that had been plaguing him for months finally answered—what she looked like when she came, the sort of sounds she made, if she'd scratch up his back or sink her teeth anywhere, and god, how that thought was both pleasure and pain because he'd have to hold on, keep from spilling

inside of her like a sodding schoolboy, for the second he did, everything was over.

He could never be her hero, but if he played his cards right, he might be able to stop being her problem for a while.

“What do you think?” Buffy asked, breathless, raising those dangerous eyes to him. “Good enough to make you last?”

Spike barely had time to nod before she was talking again.

“Or maybe we should... Just to be safe...”

And then Buffy Summers dipped her head and took his cock into her mouth, and everything—all the sound, the prattling, the internal screaming that this was really happening—went silent. It was just her and sensation. Her hot mouth, her tongue, the pressure against his cock as she sucked him in deeper, as he watched himself slide along her lips, disappear inch by inch until her nose was pressed against the curls at his groin, and she pulled back and he got to watch in reverse. His cock, now slick with her saliva, touching air once again, and she was still looking at him and he at her, and there was no way he was going to last. Not an hour. Not the next ten sodding seconds. Not if this was just her mouth because as blissful as it was, he knew it just got better from here. When he had her in his arms, on his lap, under him, over him, impaled upon him, her mouth within range and her eyes level with his. If he couldn’t hold on now he didn’t stand a chance.

He had to bloody hold on.

“What do you say?” Buffy asked after his cock slipped free of her mouth, her wet lips brushing along the shining head as she spoke. “This gonna be better?”

“You’re gonna bloody kill me.”

“Probably, but we have business first.”

When she sucked him into her mouth again, there was no tease. No long, decadent inching along the shaft until she had swallowed him entirely. She was a slayer who wasn’t playing, but trying to prove a point, and that point was he’d already lost. Whatever he’d been trying to convey upstairs, whatever advantage he’d wanted to score for himself had vanished, because she had him by the cock and bollocks, and she knew it. In every hard suck, every swirl of her tongue, every squeak of wet skin against her lips, and then she had his balls in her

palms, rolling in rhythm with the strokes of her mouth. Fisting the base of his cock with her free hand to squeeze him every time her lips descended, and his hands were in her hair—he didn't remember putting them there, but there they were, golden tendrils spilling between his fingers—and she was murmuring wordless encouragement. Pulling harder, so hard it might have hurt but didn't because he was a vampire and he could take whatever she dished out. Her cheeks hollowing, spit coating his length, and then her tongue again, running laps around the head. Under the foreskin she kept dragging up, over, under, and then the dip and her eyes flashed back to his and he was coming before he realized it. Before he could bark a warning. Spike, William the Bloody, Slayer of Slayers emptying himself into the mouth of one, coating her with him, and watching, mesmerized and lost as she worked her throat and swallowed his spunk, feeling he was damn well near tears or hysterics or whatever else, and she kept her mouth on him, kept rolling his balls, and he hardened again in her mouth. Swelled until her lips were rounded with him once more, and god, was she going to try for another? But no, the buzzer was sounding and everything was over. Buffy shoving him back to the bed with a grunt, a string of semen spilling from the corner of her mouth. And then crawling over him, on top of him, and rubbing her pussy along his prick only there was something in the way—her knickers—and she reached and he reached and they fought together with what he hoped was mutual need, sodding spell be damned, until the sound of shredded fabric parted the air, and Buffy was sinking onto him at last.

Spike hissed and threw his head back, his hands on her hips, his fingers digging into her flesh, and this was happening. It was truly happening.

He had an hour inside of her.

Provided he lived that long.

## WHAT I NEED IS A GOOD DEFENSE

“BLOODY FUCKING HELL.”

Yeah, that about summed it up, though Buffy had her limits, and admitting as much was one of them. She’d already maxed out the number of allowances she was willing to make for a day, maybe a lifetime, by caving into the knowledge that some deviant part of her truly did want to have sex with Spike. That had gotten her as far as the crypt’s lower level and perhaps no further if she hadn’t been prepared to find him exactly the way she had. One lesson a girl learned when she spent enough time around a soulless creature devoid of all shame—when he said he was going to do something gross, he was probably telling the truth.

The problem was Buffy hadn’t found it gross. She’d wanted to find it gross—had wanted very much for the tingle of anticipation, which had only become more pronounced the closer she got to the start of the ritual, to just stop with the tingling. She’d wanted to find Spike masturbating repugnant because Spike inhabiting any sort of *sexual* space in her brain was just wrong.

Instead, the second she’d gotten a look at him—and she’d forced herself to look without blanching—had been the second a deeper

understanding had settled. A thought that had lived in her subconscious, close to the never-to-be-acknowledged curiosity about fucking Spike that she'd had to break out of its case, albeit under protest. And that thought—that stupid, also never-to-be-acknowledged and incredibly disloyal thought—was that Spike was probably the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen.

The thought that had followed, less scandalous but only by degree, was that she'd known he would be. While he rarely turned up anywhere sans that oversized duster, Buffy had caught enough glimpses of his arms and shoulders and build over the years to know that under his clothes awaited veritable eye candy. Learning firsthand how right she was hadn't been anything other than unneeded confirmation. Except now it was a thought that existed in the conscious part of her brain rather than the buried part, and she would never again be able to look at him without seeing the cords in his neck or the strain in his muscles, and certainly not without remembering the exact way his hand fitted around his cock as he stroked himself.

Nor what the sight of that cock had reduced her to.

That cock that was now inside of her, hard and thick, filling her in a way that made her hate him even more because of how good it was. How easy it had been just sliding onto him, not needing to check her readiness because, by that point, she'd felt the throb of his absence inside her the way she'd never felt anyone else's. It had been another stupid thing to think, spurred on by the circumstances and, yes, the guilty rush of pleasure that came with knowing she was doing something she shouldn't with someone she especially shouldn't, but knowing it was stupid hadn't made it go away.

And he was talking still. Of course he was talking. It was Spike. He never actually stopped.

“—so hot, Slayer. Always knew you would be. Always knew you'd burn me up.” He dug his fingers into her hips, ostensibly to help her find a rhythm, because the second she'd impaled herself on his cock, all other communication between body and brain had gone quiet. “And how wet you are. Like liquid bloody fire. Could stay in you for days.”

She wanted to tell him to shut up, to smack his arms or his chest or

his stupid face until he choked on his words and had no choice. But something told her that would just make the volume go up rather than down, so she forced herself just to grip his shoulders and concentrate on getting her orgasm count which, embarrassingly, she was starting to realize wouldn't take her all that long at all. At least not the first one, maybe not the second. Turned out Spike had a reason to be an arrogant pig, because as impressive as that cock had been to her eyes and mouth, it felt criminally amazing inside of her, and it shouldn't. None of this should feel even remotely good but god, he was kissing her throat now, his lips cool and soft and eager, muttering things still as he helped work her up and down his shaft, and the things that reached her ears—the things she couldn't block out—were not stakeable offenses. Hell, they sounded like prayers. Almost poetry.

Well, really filthy poetry, but Buffy had taken a poetry class. She knew what it sounded like when recited.

“That's it, baby, ride me. Feel that? How hard I am? That's all for you. All of it. Has been for bloody years and I was just too thick to get it. Didn't want to. Didn't want it to be true. But fuck, it's true. I knew you'd be hot like this, though. Knew you'd bloody destroy me. So good. Feel so fucking good. Christ—”

Buffy slammed a hand over his mouth, her heart skipping, her skin heating for reasons that had nothing to do with what they were doing. “Shut up.”

He just smirked—she didn't need to see his mouth to recognize the expression—and licked her palm, which made her whip it back and start wiping his saliva on him as though in retribution, but of course he just loved that, too. And then his mouth was on her neck again and he was back to muttering those little nothings that weren't nothing between kisses, helping her pump faster, filling the air with sounds she'd never once thought these two bodies would make together, and that knowledge just made it better and worse in the same stroke. That she was really here, really bouncing on Spike's cock as he filled her ears with praise and thanked his lucky stars for Glory because otherwise they might never have learned this about each other. And she couldn't hear it but also couldn't stop hearing it and it was making everything better and worse at the same time.

“Needed more than a suckjob,” Spike murmured, pressing kisses along her collarbone now. “Not gonna make it like this.”

At last, something dangerous enough to penetrate the fog that had settled around her head. Buffy pulled back enough to glare at him and smacked his chest before she could stop herself. “We had an agreement,” she snapped, unable to keep the tremor out of her voice. “That’s the entire reason I came over early.”

Again, he just smirked at her, tumbling back so he was flush against the bed and she was astride him. “Just lookin’ for a rise, Slayer. Man’s spillin’ his soul to you here and you’re just—”

“You don’t have a soul to spill.”

“No. Got somethin’ else though, don’t I? Somethin’ better.” He waggled his brows and did some obscene thing with his tongue that unfortunately she interpreted with one hundred percent accuracy and her body thought sounded like the best idea in the world, for of their own volition, her hips had started to up the ante. It was almost worth it for the way he rolled his head back, and definitely for the way he shut up for about twelve seconds, before he brought himself back around and met her gaze again.

And that. That she didn’t like. The whole being face-to-face with Spike while she worked herself up and down his cock, his reactions unavoidable, his expression open and hungry, his pleasure—because that was what this was, Spike soaking in pleasure—just seeming too intimate. Which was ridiculous considering what they were doing yet no less true, either. Stupid Spike with his stupid animated face and his refusal to pretend.

As though hearing the thought, he arched his eyebrows and grinned. “You’re magnificent, you know that?”

“Shut up.”

“Bloody magnificent.” He waggled his tongue at her, pressing his hands down on the small of her back to urge her forward. “Come ’ere.”

“Why?”

“Wanna taste your tits.”

Her heart skipped and she stared down at him, not sure exactly what she’d expected him to say yet still somehow surprised. That was the thing with vampires, she guessed. They weren’t exactly beat-

around-the-bushers, rather direct and unapologetic. Still, it shook her, even after his whole speech upstairs about how he wanted this. Even after giving him that blowjob. Even after just three seconds ago thinking about how he never lied with his expressions or held back.

“You don’t need my...*that*.”

“Need? No. But I’m not gonna let an opportunity go to waste.” As though to demonstrate, he palmed one of her breasts and began strumming his thumb across her nipple, and god, she didn’t want to admit how much electricity was in that slight touch. How just the sensation of his fingers zinged straight to her clit, how she felt herself clench around his cock in response, and how his eyes widened and his lips curled back over his teeth. How he showed her more of that unadulterated pleasure she was so unprepared to see.

“Come on, pet,” he urged, his voice dropping an octave. “Let your Spike have a sample.”

“You’re not *my* Spike.”

At that, he snorted. “Matter of opinion.”

“What?”

“Just sayin’ I don’t seem to be anyone else’s right now.” He grinned and ran his tongue over his teeth in a way that was downright obscene. “I’m already in your cunt, baby, just let me have a little suck.”

And there it was. The reminder of who she was with and what it was costing her. “You are disgusting.”

“Yeah, and it didn’t make you tremble at all.” He punctuated that remark with a pinch of her nipple, and when she answered by smacking his chest, just chuckled and pulled himself off the mattress so they were chest-to-chest. “Don’t hit me too much,” he said, then swirled his tongue around that same nipple before she could stop him. “Not if you want me to keep until the timer goes off.” And he closed his mouth around her breast with a growl—one that again stole whatever she was about to say right from her lips with a guttural moan that she was no better holding back than the fresh rush of wetness she knew he felt all over his dick. It was awful and embarrassing and *shit*, she hadn’t known she liked her breasts to be teased before he’d started working some sort of voodoo with his lips and teeth and tongue, and he was going to be insufferable to deal with when she



reclaimed control, she just knew, but also maybe that was worth it for this.

“Feel that?” he asked, and dragged his teeth along her nipple. “Feel how you shudder? Someone likes havin’ a vampire’s fangs this close.”

At his words, a fresh wave of heat crashed over her, spreading across her skin and filling her cheeks. What was worse was that she knew he knew—if she felt it, if she was aware of it, then there was no hiding from him. Spike was as close to her as he ever had been or would be again, and he was too much of a predator not to take notice of all her body’s responses to everything he did. There was no point in denial, which left her with another meek “Shut up!” instead. One he answered with a chuckle that pressed another, almost ticklish rumble into her flesh.

“No harm in admitting it, love,” he told her before swallowing her breast a final time, then releasing it with the sort of wet *plop* that, for better or worse, stimulated some erogenous zone she hadn’t known she had. Or maybe it was just knowing this was real. For as many times as Spike had stolen into her dreams, smirking and stroking and full of all that attitude that made her want to fuck him humble, some part of her had known those dreams were not real. Real sex wasn’t cinematic—it was this. Slick and messy and loud, punctuated by wet, fleshy smacks and squeaks that reminded her, if sensation alone did not, that she had Spike inside of her, that she was riding him, soaking him with herself as well as her sweat, catching the raw ecstasy on his face that he didn’t try to hide every time her pussy swallowed him. Those sounds, the ones that couldn’t be muted or bitten back, reinforced how very much this was actually happening, how *all* of it was actually happening, and how that made some sick, twisted, curious part of her all the more insatiable.

Then his mouth closed around her other breast, his fingers playing over her wet skin first gently, then less gently. Pinching one nipple at the same time his blunt teeth scored the other, and chuckling all over again when she gasped and bucked and ground down harder onto his cock.

“See?” Spike pulled back to grin at her, his blue eyes glittering in the weak light. “Can’t hide from me.”

“Who’s hiding?”

“You. Every time you try to tell yourself that danger doesn’t get you hot.” He slipped a hand between them and stroked her where they were joined, making her whimper and shudder and she knew what he was doing, the point he was trying to make, but that didn’t stop her from enjoying it. “Body doesn’t lie,” he growled, holding up his glistening fingers. “Nice and convenient, this spell, innit? Gives you a reason to get a vampire’s fangs in your throat while keepin’ chaste about the whole thing. Except I’ll know the truth, Slayer. I’ll always know.”

“Again, you’re disgusting.”

“Yeah, that’s what’s burning you up. Disgust.” He winked and sucked those fingers into his mouth with an obscene moan, staring at her the whole damn time. “Mmm. Pure slayer concentrate. Better than blood, this is.”

Buffy smacked his shoulder again without thinking. “Stop it.”

“What? Finding you delicious?”

“That is not me.”

“Smells like you. Tastes like you, too.” He dropped his mouth again and started kissing his way along the slope of her breast and up her chest, along her shoulder, and then his lips and teeth were on her neck once more. “Think I don’t know you, Summers? Think I could get your juice on my tongue and have any sodding doubt who I’m tasting? How hot you get when you haven’t had it good in a spell?”

Irritation and embarrassment surged forward in equal measure. Buffy screwed her eyes closed and shook her head, though there was nowhere to hide and no way Spike would just drop it because she wanted him to. He’d never let anything go once he sensed its potential as a weapon. Why in the world would he start now?

“You saying you thought I didn’t know every time you took a little jaunt through the graveyard because Captain Cardboard wasn’t helpin’ you hit the high notes?” he asked, ghosting his hands along her arms before dropping them back to her hips. Digging his fingers into her ass to work her up and down his cock at a more fevered pace, and she didn’t think she’d hated him more than she did in that moment. Feeling the way he did, his flesh sliding along hers, pressing into her,

stirring things she didn't want stirred while whispering things she didn't want to hear, and it all being so good but still somehow terrible. "Even the nights you didn't have to put on a performance were underwhelming, weren't they? Always a part of you that you held back, knowing it would just hurt him if you let him catch a peek. You were too much woman for him. Too much *slayer*. And you could never let go with him the way you can right here. So do it, Buffy. Let go."

Her eyes were open again before she could help it. "Don't tell me what to do."

"But you want me to," he replied, his words practically a purr, his mouth twisted into a smirk and everything about him challenging her to argue when he knew full well she couldn't in earnest. "You want me to be the monster. You wanna know what it feels like to unleash and not worry. Come apart without frettin' if you're squeezing a bloke too hard. If you're leaving bruises or fracturing bones. If it'll be too much to keep him tethered to you for another night."

"Shut *up*." Buffy planted her hands on his chest and shoved him back again, bouncing harder, faster, unable to keep his words from settling over her burning skin. Unable to keep her heart from skipping or her body from reacting, betraying the truth she didn't want to acknowledge. Just add it to the list. "Stop talking."

But he didn't stop talking. "Told me you could pop me like warm champagne once. That you could make it hurt. Show me, Buffy. Show me how good it can hurt."

That didn't sound right. "I...what?"

"Oh, sweetheart, there's no need to get dainty on me now."

She wasn't being *dainty*—she was fucking confused. Of the many, many things she had said to Spike over the years, in all manner of scenarios up to and including a spell in which they had been engaged, nothing like *warm champagne* had ever crossed her lips. Hell, they didn't even sound like words she'd use, and definitely not in that context. Even bespelled Buffy had been somewhat reserved, swept up in the romanticism of what was happening between them rather than fixated on all the sex they were eager to have. And yeah, there had been a brief if intense flirtation during the whole Super Jonathan spell, but that had mostly just been innuendo on his end and her just...standing there and

letting the innuendo happen because, well, what else was she supposed to have done? She hadn't been the hero, just the sidekick.

Then she thought of what else had happened around that time, remembered what had been on her mind the most that night Spike had come onto her, and a lightbulb went off.

"You don't know me," she panted out, her heart plunging and twisting at the same time, though ask her why and she'd have no freaking idea. "I never said that to you."

"Bollocks."

"I never said that to you, *Spike*." Buffy gritted her teeth, trying to block out the images suddenly flooding her stupid head. Images of Faith and Spike. Faith doing things to Spike. Doing things like what she, Buffy, was doing to Spike. "That was the other slayer."

The idiot vampire rolled his eyes. "Look, I know you were just tryin' to drive me barmy—never tried to take you up on it, did I? But I was there, pet."

"Well, I wasn't!" She pinned him with her glare, took in the contours of his face, the confusion and the fight all wrapped in one. And goddammit, she didn't want to tell him. Didn't want to see what happened when he realized there was a slayer out there who probably would have jumped his bones from the word *go* just to prove something and live with the certainty that he would have loved every second. That Faith might have replaced her entirely in Spike's way of thinking, and why that mattered as much as it did. Hell, why it mattered at all. *Nothing* about this should bother her, yet there it was. Those flashes of what-ifs her brain kept firing at him tied intimately with the knowledge that the what-ifs could have easily been just another footnote in the saga that was Faith trying to single-white-female her out of her own life.

"What the hell do you mean, you weren't?" Spike demanded.

"I mean that my evil twin swapped bodies with me and took mine for a ride around town." If she'd even managed to live that long, given how hard the Council had been gunning for her. "She fucked my boyfriend and I thought that was the worst, but no. Apparently, she tried to fuck you, too."

Spike just gaped at her, his mouth hanging open, leaving her feeling

more vulnerable and exposed than before. The vampire she'd apparently shocked into silence while riding his cock, though for reasons that made her skin crawl. Like some part of it still wasn't hers. Like it had been tainted along with everything else. She had no feelings for Spike that weren't disgust-shaped, but there it remained. The sort of betrayal that had twisted her up the first time. One thing for Riley not to realize that Buffy hadn't been behind the wheel that night, but Spike? Way-too-perceptive-for-his-own-good Spike? Mortal enemy Spike?

Why hadn't he known? Was she that insignificant?

Buffy shook her head, trying to banish those thoughts and the images and everything else. Except it didn't want to go. Some part of her wanted blood. Wanted to punish Spike for not realizing what had been obvious. What *should* have been obvious, and the only method at her disposal right now was to fuck him harder, try to bruise his body with hers, drill it into his head that she was the one he was with. That for the next however-many minutes, his stupid hands and his stupid face and his stupid body and his especially stupid cock belonged to her and her alone.

Only she was the most stupid one of them all for giving a damn. For feeling this way in the first place, especially over Spike.

And he saw it. Of course he saw it, because he was Spike and Spike always saw the things she didn't want him to see. Could always read her, and always knew the exact combination of words to get under her skin. A talent he wasn't shy about showing off, either, even when it was particularly hazardous to his health. For the next second, as he tightened his grip on her ass, he started talking again.

"She could've had me, Slayer. Could've lured me in just as she did your ex. I could've been inside this tight cunt and never known it wasn't you. She made it clear baby likes to play and yeah, if you're curious, I wanted to play. I wanted a taste. Bloody nearly gave it to her. If I'd known—"

"Shut up," Buffy spat, swatting at his face, trying to cover his mouth, but he just pulled that lick and nibble trick when it got close, his grin unrepentant. His eyes flashing with dark, mean humor that made her want to cry and kill him in equal measure.

"How's it feel, knowin' another slayer could've fucked your vampire?" He smirked up at her, and she hated him so much she felt it pumping through her along with her blood. Lighting her up from the inside, making her burn so hot she could scream. That she *wanted* to scream. Only she also didn't because Spike would take credit for it—the heat and the scream—and she couldn't let him have that. Couldn't reveal more than she already had how much it bothered her. If there was anything left of her self-respect to preserve at all, she had to at least try.

"That's it, baby," Spike cooed the next second. "Fuck yeah, show me whose vampire I am. Show me who I belong to. Let me have it. Give me everything you hold back. Remind me who calls the shots here. Come on, Buffy, make it bloody *burt*."

And that was it. Buffy's brain switched off and she gave in. That burning hatred, that pulsing resentment, that twisted sense of ownership—he was right, he *was* her vampire—and everything else coming together in an explosion of movement and fury, of her working herself up and down his cock so hard she thought the bed might cry uncle, that they might tumble onto the floor and she'd just keep riding him until one or both of them had dissolved to dust. She was distantly aware that she was panting, then moaning, maybe even growling, that Spike was begging her to show him just what a slayer could do, what *she* could do because there was no slayer like Buffy. That he could take it, *needed* to take it. Needed to feel her tighten and spasm all over his cock, make him howl and beg for forgiveness or mercy or both.

Then he was there, his hand between them, positioned perfectly so her clit struck his knuckle on every downstroke, and it didn't take much. It barely took anything, it seemed, before all the heat inside her reached a precipice and there was nowhere to go but over, and now Buffy did scream. A scream she felt more than heard for the way it ripped through her throat, and then Spike was cursing and clutching and thrusting up into her, and it was so good she could cry, that sense of release. The fall back down from the high she'd touched, the tension gone and her body boneless, all except for the strokes of the still-hard vampire inside of her.

Her first thought, when thoughts returned, was something along

the lines of *hot damn, I have to do that six more times*. Her second thought was *this is going to kill me*. Her third thought was a vague wondering if she cared if it did. Her fourth thought was that it'd be a hell of a way to go.

And her fifth thought was *fuck*.



## MAKE ME STRONG, YEAH, YOU MAKE ME BOLD

CHRIST, AT LEAST HE COULD DUST A HAPPY MAN.

Buffy had collapsed across his chest, panting harsh breaths against his skin, all hot and sweaty and so wonderfully alive she almost made his eyes burn. Definitely made other parts burn—the snug fit of her cunt around his cock, how she'd gripped him, spasmed and strangled, taking him to that sweet spot that united pleasure and pain, and he'd understood instantly just how right he'd been. There was no way a human bloke could handle her at full strength—if that had even been full strength, and god, the thought that she might have been holding back was as tantalizing as it was infuriating. But Spike didn't think Buffy had been holding back. He'd had her too riled, too brassed, too jealous to consider easing off the pain. That had been a gamble, fueled by the fire in her eyes when she'd realized how close he'd been to fucking another slayer, though one his gut had urged him to take and thank god he always listened to his gut.

Even if she decided to end it all now, bugger the rest of the ritual and pop his head clean off his body, he wouldn't have cause to complain. But she wouldn't end it now, no matter how furious she was. Not with the world at stake and a ritual to complete. She wouldn't come this far just to call it quits. Not even close.



So, yeah, he had more of the best shag of his life to look forward to.

Of course, part of what had made it the best was exactly what he was denying himself. Keeping in check, holding back. Dancing as close to the edge as he had was its own sort of torment—a sort both sweet and awful, as that age-old ache had started to spread. Making his balls throb and his cock hurt all while the knowledge of what was to come, the promise of that sweetest ecstasy that he would only experience if he made it to the end, kept him riding the edge between needing it now and knowing it would be better for more than one reason if he forced himself to embrace the ache.

Six more. He had six more orgasms to wrangle out of her. Six more times she'd clench and come and torture him before he was finally allowed to shoot his load and sink his fangs into that perfect smooth column of a neck. And Buffy had already shown him so much, given him so much, that the thought of more was downright decadent. And yeah, while she was likely to stake him once this was over, that would be a right treat as well. William the Bloody pitted at last against the greatest slayer he'd ever known, warm from her juice and high on her blood, given the chance to fight his way to freedom or die at her hand the cheeriest bloke who had ever snuffed it.

Until then, he'd count the blessing that were each minute he had between now and the bloody timer going off. Starting with tasting the one part of her she had yet to give him.

"Buffy," Spike murmured, running his hand over her head and coming around to cup her cheek. "Buffy, look at me, pet."

He fully expected her to ignore him. Instead, she shifted and opened her eyes—those soft, mossy eyes that haunted his dreams—and favored him with a look so soft, so *Buffy* and not *slayer* that he felt his chest grow tight. And then, desperate to seize that before she remembered who she was and who she was with and why, Spike lifted his head and caught her mouth with his. A real kiss, not induced by magic or brainwashing or any other excuse she might whip out once all was over. Just Buffy's lips against his, parting for his, her sweet little moan of surprise and maybe more than surprise spilling into his mouth. Then a gentle taste of her tongue, soft and cautious as though

her body were reacting independent of her mind, knowing what to do and going with it, going with him, responding and sinking and now, yes, kissing him back with increasing urgency. Chasing him when he pulled back, curling that tongue around his teeth and stroking along his own, pushing more, giving more, the parts of her that were soft and relaxed going tense again as her arousal renewed. Her cunt contracted around him, and he groaned, couldn't help it, the edge he'd been so close to just seconds ago now a safer distance away but bloody hell, he'd be there in a blink the way she touched him. The way she stroked. The way she delved and moaned and tried to swallow him with her mouth. Her mouth that tasted of him, too, for she'd let him in there. Let him spill down her throat and it had been bloody marvelous.

Every part of her was marvelous.

It ended just as quickly as it had started, though, as he'd known it would. He might have fucked her senses out of her, but this was the Slayer. Those senses always came back whether invited or not, and usually ahead of schedule.

Buffy snapped back, jerking her mouth from his with a gasp. "What are we doing?" she demanded, blinking at him as though she'd never snogged anyone in her life and wasn't familiar with the concept. "What were *you* doing?"

"Me?" Spike arched an eyebrow, then arched something else. Watched with great gratification as the bitchy, defiant look on her face melted into a moan, as her head lolled forward and she fell into the rhythm of his gentle thrusts. Thrusts that wouldn't stay gentle for long. An hour might feel like forever for him but he still had to ensure she got what she'd asked for and soft, tender lovemaking wasn't likely to do it. At least not this round.

"You kissed me," she replied, though her words were muffled as she spoke them into his shoulder.

"Sorry to burst your bubble, Slayer, but you did a good amount of kissing yourself."

"It was a reflex!"

"Considerin' you just came all over my cock, gonna wager that a little kissing's not gonna kill you."

That did it, got her to rear back and fix him with a glare that he felt all the way down to his balls, which throbbed in agreement.

"You're depraved," she told him.

"Now you're gonna go dainty on me?" he replied, lifting her off his cock with relish, the wet slide of her, the way she clung to him, then the sound their bodies made as he pulled her down and her pussy took him in again. The sensation had his mind blanking out for a moment, and he couldn't let that happen. All he had was this—the way she felt, the way she sounded, how she looked astride him, and yeah, if he'd been thinking at all during the lead-up, he might have set up cameras or the like. Make sure he had some way to relive this once it was over. But he hadn't been thinking—at least not about anything other than what it would be like to be inside the Slayer—so memory was all he'd have. He couldn't squander it now. He had to be present for every sodding second.

"We're not kissy people," Buffy protested.

"Bollocks. I've seen you steal your fair share of snogs."

"No, Spike, I mean *us*. We're not kissy people. We don't kiss each other."

He arched his eyebrows and, without breaking his gaze from her, lifted his head to tease one of her pert nipples with his teeth. "Last I checked, we didn't fuck, either," he replied in a low, gravelly voice he knew for a bloody fact had wetted plenty of knickers in the past. "Think we can make an exception. Don't seem to be following any bloody rules today."

"The *fucking* is a necessary evil."

"Think *I'm* the necessary evil in this instance." Spike grinned broadly, turning her nipple over to his tongue, groaning when she gasped and clenched and coated his cock with a fresh wave of those slayer juices he wanted so badly to have in his mouth. She could play all she wanted, deny the good time she was having, but her body told the real story. The spell might be the reason she was rolling her hips and bouncing on his shaft but it wasn't the reason she let out those little whimpers or fluttered her eyes closed or dug her nails into his skin—it wasn't why she trembled when he nibbled along her breast and up her collarbone, didn't account for the sharp intake of breath as he trailed a

path along her neck, and definitely had nothing to do with the way she leaned into him or the jump in her pulse. Buffy could tell as many little white lies as she fancied, and he'd know the better of it because he knew how to really listen.

"You are," she said a beat later, her movements becoming sharper, more earnest, graduating beyond languid post-coital strokes. Following that same beat as the burning began again. Buffy knew how to listen, too, even if she was rubbish at picking up on what her body was actually trying to say. "And I'm doing enough evil as it is. The spell doesn't...doesn't need kissing."

"Maybe it doesn't, Slayer, but *you* certainly do." Spike cupped the back of her head and drew her down to his lips once more, and she must have been expecting it, craving it, for she didn't even try to fight at first. Instead, she quickened her pace, moaning into his mouth and pushing back with each stroke. She kissed the way she did everything else—with all of herself, bright and hot and fiery, gaining intensity and momentum until she *was* fighting him after all. And there was nothing like this—nothing in the whole sodding world to compare to the sensation of having her pussy squeezing him, drenching him, as she explored his mouth with her tongue. As she let herself fall into the moment despite her reservations.

It didn't last, though. Couldn't. For she was still Buffy and Buffy was too bloody addicted to overthinking the simplest things. When she wrenched away, she did so with a grunt and a glare, as though he had tricked her into falling on his lips.

"I don't need that."

"Clearly."

"Let's just get to the end of this spell, okay?" She furrowed her brow in concentration and bounced on his lap a few times with exaggerated enthusiasm, only it wasn't for him and he wasn't about to try to convince himself otherwise. And he understood better than she could have imagined. Enjoying a shag was one thing—shags themselves could be perfunctory and impersonal, just a quick way to release physical tension while having a jolly good time in the doing. People fucked people they didn't fancy every day just as a matter of course, and even though *people* would never be *Buffy*—she was not the sort who could be

sustained by casual shagging—she could pretend all right that what she was doing now was impersonal so long as he played along. Kissing her was a different story altogether. Kissing made it personal. That bloody Julia Roberts movie had gotten at least that much right.

But no, if this was Spike's only time with Buffy, he wasn't going to make it easy for her.

"You wanna talk about the spell, I can play," he told her, lowering his mouth back to her sweet, damp skin. "Answered at least one of my burning questions. I knew it'd be good with you. Just not this good. Did you know?"

Buffy tipped her head back, shuddering as he nibbled his way down her throat again. "I... I didn't say it was good."

"Didn't need to. Your body did all the talking."

"Shut up."

"Really bothered you, didn't it, thinkin' I might've had a different slayer around my prick before you got a chance."

He was rewarded then with another of those blissful clenches of her cunt, the way she gripped his cock as though to punish him, as though to hurt, and he could almost believe she knew what she was doing. That it wasn't just her body responding to the words but all of her. And as though in response, she started rocking a bit harder, grinding herself against the base of his cock every time she slid back down. Working that magic set of muscles so well that he thought he might go cross-eyed before this was over and didn't bloody care. Who would? Anything was worth this.

"It didn't...bother me," Buffy argued, because of course she argued. He would expect nothing less from her. "What bothered me..."

But whatever it was, she didn't say, instead seemed to lose herself in the rhythm she'd established, focusing instead on the slow gallop. He wondered how it felt to her, how it sounded. If the wet smacks were doing to her what they were to him, if she was shaken by the knowledge that she had come harder just a few minutes ago than she had in her entire life, for he knew she had. Too many nights standing outside her window, listening to her grunt her way to a mediocre orgasm—if she got there at all—had been highly informative.

Still, that didn't mean he was going to let her get away with teasing

him like that. Spike began exploring again, running his hands over those miles of creamy slayer skin, her breasts, her hips, along her sides, grinning and holding his tongue when she leaned into him. When her breath caught and her heart skipped and she increased the pace of her thrusts, still not realizing what she was telling him without giving him words at all.

But greedy bastard that he was, he wanted the words too. So he took her earlobe between his teeth and tugged. "What bothered you, baby?" he asked. "Tell your Spike everything."

She hissed in a breath and slapped his shoulders, the sting sharp and decadent. "Stop enjoying this."

He snorted. "Not on your life. Thought we already covered this—agreed that we're taking the time to answer some of the more private questions we've had about each other for years."

"I never agreed."

Well, now she was just flat-out lying, which would have annoyed him had it not betrayed something interesting. Something that, combined with her flushed face and the eyes that suddenly seemed determined to avoid his own, was practically a confession. Spike grinned and slipped a hand between them, keeping his gaze focused on her face. "We both know that's not true," he told her. "You can't go changin' the rules on me just because you're embarrassed that you're having a good time."

That did it. Buffy whipped the full force of her slayer glare on him, and it damn near burned with the truth.

"It's all right to like it, pet," he whispered, dancing his fingers now over the swell of her slick mound, through the thatch of dark curls until he was at the apex, inching closer to her clit. "Just because you're enjoying yourself doesn't make this any less something you're doin' to save the world."

"I am *not* enjoying myself."

"Oh yeah, I'm convinced. That's why you bloody near strangled me when I made you come." He arched his eyebrows and dipped his fingers into the honey her body was making, the evidence she couldn't deny no matter how much she tried. Time to remind her just how good he made it. See her deny it twice.

The second the pad of his finger touched her clit, though, Buffy shook her head and snatched his wrist. "No. Can't."

"What's that?"

"I'm too sensitive right now. Don't."

"Are you? And why is that?"

Buffy didn't answer, just glared at him with that insolent expression that could have had him shooting off all on its own. "I hate you."

"But you don't hate this."

"Yes, I do."

"I don't think so. I think what you really hate is the fact that you don't hate it at all." Spike lowered his mouth to her neck again, resumed the teasing bites and licks that he knew had been driving her wild before. Was rewarded almost immediately, in fact, with another rhythmic clamping of those perfect muscles around his cock, of the increased pace of her strokes, her breaths, the little involuntary grunts that shook loose from her lips. "I think you wanted to come in here, close your eyes and think of Sunnydale, and instead it turns out that you've realized you've never once had truly good sex and you can't stand that I'm the one who made you see that."

"God, you are so full of yourself."

"And you're so very full of me." He clamped his teeth around her earlobe and tugged. "That's the thing, Slayer. I can feel it. Every time your heart skips. Every time your skin heats. You clench around me so sweet because this body wants me right where I am. Loves having me inside you."

She shook her head but not much, and not nearly enough to be convincing. So he went on.

"You've never had it like this. Never been with a man who knows what he's doing. Who really cares that it's good for you the way I do."

"You have to care," she spat at that. "That's part of the deal. I have to get there seven times."

"And you think just anyone could do that? Think it takes a spell and some funny candles to make me want to watch you come all over my cock like the beautiful bitch you are?" Spike pulled back again, this time needing to see her eyes. "I told you before, this is more to me than your sodding spell."

“Because you wanted to fuck a slayer,” she all but snarled.

“God yes, I did.” Spike tangled his hand through her hair again, palming the back of her head so she would have no choice but to look at him. This next bit was important. He didn’t know when he’d decided to do it, but he had and once he was set on a path, there was little that could knock him off course. What happened between these crypt walls would define his future with her one way or another, whether she decided to make good on the promise to kill him or he had to adjust to living in Sunnyhell having once tasted perfection and cursed with the knowledge that he never would again. But it would be a choice—his choice—and when left to his own devices, Spike always preferred to go down swinging. “I’ve wanted to fuck a slayer for more than a century. If any of the birds I’d met had been interested in dancing like that with death, I would’ve given it to them. Made sure their last moments were their best.”

“You’re sick.”

“Can’t argue with that. ‘Cause as much as I wanted to fuck a slayer, it’s nothin’ to how badly I wanted to fuck *you*.”

Buffy drew in a sharp breath, her eyes going wide and her mouth forming almost a perfect *o* of surprise. “*Because* I’m the Slayer.”

“Because you’re Buffy.”

And that fact would continue to rock him until he was dust—that somehow she’d landed in his lap, literally, that she’d come to him, climbed into this bed, impaled herself onto his cock, that she’d found a spell to justify it all, regardless of what she told herself after it was over. Now he took in the confusion on her face, the curiosity that he knew, could tell, she was both desperate and terrified to quench.

“Let’s have us a bet,” Spike murmured, nudging her lips with his. “If I can make you come with just my cock, you’ll drop the puritan act and kiss me.”

He felt her answer around his prick before she got the words out, and tried—not very hard, but some—to hold back his grin.

“You can’t,” she said, her voice having gone all trembly.

“Just because the other men you’ve bedded were all tossers doesn’t mean I am. And if you’re too sensitive for me to stroke that sweet little



clit of yours, I'd wager we don't have anything to lose. We still have a timetable, don't we?"

Again, her mouth fell open in that sweet little *o* he'd happily fill for her, but seeing as that wasn't in the cards at the moment, Spike decided to seize the initiative. "Everything with you has been different than it was with the other birds I've hunted, and it started the first time I saw you. You were dancing at the time, all sweet seduction. I was there to size you up, suss out if you were as much of a threat as I kept hearing. Had no idea what I was in for—that you'd turn my whole sodding world upside down."

Buffy was shaking her head, her eyes still wide, and now, a bit wild, full of a heady combination of curiosity and fear. Not to mention vulnerability. It had been a long bloody while since he'd had her looking at him like that—back in the early days, when she'd been feeling him out warrior-to-warrior for the first time, intimidated by his reputation as a hunter of her kind. That hadn't lasted, and though he'd first been sour on the idea that he'd lost his ability to strike fear in the hearts of walking would-be snackpacks, Spike found now that he enjoyed the intimacy that came with being known instead. And she did know him—not entirely but more thoroughly than damn near anyone else ever had, with Dru being the obvious exception.

"Introduced myself not too long after. Gave you a line about killing you soon. Then I went back and had me a nice wank."

"Stop," she said weakly, though there was no conviction in her voice—certainly not enough to drown out the interest. And she was riding him harder, too, clawing for purchase at his back as she rocked and slammed and continued to squeeze like she wanted him to cry out, and much more of that and he'd give her that wish and whatever else she wanted. The heat alone was enough to make him want to—the heat and her slickness, the slippery slide of her cunt around him and knowing he was the one who had done that and that no matter what happened after this, what she was experiencing here, what he was making her feel, were things she couldn't ever outrun. That she'd been shagged so hard the world had been saved as a result.

Fuck, what a way to be remembered.

"And what I thought about then," Spike went on, cradling her arse

against his palms again, fingers digging, helping her as her strokes grew more frenzied, “was what I would’ve liked to have done to you. How I could’ve sauntered up to you, pressed into you from behind. Moved with you to the music. You’d know what I was but you’d be curious. Most vampires snarl and jump out at you from the shadows. But not me. Not like that. No, I pull you close so you feel what I want. And saucy little thing you are, you rub against me, letting me know you’re intrigued enough to give it a try. Yeah, you might protest a little, maybe throw an insult or two, but I can smell it, Slayer. I know you want it just as bad as I do. So I slip my hand into your slacks and feel for myself, how hot you are, how wet, and your legs are shaking but I’m there, aren’t I? I’m holding you up, stroking you just so, pushing my fingers into your cunt, and you’re silky and hot and squeeze around me like you mean to break my bloody bones, and it just makes me hungrier.”

“Oh god,” she whimpered, all pretense gone for the moment. Leaving him with pure Buffy. Just Buffy. “Oh god.”

“Hasn’t stopped, either. Not once. Even when I hated you. Remember that fight in the sun? I’ve played that so many times I could convince myself my way’s the way it happened. Pinning you against that lamppost, ripping off your pants, showing you just exactly what that sniveling git you let between your legs never could. I’d take you and you’d scream your slayer heart out there on the grass, and everyone who was off trying to get some higher learning would hear exactly what sort of education Buffy Summers was getting from the only person man enough to teach her.”

She didn’t reply, at least not in words, but everything he needed to hear was there on her face.

“Thought about this mouth,” he went on, lowering his gaze to her full, kiss-swollen lips. “There have been times when I just knew you’d swing by, demanding a bit of information or just to toss me around ’cause it gets you hot—”

“It doesn—”

“—and I’ve wondered how you might react if you came in, full of all that slayer swagger, to find me starkers in that chair upstairs, pulling on my prick. Reckon there’d be a good amount of yelling on your part,

even if you were the one who just barged into someone else's home uninvited, and yeah, you'd probably end up turning tail and running, but always that sliver of a chance you wouldn't. That you'd see something you liked and would just need to have yourself a little taste. Just like you did tonight."

She swallowed. He watched her, followed the movement with bald, open hunger. "That's not what happened," she said.

"No? You didn't pop down here, find me with my cock in my hand, and decide to let your mouth have a go?"

"You said it'd help."

"That's not why you did it, and you know it." Spike shifted back just slightly so that more of her weight fell upon him, so that the momentum was all hers to claim. Buffy spearing herself on him again and again as her eyes popped and her breath rushed and she started mewling, perhaps not even realizing it, low in the back of her throat. If he touched her now, or tried, he doubted she'd stop him, sensitivity concerns having been tossed aside, and he wanted to but he also wanted her mouth and he was so close to having that.

"All the times I've imagined you sucking on me, and nothing could compare to today," he told her. "Didn't know how hot you'd be. How much you'd like it. And you did, didn't you? You liked knowin' you were in charge then. Liked having me at your mercy. Needing it, practically begging for it." He felt rather than saw her move, her hand sliding between their slippery bodies, and caught her wrist before she could make contact. "Ah ah. We had a deal."

"Spike..."

"I make you come with just my cock, I get your lips."

She glared at him—or tried—through her damp hair. "I didn't agree to that."

"You didn't say no, either. Fair's fair, love."

"That is...*insane*."

Spike grinned, couldn't help it. Her cunt was growing tighter, wetter, and she'd started trembling that way she had just before she'd let all go the first time. And he knew, he sensed what would push her over the edge. The bit he was holding back, keeping close to the chest, burying in layers of filthy words and images. Because that was Buffy

more than anything—he could stroke and fuck and relish the sensation of her all he liked, but it was the heart he wanted most. The heart she needed most, too.

It was risky—more than just a gamble, it was giving her a peek at everything he'd been trying so desperately to hide. The parts of him that she could destroy while still leaving him alive.

At the same time, though, maybe it would be worth it. Wasn't like he stood much to lose, apart from himself.

"What's insane is that it doesn't matter how good your pussy feels or how nice you squeeze," he said. "I could've imagined you every day until the rest of time and it would never have come close. It's you, Buffy. It's just *you* bloody trouncing every single thought I've ever had. You carving into me so deep I can barely move, you've consumed me so."

Her heart jumped. "Oh."

"Always have, right from the start. And I think you did too. That's why it brassed you off so much, the thought of me and that other slag. You know I'm yours, and you need me to know it too. I do."

"Spike—"

"Buffy, I know it. There could only ever be you."

And that was it—she spasmed, her cunt clenching and pulling and bloody well making him go cross-eyed. Spike gritted his teeth, his jaw tight, his body split between pure euphoria and the exquisite pain of not being able to follow, his balls throbbing and his muscles tense, and every ounce of effort he had to spare shoved into the art of restraint. But god, watching her come was a religious experience. The sounds she made, the crease of her brow, her lips trembling as though she could burst into tears, and all of that for him. She couldn't hide it anymore, couldn't say it was something else, because he knew exactly what had sent her over the edge. What made her pulse and throb around him, drenching and strangling his cock in the sweetest agony he'd ever known.

When her eyes opened, they found his at once. No hesitating, no pretense. Just Buffy Summers looking at William the Bloody as she breathed and trembled, her hands on him, arms around him, all of her hot and wet and perfect.

And something had shifted—he didn't know what, only that it had. The air between them was charged, bloody electric, and Buffy looked at him like she didn't know him.

Or, even more terrifying, that she did.

"Spike," she said again, softer now, somewhere between a question and a statement.

Then she lowered her gaze to his lips, licked her own, and kissed him.

## JUST GIVE ME TILL THEN TO GIVE UP THIS FIGHT

IT WASN'T THAT BUFFY HAD FORGOTTEN HOW GOOD HE WAS AT THIS, more that she never let herself think about it, or anything she might have learned that night last year where she'd assumed the role of the soon-to-be Mrs. the Bloody. The way he kissed, the movements of his lips against her own, the strokes of his tongue, the flavor of him in her mouth—smoke and whiskey and *Spike*— all things to be known in a detached, academic sort of way and never ever considered again . Kinda like how she'd marveled at how it had felt being encircled in his arms, so different than the men she'd been with before, without that meaning anything other than *oh, Spike's lean* . Or her begrudging and never-to-be-acknowledged spell post-mortem observation that he hadn't felt domineering or like he was trying to protect her from the world at large with his big masculine man-ness. That had been *interesting* , nothing more. As had the fact that, aside from one strange comment about thinking she needed protection, Spike's default *romance Buffy* status had been to be a fount of support. And kissage. Lots and lots of kissage.

Kissage that she had struggled to recategorize as disgusting because, lord help her, it should have been. All gross and nothing to swoon over. Nothing to keep her wondering what might have

happened had the spell not ended prematurely—or not prematurely but, well, the way it had. Before she and Spike had had the chance to steal away for a quickie in the bathroom or do anything more than whisper filthy things to one another with the vague hope that they would be able to consummate their nuptials soon.

Instead, it had ended, and all she'd been left with was the knowledge that no one kissed the way Spike kissed. On the plus side, though, she'd been able to tell herself that maybe her perception had been radically altered by the spell itself and therefore unreliable. A byproduct of magic gone truly, horribly wrong.

Well, she could kiss that excuse goodbye, and keep kissing Spike, while she was at it. Somehow, over the last year, he had improved upon perfection.

And god, she should pull away. Save face. Start trying to reestablish the status quo before she forgot what it was. Down here, beneath the town she called her own and the world she fought every day to save, her actual life felt far away, in light that couldn't reach her. A slayer could forget that the crypt she was in belonged to that world, too. That the things that happened here wouldn't stay just here.

Kissing him, rubbing against him, her sweat-slick breasts teasing along his chest, her hands gripping his shoulders, his hair, the rhythmic rolls of her hips to keep working his cock in and out of her, aware of how sensitive she was and how every touch set her skin on fire—none of this was sustainable above ground. And none of it was really necessary for the ultimate goal. But every time she commanded herself to draw back, break her mouth from his, make sure the lines separating them remained all liney and defined, she just fell further into his kiss instead. The sucks and strokes and sighs and low, throaty groans, the feather-light way he ran his fingers along her damp skin, as if he sensed anything more would be too much—as though he could read her here as well as he did everywhere else, sense what she was thinking and feeling or, worse, what she needed, and was determined to give her exactly that.

Finally, Spike broke his mouth from hers, and when she inhaled, the relief in her lungs was so intense it took a moment to realize he'd given her that, too, before he buried his face in her throat to nibble her

skin. Teeth first, then tongue, lapping at her where she was sweaty and trembling, then pushing back, back, so she was splayed across the mattress, Spike over her now, looking down into her face as he began to piston in and out of her at his own pace.

"You're gonna be the end of me, Summers," he said in a way that was almost affectionate. "Dunno how I ever hoped to see this through all the way."

"You have to," she spluttered, her heart skipping again. "We've...we agreed."

"Gonna do my best, but you don't make it easy with the way you grip me. How good you feel. How wet you are." Spike drew in a shaky breath, his thrusts halting for just a second, and then his hand was on her face, brushing wayward strands of hair from her eyes. "Knew I had to try, though, no matter if it bloody wrecked me."

God, he had to stop saying things like that. Her mind felt soft at the moment, unprepared, unwilling to start conjuring up anything to support the disgust she knew she should feel. Spike was twisted, Spike was evil, Spike had been the best and truly only option out of a lineup of shit options and that, coupled with the curiosity he'd outed earlier, had made the decision for her. Not out of choice or want, strictly utilitarian. The best way to get from one end of this to the next.

It wasn't supposed to be this confusing. She wasn't supposed to experience anything other than the orgasms, and even those under protest. The fact that Spike wasn't sticking to the script she'd given him was not her fault, nor was the fact that he just couldn't make anything easy. Just do his job and get to the end so they could move onto the next Big Bad and he could move on and out of Sunnydale forever if she didn't decide to just go ahead and stake him.

But Spike never did what she expected, or what was asked. He always had to throw a wrench in her plans. And this wrench was a doozy.

What the hell was she supposed to do if Spike had feelings for her? If he got to the end of this spell and wanted...what? To date? To continue having sex? Was this an enemies-with-benefits thing, or was it something more?

And god, how was she supposed to deal if it was something more?



"Talk to me, baby," he murmured, and suddenly he wasn't moving inside of her anymore. Rather, he propped himself on his elbows, studying her face with the sort of intensity that just made everything in her head even more confusing. "You've gone quiet on me."

"Sorry," she replied without meaning to, then immediately scrunched up her face because, sorry? Had she really said that? "I'm... not a talky person during sex."

He studied her for a moment longer, then, slowly, starting rolling his hips again, and Buffy lost herself for a few blissful seconds. The sensitivity from earlier had intensified almost to the point where it didn't matter anymore—where he could do whatever he wanted and it wouldn't be too much, just more.

"You've done all right so far," he said, almost guarded.

"Spike, this is weird."

"What's that?"

"You. This. All of...oh god..." Buffy screwed her eyes shut, her heart hammering in her chest and throat and fingers and pretty much all extremities. He'd started nibbling on her neck again, his thrusts gaining momentum, flipping a switch from sweet and lazy to hard and purposeful, almost as though he was determined to chase the *weird* away. Make her forget she'd said that, or thought it, and god, he might just succeed, the way he was going. The *insane* way he was going. And for the umpteenth time, Buffy found herself wondering how he was managing it, the whole *not coming* thing, and almost asked before she remembered that it didn't matter so long as he continued to manage.

And that was why she couldn't talk more, couldn't ask. Whatever was going on here, she was better off not knowing.

Only of course he wouldn't let it be that simple. He never let anything be simple. He was Spike.

"All this what?" he asked, his mouth wandering lower still, dancing over her collarbone until he was nipping at her breasts again. And oh god, she shouldn't like that. Shouldn't gasp or arch or hook her leg around his waist, shouldn't lift off the mattress to grind into him every time he drove his cock back inside. Chasing that sensation that should have been numbed by now, because really, even when Riley's meds had

had him all super soldiered up, it hadn't been like this. Hell, not even that time when she'd literally been possessed by horny poltergeists had been like this. This endless stimulation with her mind fully present, feeling when it nearly got to be too much and she wanted to ask him to stop but would also kick his ass if he even thought about it. She could feel the whine of her muscles, a pleasant sort of ache that would linger for days—six years had taught her a lot about identifying lasting versus fleeting pain—and even though she was, in many ways, exhausted and ready to sleep for a thousand years, something inside of her was very much awake. Awake and hungry for more of what he was giving her, not satisfied with what she'd already experienced, and she didn't know if that was because she knew there was more or because Spike had awakened her inner nympho. Both options had her scared stupid.

"Slayer, all this what?" Spike asked again, grinning up at her from her breasts, his lips brushing her nipple as he spoke.

"God, I don't know!" The words exploded from her, part cry and part whine, which he decided to answer by drawing her nipple into his mouth and performing more magic with his tongue. "You... I don't know. I thought this was just supposed to be a spell."

He arched his eyebrow, which ought to be illegal while he was sucking on her breast. It just looked too strange, too good, too much like he was actually Spike and she knew he was and that was why she was here, but him being so unabashedly himself was not helping clear up the confusing thoughts running rampant through her head.

"Is this not a spell, then?"

If she could stake him right now, she would. He was the most infuriating not-man on the planet. "You just told me you've wanted this for a long time."

"Yeah. Said as much upstairs, too. You still chose to—"

"No," Buffy replied sharply, and thank god, she was starting to think clearly again. Even if he was doing his damndest to fuck her senses right back out of her head where they'd been for the last however long. How had it not been an hour yet? "The stuff...about thinking about me when... That's not like what you said upstairs."

"No?"

"That's...that's not about fucking a *slayer*, Spike. It's about fucking *me*."

He smirked that insufferable Spike smirk of his, made a show of dancing his tongue around her nipple, then slowly began making his way back up her chest. Skating along her neck, taking the time to suck hard on a particularly sensitive patch of flesh as he went. Her pulse throbbing as though it called to his fangs, which was twisted and impossible, but god, it felt right. Too right. As right as everything else he was doing.

"Known you the longest of any other slayer I've come across," he said when he was at her mouth again. "Had a lot more time for fantasies to become personal. Lots to wank over."

"That's not what this is."

The bruising rhythm subsided again, almost as though he'd lost a battle with himself, but that wasn't it. She knew because she knew him, the way he was studying her now, the wheels churning hard behind his eyes, the *caught* look on his face. Spike wasn't the best on-his-feet liar, and when someone called him out on something that he didn't have a prepackaged story for, he often opted for the truth. Even when it threw a wrench into whatever he had in mind.

In fact, considering Spike was an evil thing, Buffy was hard-pressed to think of a time he'd outright lied to her. He seemed to use the truth as another weapon in his arsenal, which was either admirable or made him even more dangerous than other kinds of baddies. Perhaps a combination of the two.

"It's not what this is," he replied at last, a smile that was almost sheepish falling across his face. "Got me there."

Then he dipped his head and kissed her before she could respond, filling her again with his cock and resuming the pace that all but screamed he was doing his best to distract her. What was worse, it was working because of that stupid, amazing mouth and its efforts to chase away all the thoughts she should be having as a rational, brain-possessing person, leaving her with nothing but *yum* and *oh god* and *tongue good*. Only enough of her remained to understand, to realize, that something had changed here too. The strokes of his mouth were hungrier and more desperate, like he was more deter-

mined to talk over her or blank her mind of anything that wasn't his lips or his dick. And god, that almost worked too. Every stroke of his mouth had her slipping, falling to the sensation of what he was doing. The seconds between kisses gone, along with the breaths she so desperately needed to steal, replaced with Spike lips and tongue and teeth, consuming her until her thoughts were filled with nothing but more of this.

His body, though, seemed one step ahead of her all the while. As though part of him could sense the thoughts he was suffocating and was determined to smother them until they blinked out entirely. The slow thrusts he'd been teasing her with steadily increased in tempo. Only not like before—where he'd seemed confident and in control—and she didn't know how she knew that, just that she did. It was in the hard smacks, the grunts that shook out of his chest, and then, when he finally pulled his lips back from hers, the almost wild burn in his eyes. Places on her body that had just been overly sensitive before were starting to burn with what she knew would graduate to soreness, but she was detached enough from that awareness not to care just now. All she could see, could feel, was him. Moving and thrusting and coaxing and blanking her mind of everything except a few flashes of thought and insight, for nothing existed beyond those flashes but a primal need for more of this. More of him. More of his cock moving inside of her, his mouth on her, more of all of it. It was too easy to get lost in the rhythm he'd created, sensory experience on pure overload, to the point where she'd nearly forgotten what it was like to sit in a room that lacked the soundtrack they were making together. Soft sighs and grunts and moans and the squeaking mattress and the wet squelch that marked every thrust.

But his eyes remained wild, and that stuck with her, clung to the places in her mind that refused to go soft and pliant. There was a glow there she recognized, a glow any predator would recognize. A glow that was fear, that was *running*, that was Spike throwing everything he could in her path to slow her down, make sure she never caught up. That by the time the race was over, she'd forget they were competing to begin with.

Only Buffy's brain didn't work like that. Not even when she wanted

it to. If Spike had something to hide, then she had something to find. It might have taken all of her brainpower, but she managed to ask, "What is this?" before that thought could fade.

Spike shook his head but didn't answer.

"Your very me-specific feelings?"

"Nothin' to twist your knickers about," he barked at last, his voice growly, and god, he started fucking her even harder, as though determined to drive the question or his answer out of her mind. Or maybe trying to punish her for being able to think it at all. Too bad for him, she could be just as stubborn. "Happens in the sodding workplace all the sodding time," he went on. "They develop."

"*What* develops?"

His eyes flashed, almost like he was struggling against a change. Only he wasn't. "Feelings."

She'd seen it coming, had felt it in every tense fiber of her being, but still somehow managed to hit her like the proverbial ton of bricks. And as though it had been waiting for said ton to drop, something in her brain unlocked and started flooding her with snippets of interactions from recent months. Not one at a time, not nice and polite, but all at once. A deluge of moments that had caught her off guard suddenly made clear because *Spike had feelings for her*. Spike as in *Spike*. William the Bloody. Slayer of slayers.

The cigarette butts littered around the tree in her front yard.

"*God knows you need some satisfaction in life.*"

The kiss he'd tried to steal outside the Bronze.

"*Is there anything I can do?*"

The enthusiasm with which he had agreed to do this with her, even before what he'd said upstairs.

Everything. All of it. Several months of what were now incredibly obvious indicators came crashing to a head and she understood—saw what she should have seen then. What she'd either rationalized away as a weird Spike thing or ignored altogether. He'd tried to *kiss* her once and she'd, what, managed to not demand just what the hell that had been about? Tell herself it was because Spike got off on killing slayers so naturally, talking about killing slayers was to him what oysters and Barry White were to normal people? Let herself get so distracted by

her crumbling relationship, her worries for her mother, her terror for her sister, and her desperation to keep ahead of whatever came next that she missed what was right in front of her face?

He had *feelings* for her. Was it love? Did he love her? Did he *think* he loved her?

And oh god, when was that timer going to go off? She needed to get out of here. She needed to have never come here in the first place. She needed *away* from Spike and his eyes and his cock and the way he was looking at her. Needed all of that and she needed it now.

Maybe he sensed it. Probably he did, being as freakishly observant as he was, for Spike's expression darkened a bit, his cock ramming into her with enough force that her lungs seemed to bounce against her ribcage. "Somethin' the matter, Slayer?"

Buffy gasped but didn't reply. She couldn't. Now was not the time to give anything away.

"Gone skittish on me, have you?" he said, and surprised her by smirking. Only it didn't look like a regular smirk—a Spike smirk. It looked more like a mask and was all the more horrible because of it. Maybe he meant to fuck her hard enough that she didn't notice, but Spike was a giant mood ring. Everything he did informed everything he felt. The things he said, the way he looked as he said them, the fact that he was pummeling her with his body. He was trying to hide but he was under a spotlight and she couldn't look away. "Big bad Buffy can't handle the idea of a vampire deciding to change the hat he's wearing without a soul making him do it. Your world always been that small?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" So much for keeping her mouth shut. "You're saying you're not evil anymore?"

"Sayin' you give a man proper motivation and he'll be anything you want." He captured her mouth again before she could think to respond, his hands in motion—along her face, down her throat, over her breasts, along the curve of her hip, every stroke intentional, as though to remind her exactly where she was. In his crypt. On his bed. Under him as he fucked her toward another orgasm. All by her own doing, her own stupid idea, and now he was trying to tell her...what? That if she asked, if she gave him reason, he'd be her domesticated

vampire? That was insane—the sort of simplistic thinking that she could only ever expect from Spike.

“You bargained for the chip to be deactivated in exchange for this,” she reminded him when she managed to break away from his lips, telling herself to turn her head when his mouth chased hers, that she couldn’t let him keep kissing her, but her head refused to move and there he was. Lips on hers, soft and stupidly good-tasting like the rest of him, pushing his tongue past her teeth to tangle with hers, and she was kissing him back without meaning to but definitely wanting to, because god, he’d made her an addict and worse, she was pretty sure he knew it.

“Needed it, yeah?” he murmured against her lips when he pulled back. He was still pounding into her but had lost the almost-manic edge from before. Perhaps not in control but closer to it than he had been a moment ago. Or maybe that was wrong—maybe it wasn’t control at all. Just Spike looking at her as he’d never looked at her, or as she’d never noticed, and that look reverberating into his body, his hands, his voice when he spoke. “Need to be able to sink my fangs into you by the end. Show just how you’ve managed to tame the vampires in this world of yours.”

Yeah, that was true. But it couldn’t mean what he was hinting it meant. It just couldn’t.

The thought must have been broadcast, for Spike offered a weak smile. A cousin of the not-smirk from before. “Don’t need to worry, Slayer. Not gonna try to milk anything out of what we’re doing here beyond what you give me.”

“Right, because you wouldn’t do that,” she said before she could help herself.

“Not if there’s nothing left. But here’s the rub, I think there will be.” And again his mouth went to her throat, skin that should have felt raw for the amount of attention he’d shown it tonight. But the strokes this time were softer. Less like he was there to distract her again, more like he needed a new place to hide. “I think you’ll scarper the second the spell’s over, all high and mighty, havin’ done your duty. And then a few days will pass. Maybe a week. Maybe a bit more than that. Eventually, though, you’ll find yourself thinking about this moment.”

Spike surprised her then by lifting himself on his forearms, meeting her gaze with bold challenge even if his lips trembled a bit too much for her to believe it. But along with that came a tremendous view of his carved chest and the tight muscles that made up his abdomen, a glimpse of their bodies where they were joined, and heightened physical and visceral awareness when he started to pull out of her pussy. Inch by inch, his shaft wet and shining in the flicker of the surrounding candles. And Buffy started trembling, wanting to not watch, because there was sex and there was decadence and this felt much too much like the second thing, but she couldn't look away because it was right in front of her, it *was* her, and it was him too. Spike mostly *not* inside of her where he was supposed to be, all except the head of his cock, and she worried for a second he might pull out entirely—she didn't know if that was allowed or not—and then he was pushing inside again, filling her in increments, chasing away a hollowness she hadn't even fully registered until it was gone in its entirety, the dark, curly hairs at his groin pressing into hers.

Then he did it again. Like that. Just like that. Pulling back and she felt the hollowness this time, how the parts of her that had somehow gotten used to being full with him didn't like the empty.

"You'll think about this," Spike said in a low voice, shifting again so his weight was braced almost entirely on his left arm, the other hand suddenly flat between her breasts, fingertips just over where her heart was thumping up a storm, where he'd feel it shattering her ribcage, and then that hand was moving. With its long, pale fingers tipped in chipped black nail polish, skating over skin damp with sweat toward her pussy, where he was still tormenting her with those long drags of his cock. "You'll think about this," he echoed, and pressed the tip of one long finger against her clit. And when she saw his skin grow wet on contact, the next orgasm mounted without warning. Not a slow build but a sudden rush that sparked and teased and just barely held on from detonating entirely, fed by a combination of watching him and feeling him and seeing what he was doing to her, everything she'd once — *still* — considered too much, even though she was hardly a virgin anymore. No one had ever encouraged her like he was, urged her to watch the way he was, whispered the things he was whispering while



doing the things he was doing, and it felt a wonderful kind of wrong that she both loved and resented.

"You're close now, aren't you?" he whispered, watching her with dark, greedy eyes as she panted, twisted and arched against his hand. Drinking her in and she was very aware, in that moment, that she was letting herself be drunk. That he was watching her to catalog this in case his prediction fell flat, that one of the reasons his eyes were dark was he was doing what he could to protect what little he might still have to show her. It was absurd in that moment that she'd ever considered Spike anything but a paragon of control. He'd had all this just simmering beneath the surface for she didn't even know how long, only that it hadn't developed overnight. Maybe it had always been there. "One of the best things about this spell—I know exactly what you look like when you come. When you're about to come. How you feel, too." He nudged forward with his hips, thrusting more than just the tip of his cock inside her now, and he was panting too—panting like he needed it—then pulling back again with a shudder, his fingers abandoning her clit to scale up the length of his shaft, though not sensually. More as though he were trying to steady himself. "Bloody torture, that is, though."

She knew the answer, knew what he would say, but asked the question anyway. "What is?"

"Being inside your cunt, feeling you squeeze me, feeling what I do to you, knowin' I did it, and not getting to fill you up the way I want." Spike closed his eyes, worked his throat, his fingers dancing back toward where the head of his cock was buried inside of her, then up again, until he had her clit pinned beneath the pad of his thumb once more. "Oh, I'll get there in the end. But every time you do this"—and as though he'd willed it so, as though the command had been hidden in his voice, in the words that didn't match, the building pressure reached its zenith—"it's sodding torture. Christ, I can't stand it."

And then he was pushing into her again as she gasped and arched and spasmed, his low groan, his, "Fucking love your pussy, baby," in her ears, and she felt what he was talking about as she hadn't before. The way her body clamped down, clenching and trembling around his cock, and Spike was breathing with a hard, almost desperate force, his eyes

squeezed shut as he buried himself to the hilt. There was pain on his face as well as pleasure, and she hated how much she didn't hate it, how much she loved it, how expressive he was and how he felt the truth behind each of those expressions. Of the words, filthy and raw but honest, that he whispered across her skin, forced her to hear and understand. Then adding insult to injury by finding that rhythm again, that thought-disintegrating rhythm that had dwarfed her before, and she was too weak to push back now. Her body screaming again over her mind, and Spike doing what he could to settle the argument, one hand still between them, wet fingers stroking her folds and teasing her clit and all that sensitivity from earlier coalesced into the best sort of *too much*. Someplace fitted between intense pleasure and discomfort, where keeping going or stopping would hurt the same amount and she didn't want to pick her poison.

"Another thing I can't stand," he continued in that low, gravelly voice that was starting to make something within her vibrate like a plucked violin string every time he used it, "is that despite this hour I get with you, I won't ever know the way you taste down here." He spread some of her juice along her clit as though to demonstrate, then skimmed closer to where he was inside of her until she felt both cock and fingers at her entrance, and she realized what he was going to do a second before he did it. Buffy bowed off the bed, some sound she hadn't even known she could make tearing through her, and Spike growling in response. Plunging into her until, at last, he pulled back and lifted his hand to show off the wetness clinging to his skin. "Can taste you like this, granted," he went on, and sucked his ring finger into his mouth, rolling his eyes back and releasing the most obscenely depraved *yummy* noise she had ever heard as he did. "But nothing beats eating from the source."

Spike held her gaze as he pushed his shining middle finger into his mouth as though daring her to argue. As though she could think right now, let alone in complete sentences.

Somehow, though, she did manage to find words. or a disjointed part of her did, for she heard herself rattle out the question, "Source?" as though she didn't know perfectly well what he was talking about.

But that was the thing—even if she did know, she'd never experi-

enced it. Never really thought about it one way or another, either. Too young and innocent with Angel. Too naïve with Parker. Too aware, on some level, of how Riley would respond if she asked for it. The face he would make, the comments, the reasons, the excuses. And too intent on keeping her one piece of normal to challenge it because, well, why bother when she was happy with everything else?

Or thought she had been, at least, until catching the way Spike's eyes flashed.

"Wanna know how I'd do it?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper, and trembling. Her damn stupid head nodded before she gave it permission, heart skipping at the delight that lit up his grin. "Right now, you're a bloody banquet. Think I'd like you on my bed for our first go, so I could see you properly. Get your scent all over my sheets. You'd have your hair all spread out, and you'd look at me, all shy-like, wanting what I'm about to give you but feeling that it's wrong that you do. I'm here to show you it's not, Slayer. All good girls deserve to be eaten by someone who knows how, by someone who loves it like I do. Someone who wanks to the thought of getting to put his tongue between your thighs."

And suddenly, that was all Buffy could see. Spike sitting on the edge of his bed as he had been when she'd first come down here, or maybe in one of the green chairs upstairs, completely naked with a hand wrapped around his cock. Stroking himself while imagining exactly what he was describing. Her on the bed, hair fanned around her head, her legs spread and her hips arching in welcome. It was such a visceral thing—picturing him picturing her—and she was struck through with the knowledge, the sudden conviction, that this exact thing had played out just like that at some time. Perhaps while she had been wandering through the cemeteries on a patrol, hunting down vampires, all the while just a few feet away Spike was pulling on his dick to the fantasy of getting his mouth on her. Probably knowing she was near, maybe hoping she'd burst in and get an eyeful. And god, what would have happened if she had?

How would she ever patrol again with that thought in her head?

"I'd come up real nice-like. Slow," Spike continued, and lowered his hand again, fingers now wet with her and his saliva, and before she

could even begin to think about what he was doing, he was touching her once more. Sliding those slick fingers back inside of her along with his cock, filling her so completely it almost hurt, but only almost, and the difference was nothing but pure fucking awesome. "Spread you open, get a good look at you. See how soft and pink you are, how wet you are. Can feel it and taste it but I wanna see it, too. How much you want it, no matter what you say. I'd wanna keep looking but I'm bloody parched for you, and you need it, too. You tell me. Grab me by the hair and show me where you want my mouth. Only I'm not gonna give it to you that easy. I know I'm not likely to have this again so you better believe I'm gonna see all the sights. Maybe start with a little lick to warm you up, let you know the good stuff's coming. And you're so hot you burn my tongue. You start sweet-talkin' me the more I'm there, rubbing your cunt against my face and I'll tease. I'll kiss and suck and nibble but that's not what you want, is it? You want me inside you, almost as much as you want my mouth on your precious little clit. You want me to show you exactly what those tossers weren't man enough to give. After a mo', I think all right. I'll show you I know how to touch your buttons. Play with your clit while I fill you with my fingers, and you squeeze around me just right. Just the same way you do around my cock, thinking it'll drive me out of my head and I'll give you what you want. And for a few seconds, I do. Fill you up as I play and lick, only I know my way around a pussy, Buffy. I know how to draw it out. Know how to make you dizzy with wanting me before I let you sing. You'll pout when I pull my fingers out, but not enough to deny me when I tell you to suck yourself off them." At that, he did withdraw his fingers from her, the sound wet and indecent, then those fingers were in front of her eyes. Shining, the way his cock had shone, in the flickering candlelight. "What do you say, Slayer? Wanna know how good you taste?"

He phrased it as a question, but it wasn't one. The second the words were out, he smeared that slickness across her lips and she, without thinking, licked it off. And either because she was so turned on the rest of her synapses had started to fail her or because she wasn't quite as reserved as her time with Riley had led her to believe, Buffy was startled to discover she didn't disagree with Spike. The taste was

heady and thick and strong and *her*; and she moaned, making him moan, then his mouth was on hers, hungry, ravenous, fighting for whatever was leftover. And she felt herself clench again, realized with a start it wouldn't take much more to topple her over. Not with Spike's words in her ears and his tongue in her mouth, not even with the things she'd learned floating around her head—the impossible feelings he had said or what they might mean. Everything about this was wrong but some part of her didn't care. Some part of her got off on how wrong it was, for Spike was thrusting harder and all she could do was hook her legs around his ass to dig in her heels. He growled and broke away, returning his attention to her throat again with those nibbling kisses, and Buffy began to descend as well. Slide her hand between them, and when he realized what she intended, he rumbled a growl into her skin.

"That's it, baby," he whispered, his words somehow reaching her ears over the hard slaps of their bodies. "Show me how you like it. How to touch you when you're sensitive. And I'll show you exactly what it feels like when a vampire bites you."

Buffy's heart skipped with fear and anticipation in equal measure. "Not yet. It's too early. You can't—"

"Didn't say I'd use my fangs. Now, Slayer, you show me yours. I'll show you mine."

She didn't know what he meant for her to do, or maybe she did, for she slicked her fingers over her soaked mound, burning anew when she felt just how hot she really was. No matter what happened after this, she would never be able to deny that she hadn't enjoyed herself on a primal level, that being with Spike had done this to her. That she hadn't loved every depraved minute. He'd look at her and know, remember how she looked and felt and tasted, remember how wet she'd been—*stayed*—and that he was the one who had done that.

Some previous version of herself, the one she'd left upstairs, was suddenly at the front of her thoughts. Racing there with a rush of adrenaline, of pure terror, screaming reminders of the plan. The simple, straightforward kill-him-when-this-was-over plan. Whatever she needed to do to spare herself the humiliation that was this.

Except *this* wasn't the *this* she'd expected. She was in foreign terri-

tory now, and she couldn't afford to look back or retrace her steps. Not now. She could live here a little longer.

And Spike was still teasing her throat and she was so close. She let her hand drift lower, hesitated, then gave his cock a stroke as he pulled out. Felt him snarl as much as heard it, felt the bruising pace of his thrusts intensify to the point of pain, and then she couldn't wait and thank god, neither could he. The second her fingers made contact with her clit, Spike sank his blunt teeth into her skin, and Buffy shot off into the stratosphere.

It was unfair. Everything about this was unfair. But right then, most of all, the knowledge that *this*, new and undefined as it was, was all she'd ever have.

And it had to stay that way.

LIKE A MOTH TO A FLAME,  
BURNED BY THE FIRE

HE WAS BUGGERED. THERE WAS NO GETTING AROUND THAT AND likely hadn't been from the second she'd sashayed her way into his crypt to make this offer. Dangle the thing he wanted most in the world in front of his face and dare him to turn it down. That she hadn't known this was what he wanted didn't matter; likely none of it did. Even still, she knew now—if not everything then close enough to guess the rest.

At least he hadn't said the words. He could keep those to himself if nothing else. And there truly was nothing else after this, except perhaps dust unless Buffy was feeling charitable.

Of course, he could do what she'd thought he'd do all along—tuck tail and run the second the spell was up. Clear out of Sunnyhell and ensure he never had reason to darken her doorway again. He'd have a decent go of things with the chip problem solved, could perhaps see if he could hunt down Dru just for kicks, though that honestly sounded miserable. Another round of *you're covered in her* only this time he'd know just how right she was, and ha bloody ha, joke had been on him all along.

Yeah, as much as Dru had hated his slayer fixation before, she might decide to finally get around to that head-cutting business she'd

skipped the first time she'd kicked him to the curb. And even if that weren't the case, even if she surprised him and welcomed him back with open legs... Well, Spike couldn't say he much liked that idea, either.

It was one thing using Harmony for sex. He'd never made Harmony any promises, at least none in good bloody faith. Whatever the dizzy bint had chosen to believe was her own fault. And he'd never, not once, let her think that he loved her. Their relationship remained purely transactional. She needed a place to stay and he needed—err, wanted—someone to shag. No strings, at least not on his side. And none he'd let her rope around him, either.

Using Dru, on the other hand, was as close to sacrilegious as he reckoned he could ever get. He might not love her the way he once had, but she was still important to him, and she deserved better than to be treated as a consolation prize. Also there was no lying to Drusilla—fuck, she'd known the truth of his heart before he had. And Spike couldn't just shake off love and choose not to feel it. His love for Buffy wasn't something he'd surrendered to willingly. Hell, he'd kicked and roared and lashed and struggled every sodding second—was *still* struggling, at times, trying to knock his senses back where they belonged. If he couldn't will Buffy out of his head, then he was carrying her with her wherever he went. No matter what happened after this.

As though she'd heard the thought, Buffy stirred beneath him, turning her head so her breaths crashed into the hollow of his throat. "This was never going to be easy," she murmured in a sort of sleepy tone that made him wonder if she was aware she was speaking aloud at all.

"No," he agreed, pulling back so he could catch her eyes. That was something. Regardless of how long he managed to keep living after the hour was up, he'd have images like this one to keep him company. Buffy warm and sleepy under him, her cheeks still flushed, her hair a lovely mess. And now she was regarding him with softness he didn't think he'd ever seen before, at least not directed at him. That was something, too. Something he didn't want to question, lest she spook and take all that unexpected tenderness with her, but he was also not a man skilled at letting a thing go once he grabbed hold.



So, after a beat, he reached up to brush a few wayward strands of hair from her brow and remarked, gentle, "Never thought it would be."

"Neither did I," she replied, her gaze still on him. "But this is a different kind of hard."

Spike quirked his lips, couldn't help it, and nudged his hips forward to remind her of what else about their current situation was hard. Hard and hungry and *fuck*, time had passed but somehow he felt further from the end of the hour now than he had when she'd first impaled herself on him. It was good they had slowed down again, good that these quiet moments existed in between the other ones, for it helped him refocus despite the pain in his balls and the pleasant but very real ache along his shaft.

And then she surprised him. Blinkered up at him with a furrowed brow and a glint in her eye that a thicker git might have taken for genuine concern. "How are you doing?" she asked, the question soft like the rest of her, and disarmingly earnest.

"Me? Having the time of my life." He waited, worked his throat. "Haven't lied to you. It's the closest I reckon you can get to torture, feeling this. The way you clench my cock when you come..."

The red in her cheeks, which had started to fade, burned bright once more. "I know it can't be comfortable."

"Bugger that. It's the best thing I've ever felt. Worth the pain of not getting to follow just yet. Will make that moment bloody glorious."

Buffy licked her lips, making his own envious. The temptation to kiss her was immediately there but he didn't want this—this nice, this quiet—to stop, even if he knew it must. Had to. There were still three orgasms to go before the buzzer went off, and she wasn't likely to get there with him doing little more than enjoying her warmth and her company. Still, he hesitated. Real moments with Buffy were impossible to come by, and all the more precious for that. He didn't want to let go of this one just yet.

"You meant it?" she asked, again as though she were in his head, reading the transcript. "Everything you've... What you've said?"

"What do you think?"

"I think if you really do have feelings for me, that might've been nice to know before we made this deal."

Spike snorted—he couldn't help himself. "Yeah, right. Can see that going over brilliantly."

"Well, it would've at least helped with the mixed messages."

"There are mixed messages, now?"

She nodded. "You know this is all this can be, right? I'm not here—"

"I'm not a sodding idiot, Slayer. Didn't need anyone to explain why you asked for my help. I already know the answer." He waited a beat, then thought, *bugger it*. Wasn't like he had more to lose here, and it might be better in the long run to shatter what remained of that soft quiet anyway. Remind himself that nothing that sweet could ever really be his. "And not just because Angelus would've shot his load within five minutes."

Buffy's eyes went wide as he'd known they would, full of disgust and enough righteous indignation to do Angel proud. Even after everything the sod had put her through, she would be brassed on his behalf. "That is not—"

"Let's face it, love, your ex might be known for a lot of things, but restraint? Spent a good amount of time getting acquainted with this lovely neck of yours..." There was no need—he could see she knew where he was headed with this observation—but he decided to drive the point home in the way only he could and dipped to tease the faded but still very present imprint of a bite he'd know anywhere. "Think this here is proof enough of that."

"I told him to do that," she snapped, her eyes on fire. "He was going to die without it."

"Pity."

"And that's—"

"Also happen to know he couldn't control himself with you when you were snogging. Isn't that how you finally cottoned on that he was a vampire?"

"How in the world do you know that?"

Spike smirked. "He's a chatty arse when he's soulless. Had a lot to say on the subject of how easy it would've been to snuff you out. Point

is, *Slayer...*” He rolled his hips again, forcing that obstinate look off her face if only for a moment, her lips rounding with a sweet little gasp that lit him up from the inside. “Even if he’d been an option, Angel would’ve been done within the first five minutes. And you can argue all you fancy, but just remember, you had one night with the berk. I lived with him for nearly two decades. I *know* what I’m talkin’ about.”

He waited, watched, and grinned broader when realization chased away all that lovely, flaming anger. Even more so when her heart stuttered and her pussy contracted around his prick. Those thoughts of hers must have been saucy.

“I won’t tell anyone if you wanna admit it,” he whispered after a beat and started moving inside of her once more at a rhythm. Felt safer now, less close to the edge, which he supposed was something he could genuinely thank Angel for. If he ever got the chance, he would just for the joy of seeing the look on the wanker’s face.

“What?” Buffy breathed out, her eyes fluttering closed.

“The other reason you needed me over him.” Spike lowered his head to her face and inhaled, all sweet slayer and sweat and sex and her. God, let this stay with him. He knew nothing else would but he wanted to keep this. It didn’t seem too much to ask. “There was no sodding way,” he continued, now right in her ear, relishing the shiver that ran through her body, that he felt echoed in her cunt, “he could have had you off seven times when he’s never managed to do it even once.”

He didn’t get a chance to pull back—Buffy smacked his chest. “I’m not talking about this with you.”

“You don’t need to. I already know the answer.”

“You are so full of yourself.”

“Mmhmm. Told me that already. And I told you that you are too.” He grinned and pushed into her hard enough that her breath caught. “Stuffed full of this cock that just turned out to be your salvation.”

“My *salvation*?”

“Yeah. Keepin’ you and yours and your precious world safe. Think you might pay it a bit of proper respect once the job’s over.”

He caught her mouth in a long-overdue kiss before she could use it to whip another verbal barb in his direction, instead swallowing the

intent along with all her other wonderful fire. And she gave. The part of her that had been resisting intimacy beyond strictly fucking had left the building, and when she kissed him now, it was with all that Slayer passion that she brought to everything else she did.

Spike broke away from her lips with difficulty. Maybe it was better to keep talking, keep dodging those verbal barbs. If left only to the rhythm of their bodies, the way she felt, the sounds she made, he might start thinking the sort of thoughts he knew he couldn't.

But there were certain truths Spike could never outrun, and one just happened to be that he was a glutton for punishment. Wasn't enough to know that the woman he was mad for didn't feel the same—he needed to hear it, feel it, needed her to destroy him and then piece him back together the way she fancied. Leaving any smidgeon of hope would unwind him in a different way. At least this was honest. And perhaps that's why he pushed on, pumping into the sweetest pussy he'd ever been inside, watching the woman who held his heart between her teeth. Maybe he needed to be a little destroyed. Decent reminder, if nothing else, of the way things were for him in the world above this one.

"Think I wanna hear you say it."

Buffy sucked in a breath, opening eyes that had fallen closed. "Say what?"

"You're glad that it's me and not him." Spike planted his hands on either side of her head to lift himself onto his forearms, still moving inside of her but without the flesh-to-flesh contact. Her sweat clung to his skin, heating him with her delicious, borrowed warmth, but it was an illusion, like everything else. He needed to remember that, too. "You know he wouldn't be able to stand this without poppin' his top. That even if you'd had the choice, you would've come to me."

"You're delusional," she said, though the words rode out on a gasp. He was fucking her harder now, enough that the mattress shifted with every thrust.

"Then tell me I'm wrong. Tell me it was better with him. Tell me, Buffy, and make me believe it."

Buffy didn't, though. She couldn't do much of anything at the moment, apart from glare and claw at his arms and shoulders, try to

maintain composure—anger, indignation, it all amounted to the same—as he pressed and pushed and thrust and pounded into her. *And good.* Bloody let her stew. Let her sit with that understanding and her silence and everything it confirmed, and not for him, as he already knew. She had no secrets from him. Only herself.

“He has a thing for virgins,” Spike continued, and snatched her by the chin when she tried to look away. “No, no. You need to hear this. He likes purity, Angel does. Always did back when. The sweeter the girl, the higher the fall. The better it was when he broke her. And that’s what he likes doing. Breaking pretty things, people most of all. Sound familiar?”

“Shut up!”

“Ever wonder why the second you started growin’ up, he lost interest?”

“I said *shut up!*” Buffy closed her legs around his waist and the world went topsy-turvy. The next thing he knew, he was on his back and she was above him, glaring stakes into his eyes as she bounced on his cock, smashing him so hard into the mattress it was like she was trying to dust him with her cunt alone. And Spike tried—really—not to grin or howl or do anything to show his hand, but *bugger*, she was so fiery and so *brassed*. He could feel her anger under his fingers, pulsing through her like blood, only hotter, and if this was what she thought passed for punishment, well, he’d have to make sure to earn it again.

“He did the same thing to Dru,” he went on, gripping Buffy by the arse again, watching her tits bounce in time with her galloping pace. Times like this he needed more hands. Needed to be able to cup her breasts and guide her increasingly brutal strokes, needed to nudge her clit, too, and drag her head down within biting distance because he was certain that was exactly what she would do in that moment. “Got her all twisted up for him before something else caught his fancy. Why the hell do you think I’m here?”

Buffy smacked his chest hard enough the stinging didn’t flash away in seconds, rather lingered long enough to stretch down to his bollocks.

“Not your fault, pet. It’s just what he does. Always has been.”

“Stop it,” Buffy threw back, and there was something in her voice

now that hadn't been there before. He heard it a second before he saw it—the sparkle in her eyes, the flash of pain behind the anger—and suddenly this wasn't fun anymore. Suddenly, Spike's mind blanked. All of him did. He lost the thread of what he'd been trying to say, to accomplish, why he'd brought the wanker up in the first place, only that wasn't right because he knew the answer, and that answer was that Spike was a coward.

Buffy had heard him, had seen the bits he'd been trying to keep from view, trying to protect, knowing that there was nowhere to go for him after this. He'd spilled more than he'd meant to spill, bursting from the inside, and if he couldn't come for an hour, couldn't unburden himself that way, then he could talk. Relieve the pressure in his head and heart alike, the weight of being sick with love for someone who hated him. Try to soothe that wound, even if it would never heal, any way he could.

It wasn't her fault he was in love with her. Fuck, none of this was her fault.

Spike sighed and rolled his head back, working his throat. Buffy was still pistoning up and down his cock, but the fire was gone—she'd lost it, and he'd lost, too. He'd never stood a chance of winning.

"Sorry," he told the ceiling, running his hands up and down her sides now. "Sorry, baby. Shouldn't have said that."

At that, she stopped moving altogether. "What?"

He released a breath and shook his head. It didn't matter in the end, did it? And using Angelus as a sodding measuring stick was sorry work to begin with. He couldn't compete with a memory, or an ideal, and it was a poor man who tried at all. A lesson he seemed doomed to repeat until he was dust. At least with Dru, there had been spare moments, hours, even decades where he'd had her all to himself—could make a show of pretending. For a while, that had even been enough. Might have been enough for the rest of time if he hadn't had the brilliant idea of coming to Sunnyhell to restore her in the first place; if he hadn't crossed paths with Buffy and had the entire trajectory of his existence thrown into chaos. But then that would mean not being here, not being with her, inside of her, not having her look at him at all, let alone how she did it, and he couldn't abide that either.

Knowing Buffy was worth the pain of loving her. The agony of not having her. No matter how much he might wish otherwise when he was feeling particularly low, he knew himself well enough to know that he would do it all the same—the steps that had brought him into her orbit. The only thing he'd change would be what he'd done once he'd gotten there.

"Spike," Buffy said, giving his chest another little slap. "Seriously, what?"

"It's nothing."

"No, it's not nothing. You just *apologized* to me. That's..." She shook her head as though trying to clear it, as though she had never fathomed such a thing as an apology before. And hell, wasn't like that much was unprecedented, either. Wasn't too long ago he'd gone silly trying to think of ways to make amends for having shown her Riley's extracurriculars, and nothing had ever felt right because nothing had ever been right. They weren't people who apologized—not to each other, at least.

"Shouldn't have brought him up, is all," Spike said, settling his hands back on her hips. He couldn't imagine they had much time left now and a few more orgasms to wring out of her to ensure this whole bloody spell didn't go pear-shaped, and that was the least he could do, wasn't it? He doubted she'd come to him for a redo if he failed to deliver and was almost certain he wouldn't survive it if she did. One or both of them would make sure he was dust by the end. "Should've told you something else instead."

Buffy kept her gaze on him as though to suss out whether he was telling the truth, then began rocking her hips again. "Something like what?"

A bloody good question with too many answers. But fuck it, wasn't like he had anything left to hide from her, right? She'd know all his secrets by the time that buzzer went off—the only thing that was up to him anymore was how she would remember this. Remember *him*. The insensitive berk who had gotten her worked up over his own petty jealousies or the man who would have gone against his very nature to make her happy. Who was mortgaging his body and his heart to save the world, never mind whatever deal they'd made in the beginning.

For once in his miserable life, he could say the right thing. He hoped.

"How about...that it's true? Everythin' I said earlier. Everything I told you. Didn't want it to be, and god knows how I've fought it, but I can't. It's been there from the start." He gritted his teeth, allowed himself a moment to enjoy the view of her pussy sliding down his shaft and up again, though not as long as he would have liked before he had to draw his gaze away and focus on something else. Not that there were many safe places to look anymore—nowhere he couldn't feel her, hear her breaths or her heartbeat or the wet smack of skin. He just had a bit more to go. Just a little. He could make it. "You're a warrior. A warrior who throws her whole body into everything she does. Dancing. Fighting. Saving the sodding world. Or fucking." Spike inhaled and allowed himself to risk meeting her eyes again even if watching her like this was dangerous in itself. It was also worth it. "Always knew you would, too, baby. Fuck the way you fight. You come at me with everything you are, bruise me, punish me, make me want things I know I can't have. Make me want to do things I know you won't believe I can."

Buffy was shaking her head, her breath coming harder. "Spike, you—"

"You're light and glory, Slayer. You burn so bright it hurts to look at you, but at the same time, the burn feels so good you can't look away. That's what you do—you make creatures like me want to be more than they are. You make us want to be out in the sun."

Her lips remained parted but she didn't try to speak again—at least not then, and thank god for that, for she was working herself to a pace again. And he thought maybe, if he touched her, she wouldn't be too sensitive this time, and if she was it was a risk worth taking, for the minutes would fast descend to seconds and he had to do this for her. He couldn't be the hero or the champion but he could be the reason she didn't have to face down a god. He would. He would get her there.

"Does my cock feel good inside of you, Slayer? Tell me it does."

She didn't, though she did make a mewling sound that was almost answer enough and increased the tempo of her strokes. And she nodded when he touched his fingers to her belly, whimpered when he began dragging them along her skin, shivered when he reached her



mound, then greeted him with a choked sob as he started making sweeping passes of her clit. Touching. Nudging. Rubbing. Then pressing down every time she took him into the base. Working those muscles around his cock and squeezing him until he went cross-eyed, and he loved her so much he was sick with it. Felt it pressing against his skull, his chest, his throat, and he knew he needed to swallow it back but it was there, far beyond the point of restraint, so when he opened his mouth to ask her again, instead he heard himself sputtering, “I love you. I love you. Oh Christ, Buffy, I love you.”

And she clamped down around him and shuddered into orgasm, then crashed against his chest, panting and panicked—if her rabbiting heart were any indication—but his, *his*, and he knew it, for Buffy had come the hardest she had all night on the heels of hearing his love.

That might not make her his for always, but it did for now.

And now was more than he’d ever thought he’d get.

# WORDS FALL THROUGH ME AND ALWAYS FOOL ME

THE FIRST COHERENT THOUGHT TO RUSH THROUGH HER BRAIN, strangely, wasn't one of panic or denial or disgust. It wasn't much of anything, really. Just...

*Oh.*

That was it. *Oh.* That was the most her overloaded and overwhelmed mind could conjure up. Spike loved her. Spike, her mortal enemy, *loved* her. And she was in his crypt, in his bed, on his cock. That had to be a hell of a mind fuck. Or a mixed message, as she'd worried about earlier, when all he'd admitted to were feelings. Feelings that hadn't been defined but were now, and in the most terrifying way.

Spike *loved* her. Was that even possible? Could he do that?

The logical, human, slayer side of her wanted to say no. Or, even better, scream it. Vampires were loathsome, evil creatures that weren't capable of good things, and she knew that firsthand, better than most. There had been a time when she'd tried to convince herself and one of the most notorious and brutal vampires on the planet that buried deep down was some trace of the person he'd been before the demon had taken over. But she'd also been seventeen, naïve and in love, and desperate for reasons not to have to shove a stake through the heart of the monster wearing her boyfriend's face. Granted, that had only

been three years ago but three years to a slayer was pretty much a lifetime.

And Buffy knew what she should do now. What Giles and Xander and everyone would tell her to do. Shut down the love talk. Hell, maybe even stop the ritual sex stuff, except they were so close now. If she kept going, if she let Spike give her the remaining orgasms, that was all right, right? Otherwise, she would have done all this just for a story she would never tell later under any circumstance, and the most confusing episode of her life would have been for nothing.

There was something else, too. Something she didn't want to think but couldn't help but think anyway. Something that was there regardless of reason or logic.

And that was...she didn't *want* to stop.

She didn't want to have to go back to being the Buffy who had made this deal in the first place—she didn't know *how* to be that Buffy anymore. Beyond the whole *Spike loves you* thing she had to work out, the Buffy she'd been in this bed was different from the one she knew outside of it. Not entirely—hell, not even that much—but a version of herself that was more honest. And more confused in a terrifying kinda way, and mostly because Spike had given her what no one else had. Not Angel, her first love, and not Riley, the guy she'd thought for a brief time she might spend the rest of her life with. That point of difference had been there from the start, easy to brush off then because sleeping with Spike was not exactly a decision she'd made because she wanted to, but had become more apparent the more time passed. The more he talked. The more he told. The more of everything he gave.

And that was the crux of it—giving at all. Spike praising for how she moved or how she felt or how she tasted. Spike talking at length about how he wanted to go down on her, how much pleasure he would derive from putting his mouth on parts of her where mouths, historically, just had not gone. The way he said he'd seen her from the beginning, and maybe that was just talk—maybe thinking he was in love with her had caused him to do some creative rewriting—but it was still *more* than either of her actual boyfriends had given her. And yes, it was Spike, and yes, it was wrong, but here in the moment, where no one else could see or hear or judge her, it was also...well, everything.

And Buffy didn't know how to handle that.

Nor, it seemed, did Spike. She could tell from the way he was looking up at her, wide-eyed and—was that fear?—concerned, the *love* part of how he felt had come rushing out against his better judgment. He was at once regarding her with trepidation and hints of that old bluster, the kind she associated with tense shoulders and jerks of his chin and a hard “Yeah, what of it?” Poorly feigned apathy that just underscored just how close she was to kicking him where it really hurt.

When he did speak, though, it wasn't with mock hostility, and that surprised her. “How much time we got left?”

Buffy licked her lips, her heart starting to pound, though she didn't know why. It was a simple question. Except nothing about this felt very simple anymore. After a beat, she sucked in a breath and searched out the timer she'd set near the bed what felt like an eternity ago and was both shocked and not to see how much of their hour remained. “Fifteen minutes,” she said hoarsely. Not long, and yet also a lifetime.

“Fifteen minutes,” he echoed. “Longer than I thought.”

“Longer?”

“When you've spent as long as I have waiting to bust a nut, Slayer, fifteen minutes is a long bloody time.” He grinned up at her, though it did nothing to banish the tension in his eyes. “Got at least one more to get out of you before then.”

“One?” Buffy, admittedly, had stopped counting at some point, which should probably worry her more than it did. After all, she'd given herself to this solution. Come here and done things with Spike she had only ever entertained doing when her subconscious was in control of the wheel and determined to make up for her either lack-luster or nonexistent sex-life. Should they be off in their orgasm count in either direction, the entire experience might have been for nothing, and she didn't think she could handle that. If her entire world was going to be turned on its head, then god, at least let there be a reason. A silver lining. *Something*.

“Two, actually,” Spike replied with a slight grin. A grin, not a smirk. Her world remained where it had fallen. “But not worried about that last one.”

“Why not?”

“Because that’s the one that comes with my fangs.”

Buffy’s heart skipped. Somehow, she’d forgotten about that part. That Spike would be inside her in two places...something that sounded a lot more intimate than it had when Giles had first told her about the spell’s conditions. Or maybe it was just the way he was looking at her now. Soft and vulnerable, the air between them changed with the weight of the words he’d let slip out. The love that shouldn’t exist.

Even more, how she felt about the love that shouldn’t exist. That Giles would probably tell her *couldn’t* exist on account of the whole *evil vampire* thing, and that felt right in a detached, academic sort of way, which was to say not at all the way Buffy had experienced them. Or the way he’d said them.

“You think you can last fifteen more minutes?” she asked thickly.

He gave her a grin that managed to be cocky and self-effacing at the same time, and no, she didn’t know how, only that it did. “Suppose we’ll find out.”

She released a shaky breath, for the first time feeling completely out of her element. There had been uncertainty earlier, anger and anxiety and a whole slew of other feelings, but all shades of things she knew. Something she had experienced before. This tenuous *this* was something else entirely, because this was the first time being with Spike with the word *love* between them. Knowing how he felt and more than knowing it, *feeling* it in the way he looked at her. In the roll of his hips as he started to move again, encouraging her to do the same at a pace that was gentler than what had come before. As though he were being mindful of how sore she was—and she was, but it was a good sore. A sore she’d only experienced after the frathouse marathon sex, and even though that had been with her actual boyfriend, it hadn’t been nearly this pleasant. Which was a weird thought to have about this particular muscle pain but no less true because of it.

Maybe all the orgasms helped.

At that thought, Buffy did something she never would have expected when she’d first come down here.

She giggled.

Spike paused, arching an eyebrow, that confusing but somehow endearing smile on his face fading at once. "Somethin' funny, Slayer?"

"Just... This spell is very pro me getting laid and having a good time while doing it. It really called for seven orgasms in an hour?"

"You didn't seem all that keen on it when you first brought it to me."

"Well, sometimes it takes me a while to get a joke."

"This a joke to you?"

"Not anymore, and that's the really funny part." Buffy steadied her hands on his chest and dragged her lower lip between her teeth as she started pumping herself along his cock in earnest. That fire rebuilding, soft sparks at first in accordance with her body's protests but there all the same. "It's not a joke, Spike," she said again, not sure why except it seemed important. Something in the way he was looking at her now begged for it—called out with a special need she felt compelled to fulfill.

"No, it's bloody not," he replied, his voice clipped. For a few long seconds, he watched her as she moved, his attention alternating between her face and where they were joined. Somehow, that was still heady. Looking down and watching as her pussy swallowed his cock, admiring his full length, remembering what it had been like to have him in her mouth and how impossible that had seemed in the moment because, well, there was just so much of him. Or at least more than she was used to.

That had been him every second she'd been here. More than she was used to. More of everything—sex, yes, that went without saying, but all the other things that didn't. More in his touch, in his voice, in his eyes, and of course his words. Just an overall experience of *more* that she hadn't really thought existed in the world outside of ridiculously optimistic romance novels—the few she'd read before getting bored, anyway. And none of it made sense but she'd stopped wondering about that, at least for the moment. Stopped trying to force it into a familiar shape while she was in a place where she had to fuck a vampire in order to save the world, had to let a vampire pierce his fangs into her throat on nothing more than the hope that he would stop before her heart gave out, and the vampire in question was one

who had come to town three years ago, told her he was going to kill her, and hadn't stopped until recently.

A vampire who was in love with her but had no reason why. Just was.

And even without that, he was giving her more. Had been from the start. The world that would keep spinning because of what they were doing here, that would be a safer place, wasn't the world that comprised the real estate of this mattress. She'd been harsh and dismissive, and more than a little guarded. Spike might give as good as he got on a regular day but today was not a regular day. Today was a day where the rules were rewritten.

"Spike," she said softly, not realizing she'd made a decision until his name was on her lips. Buffy watched as he let his gaze roam back up her body, not missing the flash of hunger and something else—maybe longing—that crossed his face before their eyes were locked again. His own expression taut, almost defiant, until he clocked in hers that something had changed.

Maybe not for good but for now. For these last minutes that were left. They could make the most of them.

Whatever the case, he worked his throat, looking almost innocent, and just studied her for a moment that was probably not that long but stretched on for what felt like forever. Searching, maybe, or trying to gauge whatever it was he saw reflecting back. Either way, Spike found whatever he needed to find, and raised himself off the mattress, shifting so she was in his lap. And Buffy nodded, wrapped her arms around his neck and brought her mouth to his without bothering to stop and ask herself what it was or what it meant, if it was right or wrong or if she were making the sort of mistake she couldn't recover from. All she knew right then was she wanted to kiss him and the time for want was ticking away, and soon she would be left with only the memory of something she would never be able to discuss with anyone.

Not even him.

God, especially not him. She didn't think she could bear it. It was going to be hard enough to look him in the eye without thinking about any of this, the way he wound around her, one hand splayed along her back, the other at her ass, pushing down every

time she lifted herself off his cock. Without the echo of, "Christ, Buffy," in her ears, the whisper of his tongue in her mouth, the hungry but strangely delicate way he kissed her. Like he was trying to get her to understand something in a language he didn't think she spoke.

But maybe she did speak it. Maybe this was the only time she would. And maybe that was why she found herself pulling away from his lips to do some exploring of her own. She would never again be in a position to investigate what Spike's chin tasted like, or just how sharp those cheekbones of his actually were. There would be no appreciating the way he groaned when she nibbled on his neck, or how the groan itself sounded against the air. Deep and low and rumbly, but also breathy. Like she'd caught him off guard and it was half-sigh, half-moan, but entirely Spike.

"What are you doing?" he asked, and worked his throat. Truly worked it, his Adam's apple bobbing with the movement.

"I don't know."

"You don't?"

"Well, our time's almost up, right?" Buffy pulled her mouth back from where she had been about to start exploring his stupid, perfect, marblelike chest and lifted her gaze to meet his. "It's not like I'll get another chance."

She almost wished she'd looked away. If she had, she wouldn't have seen his eyes go wide or the emotion they betrayed, and she wouldn't have experienced that odd pang in her chest as a result. The knowledge, unwanted and definitely unasked for, that at the end of this, she was going to hurt him. Whether Spike actually loved her or not was beside the point—he certainly believed he did. And when she returned to her life as planned, some part of him would stay here.

Some part of her would, too. But she wouldn't feel that awful, heart-deep pain that came with loving someone who didn't want her. She wouldn't have to carry that.

No, instead, Buffy would have to live with the knowledge that she'd broken his heart without even trying.

"Doesn't have to be the last," Spike murmured, because of course he did. Of course he'd look at her and see what she wasn't saying and



do the talking himself. "We can make a go of it, you and me. Something more than this. Something real."

"Spike—"

"I know I'm not what you want, but I could try. Bloody hell, I've *been* trying." He pressed his brow to hers, the hand he had pressed to her back now traveling up, tangling in her hair, pressing against her head to keep her in place. "I can try for you."

She shouldn't ask but she did. "Try what?"

"Whatever you want. Turn traitor to my kind. Be a white hat. Fight with the bloody heroes. Keep watch over your mum and sis whenever you need." The longer he spoke, the more desperate his words became. The more earnest, too, which was almost unbearable. "I could love you, Buffy. I do love you, but I *could*. Better than anyone who's ever tried before. I could love you the way you need to be loved."

Buffy blinked, then blinked again when she realized her eyes were stinging and she didn't know why because it was ridiculous. *He* was ridiculous. This entire thing was so beyond ridiculous, the fact that it existed in her head downright insane. Yet there was nothing ridiculous or insane about the way he was looking at her, the raw urgency, the need she didn't understand. All while she moved over him, driven now by his words, these stupid impossible promises that he couldn't possibly mean, and wondering why the hell it had to be him. Why him? Why not anyone else?

But no one else would feel like this. This exquisite pain, the thoughts beginning to break through the wall of logic and reason that kept her protected from stupid decisions, Spike looking at her the way he was, *ridiculous*, with the things he'd made her experience during this stupid spell. The swagger from before gone, the sneers and the smirks, and all she was left with was him.

"I could do it," he said again, the words harsh and desperate. "Let me love you."

"I can't," she sputtered, not meaning to—the words forcing their way through her chest and up her throat before she even realized they were there, let alone how they would sound. Her voice all hoarse and strangled, like she was being ripped apart from the inside. Like she was hurting more than just him with what had to be obvious. And they

didn't stop. That funny pain just burrowed in and kept burrowing. "You know I can't."

"No, I don't."

"It's insane."

"And? Not like we live in a sane world." He kissed her before she could come up with a response, his mouth hot and urgent. "Not so crazy. Not like it hasn't happened before."

"Like *what* hasn't happened?"

"You. With a vampire."

"This isn't the same, Spike, and you know that."

"Let me prove it can be," he replied, and then both hands were on her hips again, guiding her in long strokes, and it was starting once more. Her body exhausted but starving somehow, greedy and needy, and Spike knowing. Spike knowing way too much. Just how much pressure to use when he gripped her, the pace she needed in order to find her path back to the orgasm she couldn't believe she wanted but did. Almost as much as she wanted, in that wild, insane moment, to believe him.

And he must have sensed it—that freakish Spike intuition of his—for he started talking again. Saying more impossible things.

"You worried about what I could do? About me hurting you? Keep me in line, then. Switch the chip back on. Don't care. I don't fucking care so long as you give me a chance."

Buffy shook her head, the room threatening to go sideways. "Spike—"

"Don't tell me it wouldn't work without letting me prove how it could." His teeth were on her throat the next second, blunt and human, but her body knew. She tensed and squeezed, and he moaned low but didn't raise his head. Kept his mouth on her skin, licking and flicking places that felt loved raw but somehow, like the rest of her, hungry for it. Then she felt his breath at her ear, jostling the hair that wasn't sweat-plastered to her skin. "Doesn't matter what I was before. I don't need any of that."

God, he had to stop talking. "It can't happen."

"I would love you better, Slayer. You know I would." He nipped at her earlobe, his hands leaving her hips and his arms binding around

her. Pulling her to him so they were flesh-to-flesh, as close as they could be without falling through each other entirely. “I’d love you when you’re strong. Love knowing you could pummel me into dust with your fists alone if you set your mind to it. I’d love being there with you in the thick of things, doesn’t matter who we’re fighting so long as we’re together. I’d love that, and I’d know what I had and be grateful for it. For bein’ in your life even a little where it’s not where creatures like me belong.”

Buffy pressed her eyes shut. It was building again—that pressure, both between her legs and in her chest. The burning in her sinuses that betrayed she was close to crying even if there was no reason to, even if she hadn’t lost anything. You couldn’t lose something you’d never had. You just *couldn’t*.

And he kept talking.

“I’d love you when you’re soft, too. When you need to be soft. And you do, love, you need it. Just on your terms.” Spike buried his face in her hair and inhaled. “Let me show you, Buffy. Let me show you how good it can be.”

“God, Spike, please don’t.” She didn’t know how much more of this she could take—or how he could manage to break her with nothing when she had nothing of value for him to break. Certainly not her heart. Yet that pain was still there, throbbing and insistent, a different sort from any she’d felt before. That hollow sensation like she was grasping at air. Trying to hold onto something that didn’t exist. Something that was just vapor.

“You know you need a little monster in your man. I know you know it. I could do that. Be your monster and your man.”

“You can’t.”

“I can. And you know it. You want me to. I feel it.” He pulled back just enough to catch her eyes—if she were smart, she would have looked away before they connected. Closed herself off. Blinked. Done anything but meet his gaze and hold. Found herself trapped in this moment with Spike. Spike’s eyes and nose and mouth, Spike’s eyebrows and cheeks and ears and the smooth perfection of his neck. Spike with his radioactive hair and his unapologetic evil. The same Spike that had stepped out of the shadows one night, clapping and

boasting that he would let her know who he was right before he killed her. The Spike who had kidnapped Angel and sent a bunch of unstoppable assassins after her, who had come to her to save the world because he liked Manchester United, who had blipped in and out of her life until blipping back in for good, who had mocked her after Parker and tried to kill her just a few months back when Riley had his health scare, who had told her death was her gift and that killing his first slayer had been the best night of his life, right after mentioning with a fond grin that he'd fucked Dru hoarse near the girl's corpse. Spike who had always been her enemy but was inside of her now, guiding her toward another orgasm, hard and thick, making her hurt in places Buffy had never hurt before. Telling her he loved her and asking for something she knew he knew she could never give but asking anyway because he was Spike.

And Buffy, somehow fuller than she'd ever been and empty at the same time, cracking down the middle under the weight of the answer he already had to already know.

Also realizing that somewhere beneath all the good reasons, better excuses, memories and knowledge and just plain logic that spelled out the reasons for her argument better than she ever could, was the understanding that he wasn't wrong.

Some part of her did want. Some part of her was curious. Some part of her heard what he was saying and thought *yes, this is what I've been waiting for.*

That was bad enough all on its own. Worse because she knew he saw it. It was that part he was appealing to now. Trying to get to take charge. Push all the other components that made up Buffy aside and give in to the thing she knew she couldn't have.

"Let me," he whispered, looking into her eyes as she moved on his cock, boldly himself. Boldly Spike. "Christ, Buffy, let me love you."

Then he swooped forward and touched his mouth to hers, and all that pressure coalesced, exploded, and took her along with it into an orgasm that was as cerebral as it was physical. She whimpered into his kiss, arms crushed around his neck to bring him into her, rolling her hips and clenching her pussy around him, wet and aching the way she'd never ached, trembling from the inside out, it seemed, and shooting

again into that impossible stratosphere way beyond the realms she'd reached before. And the world was turning, and her with it, and then she was on her back. Spike above her, panting, the gleam in his eyes almost manic.

"I know when you need the man," he told her between breaths, then the bones in his face shifted, blue melting into gold, and his lips curled around his fangs. "Also know when you need the monster. You live in both worlds. You need someone who can do that with you. Go to the places you go. That could be me, if you let it."

He rolled his hips, dragging his cock back by inches, and this was it. Their time was almost up. In minutes, maybe seconds, the timer would go off and the hour would be over. The world out there shifted, changed, and if the magic took, safer. But there would always be this, too. There would be Spike and the things he'd said, the things she'd said, the things she couldn't unknow, the love and the desperation and the hunger and the begging. There would be the memory of Spike at the end of what she'd guess was one of the longer hours of his life, finally unleashed, pounding into her so hard she worried the mattress would give. The sounds from before, wet and guttural and flesh on flesh, now all she could hear. As though he had blood that could race and a heart that could beat, and she was inside of it. Inside of *him*, just as much as he was her.

"Let me, Buffy," he rasped around his fangs. It was still there—the love. It hadn't gone away when the demon had come out. She saw it now and wondered how it was she hadn't always seen it, for in that moment she would swear it had always been there. "Give me a chance. Let me show you."

She didn't have an answer for him. All she had was his name. "Spike."

"God, let me..." He pumped his hips once, twice more, then buried his face in her neck. She felt the rumble of his growl against her skin, the corresponding flicker of alarm—her body's warning of a dangerous predator—felt the way she tightened around his cock with muscles that might be more than just sore, might actually hurt, but still with that underlying current of something that made the hurt worth it.

"Let me," he whispered again. She didn't know how she heard him

above the smacks of their bodies but she did. Then his fangs were dancing along her skin and her heart was about to explode and she had to hold on just a moment longer. Just a goddamn moment.

The shrill of a timer pierced the air at the same time Spike pierced her neck, and everything changed.

For the first time, she screamed. The sound hoarse and harsh and gritty and true. She screamed and clawed and clenched, scratching at his back, clutching at his head, and she'd swear her cells exploded into stardust. And Spike was moaning and growling at the same time, a sound fed to her skin where he kept pulling mouthfuls of blood into himself. Each drag, each inch of that fabulous pressure zinging straight to her clit so it just kept coming. So *she* just kept coming. Crashing and receding and building and crashing and crashing and Spike thrusting and whimpering and yes, finally, shaking and filling her with him. She felt every throbbing pulse of his cock, every spurt, and all she could think was how much she loved it. Loved the way he shook under her hands, the feel of his muscles shifting beneath his skin, Spike's moans muffled in her throat, and the sensation of giving as he gave. And somewhere outside of herself the timer still wailed, and then his fangs were gone, and she was screaming with the loss, but the scream was lost inside a vibration of pressure that seemed too large to be hers alone. The culmination of magic building and exploding. Of the shifting barriers outside this crypt—the energy she had made with him, that he had coaxed from her, geysering outward. Too much to keep here, just between them. Too much for too many reasons, not the least of which that it was over.

It was over. They were on the other side of the hour. The spell done, for better or worse. And everything she'd known when she'd shown up was different now. Changed in ways that couldn't be unchanged.

An embarrassing whine left her lips when his vampire face shifted back to human, but for the moment, she was too tired to feel shame. Just a shiver and a sigh, and then he was looking, his eyes fuller than they had ever been. And everything was over but it also wasn't, for this was part of that everything. The things he'd said. The questions he'd asked.

The one still there, waiting to be answered.

*Let me.*

And god help her, she wanted to.

Perhaps Spike saw as much, for he released a shaky breath and pressed his brow to hers a final time. "So how about it, Slayer?"

Buffy let her eyes fall closed, her mind whirling, everything inside falling apart without a place to land. And before she could talk herself out of it, she lifted her head and kissed him. It was brash and impulsive but something she needed all the same. One last kiss. Something that was hers and not the spell's. Something she could take with her. Something she could give him. *All* she could give him. For even though everything was still spinning, the world outside this crypt hadn't changed that much. She knew that. And he did too.

There were vampires and there were slayers. She could wave a white flag from time to time, join forces with evil when the world was at stake, but she couldn't do more than that. She couldn't risk everything.

Especially not her heart.

# YOU GOT A PIECE OF ME AND HONESTLY

THE GOOD NEWS WAS EVERYTHING HAD GONE OFF WITHOUT A hitch, thank god, for she thought there was a decent chance she would have just started screaming and never stopped if it all turned out to be for nothing. But no, Buffy arrived at Giles's place to the news that the Council had reached out to inquire about the seismic and supernaturally significant burst of energy that had tripped all their cosmic alarm bells. Apparently, the Council had ways of tracking mystical power surges and could predict most of them based on other portents and historical data like a bunch of paranormal meteorologists.

Giles explained—studying the wall, the ceiling, the floor, his own hands, anything to keep from looking at Buffy directly—that the Council had confirmed for the first time since its inception that the reality they called home appeared “untainted.” Meaning home to only the sort of creatures who were supposed to be here, whose presence was natural and not the result of a break between worlds.

“They inquired if we had stumbled across something in the texts they provided on Glory,” he said while standing in the kitchen and feverishly stirring the cup of tea he'd just brewed for himself. “I confirmed we found a spell that seemed promising and had set about completing the steps necessary to see it fulfilled. Unfortunately, Buffy,



I will need to tell them everything. I haven't yet, but seeing as you had me reinstated, I am beholden to certain—"

"I got it," Buffy retorted, trying to ignore the heat in her cheeks and the hurt in her heart at the way Giles refused to look at her. She wasn't exactly surprised—he was the only one who knew all the steps she'd taken to secure their victory—but it didn't seem fair. She'd hardly wanted to go boink Spike for an hour, and she certainly hadn't wanted all the baggage that came with it.

"I have promised to deliver a full report by the end of the week," Giles said, still addressing his tea. Then he paused, his jaw firm as though he were steeling himself, and looked up at last. "They will want to know what became of Spike. What should I tell them?"

"What do you mean?"

"You bargained with a dangerous creature and deactivated the very device that has ensured our safety for the last year. I believe the Council will understand and even commend the sacrifice you made on behalf of the world—"

Yeah, that seemed likely.

"—but they will likely request reassurance that a known slayer killer was dispatched before he could do any further damage."

Buffy's throat grew tight and her mind—stupid thing that it was—wasted no time in dragging her back to the crypt. To the loud silence that had blasted her ears as she'd pulled her clothes back on. The awareness of semen dripping out of her as she moved, the sore slickness between her legs, the damn near magnetic pull of Spike's gaze that she had somehow resisted because she'd had to. Her hands had shaken and her legs had trembled and for an empty person, she'd been really full. Her brain at war with itself, her body begging for just a little respite before she had to go back to the world above. The dangerous temptation to crawl back into bed and crash against both mattress and vampire, succumb to her exhaustion and—yes—that sense of extreme physical satisfaction she'd only experienced once or twice before, and never as she had with him.

But she hadn't crashed. She'd known better. Known Giles would expect her soon, and if she didn't show, he'd go looking for her. Likely heavily armed. Discovering her entangled in Spike's bed would do little

more than ensure someone would get hurt, and she hadn't wanted to risk it. So instead, she'd limped her way to Revello Drive. Dragged herself into the shower where she'd stood under the spray until the water had run cold before finally grabbing the soap and going about the business of scrubbing him off her. She'd promised herself a long soak in the tub after she got home from the expected debrief.

Which brought her to now. Giles telling her the spell had been a success. Giles having trouble looking at her. Giles asking her if Spike was still alive or if she'd killed the vampire who had helped her save the world on her way out the door.

"He's alive," she said, trying not to wince at how scratchy her voice was. Trying not to consider the reason why it was scratchy in the first place. Failing on both fronts because, well, why not. "He told me he wouldn't hurt anyone."

Giles didn't respond at first, but he didn't have to. What he thought was all over his face. He was still looking at her, too, so she saw all of it. "He told you he wouldn't hurt anyone."

"I know," she said, dropping her shoulders.

"And you...believe him?"

Buffy pressed her lips together, curling her hands into fists. The fact that he was keeping his voice all tempered and even somehow made everything worse. She'd feel better if he yelled. At least then she'd feel justified in responding in kind. Venting some of the jumbled mess that made up her thoughts at the moment.

"I don't know if I believe him. It... It wasn't like I thought it would be."

At that, Giles held up a hand. "Buffy, I know we typically do a thorough review of the actions taken or decisions made in the service of protecting the world, and most of the time, this is a needed step in the process. What you did today is one of the few exceptions."

"Are you completely disgusted with me?"

"No," he said much too quickly. To his credit, though, he seemed to hear himself, for he pulled a face and shook his head. "No," he said again, this time with something like actual tenderness. "Of course not, Buffy. Please forgive me. It's just... They prepare us for quite a lot. Us, in this instance, being those who become watchers. What they do not

prepare us for, we are able to infer well enough. Suffice it to say, nothing has quite prepared me for a circumstance quite like this one.”

“You mean you never read a chapter on what to do when your slayer has to fuck a vampire to save the world?”

A light blush touched Giles’s cheeks. “Surprisingly no, now that you mention it.”

“Kinda figured. It’s okay.” Buffy blew out a breath and wandered over toward the couch. “It’s not like *I* know what to say, either. And if Spike’s a problem after this, I’ll handle it. You know I will.”

“I do,” he replied. She heard how much he meant it, the faith he had in her to do what she needed when called to the task. She also heard the question he wasn’t asking—the one about why she’d left it to chance. And she would have to answer it eventually. Probably tomorrow, once Giles had completely gotten over the weird and started looking at what she’d done as any other tactic in world savage.

Would that it could be just as easy for her, but Buffy wasn’t holding her breath. Her world had shifted dramatically, and it would take a lot of time to shift back.

“I think we can leave the discussion here for today,” Giles told her a moment later. “I imagine you are quite...”

But he seemed to realize there wasn’t a safe way to end that sentence and instead let it dangle, unfinished. Buffy got the hint loud and clear, though, and pulled herself to her feet. Truth was she was indeed *quite* fill-in-the-adjective and had exceeded the amount of energy she could devote to the subject. With any luck, Giles would give her a few days before requesting more information. Or just skip the request and do some creative-but-gross writing to fill in any blanks. It seemed pretty straightforward to her, but hey, what did she know? This was the same man who had later admitted to hounding her about a nonexistent spell just so she’d share the details about the last moments she’d spent with Angel before sending him to hell.

That had been killing a vampire, though. Not screwing one.

As though he heard the thought, Giles cleared his throat before she’d made it all the way to the door. “You did a good thing, Buffy. No matter the steps you had to take in order to see it realized. I hope you understand that. You defeated a god without lifting a finger—”

She didn't know about that. Fingers had definitely been involved.

"—not to mention ridding the world of any number of dimensional interlopers. You've accomplished what few slayers ever could. I am very proud of you."

Well, at least one of them was. Buffy nodded and helped herself the rest of the way out of the townhome, then set out back to Revello Drive. No patrolling tonight. If Giles was to be believed, she'd more than done her fair share of eradicating evil creatures from this plane of existence. She was owed a hot soak, some greasy takeout, and a night spent camped firmly in front of the television.

Whatever she could do to keep her mind occupied on things that weren't the vampire she'd left behind, the things he'd said, or how she would react the next time they were face-to-face.

Though she didn't like her odds.



THE BEST FIGHTS took at least a couple of days to walk off, assuming no major injury. It was no surprise, then, that day three was the first one Buffy greeted without feeling an echo of pain between her legs, and the muscles that had protested even the smallest movements finally started responding to her brain's commands without a physical reminder of the hour she'd spent in Spike's bed. If only the reminders that took place between her ears were as easy to quiet.

But, of course, that would mean giving Buffy a break.

Buffy never got breaks. Buffy got insane spells to perform with her mortal enemy that made her first compromise everything she thought or felt about herself as a person then defy everything she'd ever thought or felt about...well, pretty much everything else. Buffy got the memories of what it had been like to watch someone she'd always considered strong and formidable fall apart the second he realized that not answering him was her way of answering him.

That had been the worst. Opening her eyes just in time to see him understand. The pain that he hadn't been quick enough to catch before it flashed across his face. Then the bittersweet sensation of him moving inside of her again, pulling his cock out of her and leaving her

emptier than she could ever remember being. A sort of empty that hurt, as though he'd taken a part of her with him.

Three days later, Buffy still wondered if he hadn't.

Everything else had gone back to the status quo. Immediate rebound. Giles let her decide how she wanted to approach telling the others why they were suddenly without a boss Big Bad to fight, though Buffy felt hurried to that explanation when an anxious Willow asked if everything had gone well with the spell they'd worked.

"What spell?" Xander asked, abruptly breaking away from the conversation he was having with Anya and leaving her looking rather put out. "You guys did a spell?"

Buffy shifted in her seat and did her best not to tug on her sweater. Her turtleneck, to be precise, as the mark left from Spike's fangs would have definitely raised a question or twenty. The most she could do was hope that neither Willow nor Tara said anything too incriminating.

Which, naturally, was hoping for too much.

"I don't know, we just got a piece of it," Willow replied. "It needed to be performed at a certain time and Buffy had something to do. Spike, too. But it all worked great! At least on our end."

Xander did the expected wiggling—accompanied by shouts and demands for clarification—while Anya went back to counting the money accrued from the day's Magic Box shoppers and Buffy tried to maintain a decent poker face. Something she knew she didn't have. She performed some very sloppy side-stepping of the spell's particulars that, thankfully, were forgotten courtesy of the punchline that Glory was no longer an issue.

"Whoa," Xander intoned, all slack-jawed, before turning to Willow. "You did a spell to beat a god?"

"It was a group effort!" Willow rushed to clarify. "Like I said, Buffy did the actual work. She had this ritual to complete that had steps that, when complete, would generate the right kind of energy. We used that to cast the spell. Believe me, if it hadn't been for Buffy, there would've been no way to cast it."

"Uh huh. And this spell made it so Buffy was invincible?"

"No. It essentially evicted any demon or entity that didn't belong in this dimension."

At that, Anya stopped counting her money and looked up, blinking. "You did what?"

And Giles, thankfully, stepped in at that point, explained that the aim of the spell was to purify the dimension by expelling interlopers back to their world of origin. That since Glory was definitely not of this particular dimension, she would have been among those given a fast pass back to whatever hellhole had created her. All verified through the Watchers Council and their super shady but somehow accurate magic-o-meters and the afternoon Buffy had spent hitting up the homes and complexes near the place where she'd killed the demon that had come so close to carrying Dawn's secret back to Glory.

And that was another thing. Dawn. Now with Glory out of the picture, there was no need to upend Dawn's entire life—either directly, by telling her, or indirectly, by telling the others. She could just be what she always had been in Buffy's and everyone else's memory. No terrible burden placed upon her, just a lease on life she hadn't known she'd been missing in the first place.

That was what Buffy was thinking about, at least, before Anya burst her bubble.

"You sent every creature that doesn't belong in this dimension back to its home world?" She looked shocked. "Have you turned evil?"

"Ahn!" Xander yelped.

"I'm just asking."

"Well, *why* would you ask that?"

"Because there are a number of demons who escaped to this dimension as a refuge from horrors from their home world," she replied with the same characteristic bluntness that Buffy had come to expect. "Survivors of things most of you couldn't imagine. Some entire ethnic groups have sought sanctuary here to escape genocides. If Buffy sent *all* non-native creatures back with this spell, then she almost certainly condemned a good number of them to death. Well, if they're lucky and get to the dying part first. I'm willing to bet many will be tortured for having fled in the first place."

None of that had been in the fine print. Buffy turned back to Giles, whose expression was studiously fixed on a text she'd been certain hadn't been open a moment earlier.

"What?" she barked. "You knew about this?"

"I considered it, yes."

"And never mentioned it?"

"To rid the world of Glory, it was an acceptable trade."

Buffy's stomach dropped, but she didn't respond. Wasn't certain of where to begin, or even entirely what she thought about what she'd learned, just that it seemed wrong. The sort of wrong Giles had to have known was wrong or he would have told her before the damage had been done.

But maybe he was right. Maybe this was a bigger-picture type thing. She'd never know unless they figured out what Glory's ultimate plan had been—why the Key had been created, why it had been hidden, and what would have become of it had Glory not gotten booted back to the pit she'd crawled out of. And Buffy wanted to figure that out, wanted to know what exactly she had condemned other, possibly hundreds, maybe even thousands, of demons to prevent from taking place.

She told Giles that and he nodded, and Xander brought up the possibility of getting together for a post-victory party as was tradition.

"Or we could all go crash at Buffy's and let the First Slayer try to kill us all in our dreams again," he added. "But that's so last year."

Buffy agreed because what else was there? Unless some other Big Bad decided to make a debut, odds seemed good that she had averted the usual springtime scramble to save the world. Granted, there was plenty of time for the appearance of another Big Bad—hell, it was barely February. The first February she could remember spending in Sunnydale without doom looming on the horizon. She might not have a date for Valentine's Day, but at least she didn't have a psycho ex-boyfriend running around out there leaving her love notes with a body count or an evil twin conspiring with local megalomaniacs or a Frankenstein-reject piecing together new horrors from the body parts of slain demons.

No, instead she had the look on Spike's face, the echo of all the things he'd told her—the questions he'd asked, the feelings he'd invoked. She had that and the stupid ache in her chest, like her heart had been bruised, and she knew damn well that it hadn't. Things

hadn't gone the way she'd thought they would, but that didn't mean anything.

Nor did the fact that, if push came to shove, she wasn't really in a celebratory mood. Not when winning felt so much like losing or that the cost had been higher than she'd realized in the start. That possibly, even now that she'd paid it, she still didn't know exactly what it was that she had lost.

Plus, if she said no, Xander might ask why.

So Buffy would run home and grab her boogie shoes, prepare to fake smile her way through a night with the gang.

And if she was very lucky, maybe she'd be able to convince herself that the demons she'd condemned had deserved it. Perhaps find her way back to the comfortable black-and-white that had defined her life before all these confusing colors had shouldered their way into the picture.

Most of all, maybe she'd get her mind to stop venturing back to the graveyard or the vampire whose heart she'd broken.

No harm in trying.



HER MOTHER THOUGHT she was in love, which was completely bogus. Completely. Buffy might be a lot of things at the moment but *in love* wasn't one of them. That Spike hadn't been far from her thoughts didn't mean anything except he was a part of her life, a not-small part, and he'd helped her save the world for the second time. And unlike their first truce, *help* had involved an hour of sex and a lot of uncomfortable revelations she couldn't quite get out of her mind.

But the thought was there. Had been as she'd tried and rejected outfit after outfit, debating the virtues of baring her neck with its fresh vampire bite around her friends or going with another tried-and-true turtleneck to spare her an evening of uncomfortable questions. Now that the hard part was done—the conversation with Giles and the gang debrief—Buffy had nothing else to occupy her mind to keep the Spike-shaped thoughts at bay.

And once those thoughts had started, there had been no stopping



them. Just a constant bombardment of memories and whispered promises, questions she hadn't been able to entertain, let alone answer. The phantom feel of his hands and mouth and...other parts, especially when she leaned a certain way, turned her head just so, or caught a look of herself in the mirror before popping in the shower. Things she knew she shouldn't give any time because, well, they could lead nowhere good, but when had knowing that ever stopped her in the past?

The fact that she was even asking herself that question was worrisome. And what was worse, she knew it.

Nothing changed the fact, though, that the most beautiful thing she'd ever heard anyone say to her had come from the lips of a demon. That being with him, watching him as he'd described how he saw her, had made her feel exposed in a frightening but also kind of wonderful way. She hadn't realized how much of herself she kept guarded until he'd stripped her of that guard, and she wasn't even sure he'd been aware he was doing it. Riley had tried to get close and she'd thought she'd let him in—thought there weren't depths of Buffy he hadn't explored, much less seen, and that the glimpse she'd given him had ultimately been what was too much. Not monster enough for a vampire, not woman enough for a man. Constantly straddling two worlds but welcome in neither, when push came to shove. Always on the outside, doing what she could so her friends could find their people and start their families and live their lives. Lives Buffy would touch but always, in some way, never see from the inside.

She didn't know what it meant that someone soulless saw her as no one else did. Not just her, but the Buffy she wanted to be. The Buffy she hoped she was. The Buffy she'd been afraid she was losing sight of in the midst of juggling expectations, worries, and disappointments. Becoming more withdrawn from the world she was duty-bound to protect.

And it wasn't just now, either. Spike had always seen her. Always cut through the bullshit she'd tried to sell herself and others. Always told her the absolute truth even and especially when she wished he'd keep his mouth shut. Didn't matter what it was about. Angel. Riley. Dawn. Her friends. The possibility of her own death. Spike forced her to confront what was real rather than the lies she tried to wrap herself

inside as only he could, and she relied on that almost as much as she resented it. That was why he lived perpetually under her skin and had from the start.

Also why she was drawn to him. Why it had to be him.

Why he was in her thoughts even now, after she'd settled on an outfit and headed out to the Bronze to shake her groove thing and celebrate that the world would keep spinning another day. No matter how far down she tried to push him, Spike kept clawing his way back to the surface. Spike and his promise to change. His vow to be good. The earnest way he'd spoken, how eager he'd been to give up parts of himself for her, the way she was so often asked to give up parts of herself for the world. It was so much she wasn't sure she could trust him to know exactly what he was saying, but at the same time there were few people who seemed to know themselves better than Spike did.

And wondering if she didn't have feelings of her own. If maybe she hadn't had feelings for a while, confused and muddled and contradictory, for she knew he annoyed the crap out of her but she also knew she admired the way he fought. Valued the way he challenged her. Enjoyed the thrill that raced down her spine every time they clashed because she was addicted to the darkness. That thing Dracula had stirred to life in her in the fall, the primal pieces of *slayer* that were never truly satisfied. The bits of her that scared her shitless but drew her in deeper because she couldn't look away. There was more to Buffy than Slayer, but there was more to her than normal-girl too. And that mattered. It mattered a whole damn lot.

Add to the fact that she knew she wouldn't be thinking about him or this at all if she didn't feel anything, and Buffy could maybe understand what her mother had seen earlier.

Spike had complicated something that should have been simple, straightforward. She didn't want to feel any of this but here she was anyway. The others greeted her with smiles and applause and hugs and compliments on the outfit—she'd chosen something light and strappy, though had caved at the last minute and added a scarf around her neck to conceal the bite marks. Xander offered to get the first round of drinks and then Willow's favorite song came bursting through the

speakers and the couples coupled off as Buffy had known they would, leaving her at the table with a strong urge to drain each of the five glasses they had left behind.

Eventually, Tara noticed that she wasn't partying and wandered over to make sure everything was all right. It was, Buffy assured her. She was just thinking thinky thoughts and not looking to add anyone to her dance card just yet, despite the few guys who had come by to let her know they were interested. She didn't say anything about the way the mark on her neck had twinged each time she'd considered slipping her hand into someone else's, or the relief that washed over her once the hint was taken and she was left on her own again. Instead, Buffy explained that she was thinking about how all these previously dead-end possibilities had opened up to her again. She could move back to campus. Pick up the pieces of her life that she'd been forced to drop. And Tara nodded her enthusiasm, told her how nice it must be to have that freedom, and Buffy nodded in return, all the while trying not to think about how Spike had helped give her that too, at least for a while. Until the next Big Bad rolled into town and she was forced to do this all over again.

And how, if she wanted him, he'd be there to fight with her. Annoying and evil and constantly under her skin, but also making her feel things that she didn't hate. Things she might actually like.

"Hey guys!" Willow practically crashed against the table, giggling and throwing an arm around Tara. "What's going on? Is Buffy still being all mokey. I thought this was a party!"

"I'm not mokey," Buffy argued, straightening her shoulders and trying very much not to feel like she'd just been caught doing something she shouldn't. "I guess I'm just more worn out than I thought by all this. Worn out and extra pensive."

"We were just talking about what Buffy could do now that Glory is handled and her mom is better," Tara explained. "Maybe move back to campus?"

"That would be rad!" Willow agreed before frowning. "Though it might be better to wait until fall semester, right? I know we've only been back in session for a few weeks, but the roommate situation might be dire."

"Oh, I'll definitely wait," Buffy agreed. She wasn't eager to rush into anything just yet. "Moving is kind of the opposite of fun, and I am all about having fun before I completely forget what it feels like. And there's some other stuff I think I want to do."

"Oooh, like what?"

"Well, Giles and I were heavy in training mode. Learning more about the mystery that is me." She tried for a smile. "And it wouldn't hurt to add other demons to the list, I guess. There's so much I don't know and honestly, at this point, it's kind of embarrassing that I don't."

"Is it about what Anya said?" Willow made the same face she always made when slightly drunk and discussing Anya. It was exactly like the face she'd only recently stopped making when sober, if not a little more exaggerated. "I was so mad at her for that. It's not like it's your job."

"You're right," Buffy replied flatly. "Demons? Not my job."

She'd thought her friend might be a little too tipsy to follow the sarcasm. She'd been wrong. "You know what I mean, though!" Willow protested, sitting hard on one of the stools. "I think it's cool that you want to learn, but it's unfair that she expected you to know what demons came here from where? Since when has that been a part of the Slayer handbook?"

"I don't know. Giles never gave me the handbook."

"I wouldn't take it too hard, Buffy," Tara said kindly as Willow helped herself onto the stool beside her. "It sounds like Mr. Giles knew exactly what that spell would do and went through with it anyway. Anya has a unique perspective on this, too. With her history."

"Her definition of a harmless demon might be a breed that traffics in baby skins," Willow agreed.

Tara's eyes widened. "No, she wouldn't think that, would she?"

"I'm just saying I wouldn't put it past her. You remember her ex, right?" And now Willow puffed up and pulled an exaggerated grotesque face. "Just saying, I don't know that anything she tells us can be taken minus at least one grain of salt. And I'm not talking teeny grain. Big, massive, makes-you-choke grain."

Tara placed a hand over hers and squeezed. "Be nice, sweetie."

"I'm always nice." Willow poked out her lower lip but was grinning

again in seconds. Buffy wondered vaguely how many drinks she'd had on the dance floor, as the first round was still here untouched on the table.

As though hearing the thought—and god, what a terrifying prospect—Willow inclined her head toward Buffy. “That spell, by the way, was a doozy. It’s been three days and I’m still feeling kinda loopy.”

Buffy frowned and glanced at Tara. “Is that normal?”

“The bigger the magic, the more it takes out of you,” Tara replied, running her fingers almost absently up Willow’s wrist until her hand was stretching along her shoulders to pull her into a half embrace. “Willow had to do most of it. The magic, I mean. She’s shot right past me these last few months power-wise.”

“That’s not true,” Willow said, though she had all but folded herself into Tara, suddenly looking incredibly sleepy for someone who had been all perky just a second ago. “I could never have done the spell without you, baby. That much power?” She blinked slowly, then grinned when she met Buffy’s gaze. “It was a good spell. Like—it felt good doing it. Just way with the tired.”

“We had to tap into whatever you were doing when the energy hit its peak,” Tara explained. “And yeah, it was better that there were two of us.”

“It was also just a neat thing to share, really. The best kind of magic can be really intense. And intense things are better when you have someone you love with you.” Willow nuzzled Tara’s neck with a drunk little grin, then all at once seemed to remember where she was and pulled herself upright again. “Oh, whoa, sorry about that. Another side-effect of the spell is that I’ve been way with the PDA.”

Buffy worked her throat and let out a long breath. She had no idea how magic worked most of the time, having done very little of it herself, but she got that disorientation. The spell she’d done to determine if there was anything mystically wrong with her mother had taken a lot out of her, and on the grand scale of wonkiness, that had been minimal. A spell that had marathon sex as a main ingredient was more than she wanted to consider. Except now, of course, she was considering it. Wondering if the reason the spell had felt so good was

because of what she and Spike had done to generate the energy, and trying to decide how gross it was if that was the case.

Conflicted feelings aside, though, Buffy couldn't help but think that Willow had a point. Intense experiences were better when they were shared. Not even just the good things, but the scary things too. There had been so many times over the last few months where she'd been in the middle of a bad feeling and stranded on the island of Buffy, left with nothing to hold onto. Riley never there when it was safe to not be strong anymore, and how she'd never clocked his absence because she was used to dealing with life's intensities on her own. Hell, even when it had been Angel, Angel had so frequently been the source of sadness or pain, rarely someone she could count on to shoulder whatever she was going through. Riley was supposed to have been the antithesis of that experience but somehow she'd turned him into a second verse, same as the first.

And though it was beyond insane, Buffy's brain would not be deterred in putting Spike in that position. Then remembering, almost against her will, how he had sat with her, angry as he had been, after she'd learned that her mother was going to be hospitalized for observation. Not asking her to explain. Not telling her it was okay. Not encouraging her to share more than she had to give at the moment, either because he'd known she'd tell him to get lost or because he'd just known...her.

That couldn't be right.

Except she knew it was. She'd already told herself as much. Spike was the person in her life who saw everything.

"You look like you're having thinky thoughts," Willow said. "Is everything okay?"

Buffy shook her head to clear said thinky thoughts away and forced a smile. "Yeah. Just... It must be nice. Doing couple things together like that. Magic stuff."

"Oh, yeah, it's the best!" Willow beamed and regarded Tara with an adoring smile. "It's like oooh, I get to do my favorite hobby with my favorite person. How lucky am I?" There was a pause, then her face fell and her eyes went wide. "Oh god, I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry, Buffy. I know the breakup has been rough but Riley leaving... Well,

that just means he wasn't the right person, right? A-and dating on the Hellmouth, not easy. But there's someone out there for you. I know there is. You're, like, the best person I know! The right guy will come along."

Buffy tried for a smile that felt more like a wince—probably looked like one, too, if Willow's expression was anything to judge by. "I've thought I've had the right one before," she said, choosing her words carefully. "Granted, Riley and I clashed a lot at the start."

"And you didn't even really want to go out with him," Willow added. "After you found out about the demon hunting."

"Which you thought was stupid."

"Not stupid, just...maybe a little shortsighted? I mean, if you're with someone, they're going to have to know all your parts, right? The parts you keep from everyone else? Even me and Xander?" She frowned a little as though displeased by the prospect, no matter that she was the one who had brought it up, then shook her head and glanced at Tara again. "But there's being with friends and being with your person, right? It's different. They see you when you're all...not coiffed and pretty."

"You're always pretty," Tara said with a shy grin.

"But, no, you know what I mean. Just that you should maybe not try to keep the slayage part away from the dating part."

Buffy nodded and lowered her gaze to her drink. Dating another vampire would definitely keep the slayage part front and center, so check. But Willow wasn't wrong—she was just describing things Buffy had never had, which hey, there's a shock to the system. It was true, though. Not with Riley, whom she'd thought she'd shared everything with and had...to a degree. Not the slayage. Not the loneliness or the part of her that gravitated toward the dark. She'd gone on runs through the cemeteries chasing something that he couldn't give her, and she wasn't sure he'd ever known about that. About that burning in her chest that sometimes needed to be embraced before it quieted for a night. And part of it had been on her, probably, convinced that he couldn't understand those parts of her because he was always outside of that world. The same way Xander and Willow were, only Willow

had the magicks and Xander had Anya. Riley's only tether had been Buffy.

And weren't there things she kept from Xander and Willow, anyway? Things they couldn't understand despite telling her they did? Despite claiming that they were as much in the fight as she was, there was always that invisible line that only Buffy could cross. The Chosen One, the only person in her circle that couldn't walk away from a life hunting monsters. Not really. She'd quit without quitting but that didn't make her any less the Slayer. It didn't stop the wild calling inside her or keep the monsters at bay. Nothing about her existence was a choice, and to a degree, no matter how hard they tried or how much they loved her, that was something her friends, even Giles, would never understand.

But Spike did. Spike lived in this world as much as she did. He *was* this world. And he already saw her. Already knew her in that way that was unnerving but complete at the same time. More than Angel had, too, as much as her mind and heart rebelled at the thought, because as much as she'd loved him, Angel had been about the *shoulds* and the *musts* and all the things Buffy already knew. Throwing a tantrum, crying about how unfair it was, lamenting her lack of choice in the most significant parts of her life—he'd hear that, yes, but destiny was still waiting and there was still evil to fight and she was the only one around to answer the call. Service above self and all that, which was noble and great, but would have been a lot nobler and greater if she hadn't been forced into it.

Strange as it was, Spike got that. That and all the other parts of being the Slayer that were less than glamorous. The close and personal relationship with death and what it did to her. How it warped her thinking and scared her as much as it enticed her, despite however much she wanted to live. And the answer was a lot. She wouldn't have gone through with the spell if that weren't the case.

"Buffy?" Willow was frowning extra hard, peering closely at her face the way characters did in movies when wondering if a friend had gone off the deep end. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Sorry I keep doing that. Like you said, with the thinky thoughts. When you're right, you're right."



"I'm not making you think anything bad, am I? Because that goes against the spirit of tonight."

"Nothing bad," Buffy assured her, and it was the truth. Her thoughts might be radical and terrifying and almost certain to cause ripples among her friends should she act on them, but they were not bad thoughts. Just different. "I think I might be having...feelings. Unexpected feelings. For someone. And just now realizing it."

At that, all signs of distress melted away from Willow's face and she let out an excited squeal. "Really? Oh, that's great! Why didn't you say anything? Is it someone I know? Can I meet him? Or have I already met him? Is it that cute doctor from the hospital? Or are you still at that kinda-secret stage that's all exciting and—"

"Sweetie," Tara said, "breathe?"

Willow nodded and inhaled like she'd decided to start hoarding oxygen. "It's just so exciting! I didn't even know Buffy was having lusty thoughts about anyone."

"I really wasn't until very recently," she replied, both heartened by her friend's response and all the more anxious because of it. "I'm still not sure, though. It's not... It's different than before. I'm kinda on edge."

"Why edge? No edge!"

"Well...when you two started dating"—Buffy looked between Willow and Tara—"there was...edge, right? I mean, I don't want to know about—that's not what I'm asking. More just you were worried. While you were figuring stuff out?"

Willow's frown returned only to be blown into a look of wide-eyed wonder. "Oh my god... Buffy, you're not...gay too, are you?"

She should have seen that coming. "No—sorry, I am not explaining this right. It's just you were worried about us possibly being judgmental jerks?"

"Maybe but... Okay, yeah, a little. But that wouldn't have stopped me. Nothing would've stopped me from being with the person I love." She met Tara's eyes and grinned. "And it shouldn't you, either. If you're having feelings and you're worried about how the rest of us react? Buffy, it's your life. You should be with who you want to be with, no matter what."

That was it, then. A choice. Her choice. All she had to do was decide whether or not to go for it. And she'd already come this far. Already asked questions that couldn't be unasked. Too much of the cat was out of the bag to begin trying to stuff it back inside.

"What if it's Spike?" Buffy asked in a rush, then sat back and waited for the world to end.

The world, however, did not end. It kept moving forward. Granted, it seemed to have taken the wind out of Willow's sails as it went, but at least Buffy had not started another apocalypse. Or not the sort she had to rush to avert.

It was strange how quiet loud places could be—how the intensity of the music from the stage and the surrounding chatter of lucky non-slayer people could sound like nothing at all.

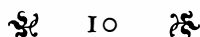
Then Tara squeezed Willow's hand. "No matter what," she told Buffy. "Even if it's Spike. Right, honey?"

At last, Willow moved. A nod. Short and terse and clearly performative—and she must have sensed that, caught it or herself, for she paused halfway through her encore nods and dropped her shoulders. "Yeah, of course. Even if it's Spike. But don't think I won't have questions."

Buffy watched her for a beat, determined to catch her in a lie, the heaviness in her chest beginning to lift. And before she knew what she meant to do, before she could begin to fathom what the next step might be beyond simply admitting this much to herself, she was slipping off her stool. Body moving without input from brain, something that had been tense and caged inside of her set free. All she understood in that moment was that she needed to be somewhere else. She had a feeling where but wouldn't know for certain until she got there.

"I'll answer all your questions later," she promised, grabbing her purse off the table. "I just... I gotta go."

And so she went.



## I KNOW THAT IT'S GONNA TAKE SOME TIME

SPIKE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT HE'D BEEN THINKING. THEN AGAIN, when it came to Buffy, he rarely did. Not like he had a brilliant track record for following through with plans in the first place. The few he'd managed to pull off had been by the skin of his fangs, if not outright accidental, and that went doubly for anything involving the Slayer. And to his credit, he'd known as much. Understood that there would be no going into this with her in a way that didn't end with his heart ripped out of his chest, but he'd still been daft enough to hope. To think that maybe knowing that he was in over his head would help him not lose the little bit of pride he had remaining.

But there had been no accounting for it—for the way it would feel in the moment, Buffy over him, under him, surrounding him, Buffy looking at him with her beautiful Buffy eyes as he made her come apart again and again. How it would hit when he understood that she was feeling something more than his cock, that he was seeing her as so few people ever did. That she was letting him in as deeply as she had.

He'd known better than to fall apart the second she'd kissed him, known not to let those meager defenses he had crumble. He'd known better, and berk that he was, she'd still managed to hurt him when it was over, but only because he'd let himself believe for a few glorious

seconds that things might end differently. That perhaps she did feel something—that there was a sliver of a chance.

Christ, he could hate her for letting him get that far. Only nothing had changed. He still loved her too much to hate her. All the hate he had was reserved for himself.

Not that hate did him any good. Hadn't even helped him consider what his next steps ought to be. Spike had already survived longer than he'd anticipated following that spell, and he supposed he could thank Buffy's big heart for that much. She might not like him but she'd left here loathing him a little less—enough to not put any of those threats she'd shot at him into practice in the days that had passed. Still, he wasn't so daft that he thought it meant anything beyond her being good enough to give him time to do whatever was necessary in packing up the life he'd traded for an hour between her legs. She hadn't been by, and he hadn't crossed her on patrol, either, but that wouldn't last. Eventually, Buffy would need to make sure he'd lived up to his end of things in full, or she really would give him the death he'd spent more than a century evading. And he was pathetic enough he imagined he'd let her. He had no secrets from her anymore—she knew how he felt. Best weapon he could have handed his enemy.

Spike drew in a deep breath and lifted his head to take stock of the meager showing he had of his life, as he did whenever his thoughts took this turn. The crypt was in the same state it had been in the last time—no closer to being packed up or abandoned, with the downstairs in a state of disarray he couldn't bring himself to address for worry that the air that still smelled like her might be disturbed and fade. There wasn't much here that he featured he'd take with him, anyway, in the event he ever made it off his arse to start gathering his things. A few mementos that had traveled with him from continent to continent, those composition notebooks he couldn't seem to stop nicking to fill with terrible verse after terrible verse, the coins that had been on his person the night Dru had found him in that alley—he didn't know why he'd kept those, except he had a hell of a time throwing them out. Maybe because he'd intended to buy something for his mum with those coins and had never gotten around to it. Holding onto them was like holding onto her. Or the

woman she'd been before he'd turned her into something truly monstrous.

But that was worth remembering, too. It wasn't just Buffy who had a history of mucking up his plans—he'd been doing that to himself from the bloody start.

Spike sighed and tipped his head back, fixing his gaze on the stone ceiling above him. None of this changed the fact that he didn't want to leave. Never had. He'd agreed to it when pressed because that was what you did when presented with a choice like the one the Slayer had laid out for him, but he'd never seen himself actually going through with it, and not only because he had fuck all places to go. The fact was that he went where his heart led him, for better or worse, and his heart had done a piss-poor job of keeping him out of Sunnyhell for going on four years now. No reason why it would change just because he'd run his mouth. All cards on the table. If she wanted him gone, she'd have to be the one who did it.

As though in response to the thought, the door to the crypt gave a familiar clank, making him jolt to attention.

Christ, was it now? He'd been waiting but still hadn't been prepared for the actual moment. Not that it mattered, because time marched on and the door was swinging open and she was there, all bouncing golden hair and bright emerald eyes, walking into his space as she had a thousand times before. But this wasn't like those times—it was in a sodding category of its own. He'd never once been a part of this play with the knowledge he had now. The way she looked under those clothes, how she sighed and moaned and arched and squeezed, the wonder in her eyes as he whispered all the things he knew better than to tell her, needing her to know it despite what it meant for him. Her scent always heady, always intoxicating, but intimately familiar now in ways it hadn't been before. And knowing that she knew it too, that she clocked it. Buffy didn't barrel her way fully inside as she normally did, rather stopped short as the door behind her surrendered to the law of motion and began to swing closed again, her eyes finding his without effort.

And for a lifetime, they stood like that. The air around them still except for the music her body made, pounding heart and racing blood and steady breaths. At least he had that—the knowledge that no

matter what she said, she felt something. That whatever came next would not be business as usual for her.

Nice bit of cold comfort, that, but he'd take what he could get.

At length, Spike forced himself to relax and settle back in his chair. "All the same to you, I don't feature spending the night in a sodding staring contest. Wanna tell me what you're doing here?"

That, at least, did snap her out of whatever stupor she'd landed in. He watched as she gathered herself, the way her throat moved when she swallowed. A throat done up with a nice pretty bow, almost as though she were gift-wrapped for him. Entirely like she wanted to hide the place his fangs had found just a few days ago.

Of course she'd hide it. Wouldn't want any of her little chums to know the truth of how the Slayer had bested a god.

Then she was parting her lips, and he was bracing himself for what came next. The explanation, the insult, the threat, the excuse—nothing would have surprised him by this point.

"I thought I'd know what to say when I got here."

Except maybe that.

"That a fact?" Spike replied, doing his best to keep his voice level, uninterested, like he didn't give a hoot what came next. "If you're checkin' up on me to hustle me outta town, you can stuff it. Gave it some thought, and I've decided I'm not going anywhere."

Buffy opened her mouth, closed it, then lifted her eyebrows and crossed her arms, and he didn't like it. The uncertainty that had been all over her face just a second ago had vanished and he had fuck all idea what he'd said to make that happen. "Oh, no?" she replied, all high and mighty. "I thought we had an understanding."

"Yeah, well, understood things a bit differently once you scarpered."

"Your chip doesn't work anymore. I'm supposed to just be okay with you hunting down people?"

Spike closed his eyes, his jaw clenching—all of him clenching—in a way that was all too familiar around her. That *holding on by a sodding thread* feeling. It was too much to hope that she would have heard a word he'd said the other day, much less believed it, and less likely that she would believe him now if he glared at her like he could make her

hemorrhage with his eyes alone. “You don’t listen, do you? Not to anything anyone says if you think them beneath you.”

“I listen, Spike. You told me you would fight with me if I gave you a chance.”

“Said a lot of things.”

“I know. I remember. But it was all conditional.”

At that, he opened his eyes and sprang to his feet, not knowing he meant to until he was balanced against the stone floor, glaring at her—those eyes, that mouth, that face that haunted him in his dreams and nightmares and every sodding waking second of his life, it seemed. More now than she had before. He’d been inside her but she was inside him too, and he couldn’t get her out. No matter what he tried or how hard he tried it.

“That’s not the way love works,” he practically seethed. She’d been here for less than a minute and he was already on the edge of either screaming or sobbing himself raw. Not enough to break a man’s heart, but she had to come by and rubberneck the debris. “I don’t just switch off because you decide you’re too good to roll around in the dirt unless you got a couple witches gettin’ chanty somewhere else.”

“You really expect me to believe you’d fight evil, try to be good, even without the carrot that is me?”

“No, I don’t, actually. Not that thick.” He swallowed. “Not like I got anywhere else to go, though.”

“No? The chip is deactivated. Wasn’t that why you said you’d stuck around Sunnydale in the first place?”

“Yeah, well, you waited a minute too long to decide to flip the switch on it, so the joke’s on me. Never been any good at going against my heart.” Also not good at saying things that weren’t entirely pathetic when the woman he loved was around, but such was the plight of William the Bloody. Always had been. “You want to have a go, love, you know I’ll give you a fight. I’m well aware of what I’m riskin’ by staying put. But if that’s not why you’re here, how’s about you toddle off until you decide you’re ready to dance.”

But Buffy didn’t toddle. She didn’t smirk, either, or start poking fun, or pull out any of the other tried and true methods he might have expected. Rather, the crease above her brow faded, and her arms fell to

her sides. "I thought dancing was all we'd ever done. Didn't you say that to me?"

"Yeah," he replied, drawing the word out, confused. "Remember you didn't take to hearin' it all that well."

"I don't take to a lot of true things all that well the first time I hear them. Sometimes it's just... I have to think. And that's what I did. Why I'm here, anyway." She wet her lips and stepped forward, toward him, dropping her eyes at the same time. "I found a way to beat a bad guy without it getting all apocalyptic, but I didn't want to do it. I mean, it needed to be done and doing it might have saved the world and all, but it involved doing something that I didn't want to do with someone I didn't want to do it with. Except...except a part of me did."

Well, that was something. "Admitting it now?"

"I admitted it before."

"Suppose you did. Just don't know why you're here now if not to make sure I'm on my way out."

"I just... You told me it would happen. That I would think about you, about being with you, after we did the spell. You were right." She grinned at that, the expression somewhere between amused and frustrated. "Somehow, you're always right. Do you have any idea how annoying that is? Of all people, the one person who gets me is *you*."

That sounded like an insult but oddly didn't feel like one. Slowly, the tension in his shoulders started to loosen. "Benefit of being enemies, I suppose. You learn to know someone you hate."

"You hate me?"

"You know better than that."

"Maybe I need a reminder."

Spike narrowed his eyes, his chest heavy. He might get her—and he thought he did—but at the moment, he had no sodding clue. Hell, Dru at her nuttiest had been easier to understand than Buffy was now. There was what his eyes were telling him, his ears and his nose and all the other parts he'd relied on for more than a century to keep him attuned with the world and all its people, but there was also his head, and everything he knew about her screamed that she was not here, asking him to reassure her that it had been real. Not really saying the things it sounded like she was saying.



But Christ, he'd always gone with his gut. That she was the first person in over a century to make him question that was just another hallmark of how crazy she made him.

"I love you," he said. "I hate that I love you, but I love you."

"You hate that you love me?"

"Stuck being head over for someone who thinks I'm filth? Yeah, Slayer, now that you mention it. If I'd tried half as hard to kill you as I have not to love you, you'd've been in the sodding ground for years now."

He expected something at that—a punch, an eyeroll, one of those bitchy remarks that cut to the quick. But her expression didn't change, and she didn't smart back. Instead, she took a deliberate step forward, and god, she was close now. Close enough he could feel the heat radiating off her body, be enveloped in the orbit that was Buffy Summers, pulled into her gravity, the space he knew so intimately. It was doing a number to his head—*she* was doing a number—but she was still there, and not a stake in sight.

"I changed my mind," she said, keeping her eyes on him. "I don't know what this is, Spike. Or if it will ever be anything more than it is right now, whenever we define it. But I want to try. See if we can... If it can be more. If we can make it to a place where you don't hate that you love me and I don't regret letting you show me what being loved by you is like."

The remaining tension fell away at that. Everything fell away. The floor. The walls. The crypt. His stomach. His heart. It all shot down, but he remained where he was, staring, hearing, not believing. Then slowly feeling that buzz under his skin, that stark awareness of self that kept him grounded when nothing else could. It had been there when he'd woken up months ago, jarred from a dream that had reshaped his entire sodding world. Not a question he asked himself but something he now knew. A piece of information that had been scraping at his brain for months, maybe years, that he hadn't been ready to accept because it would ruin him. On some fundamental level, he'd known that.

It might still ruin him. Probably it would.

But Spike had never let a little thing like pride stand in the way of a bad decision.

And through all that falling, Buffy was there. Reaching out again. Stepping closer. Making it so she was all he saw. "It's not too late, is it? You're kinda freaking me out with the whole *not talking* thing. I don't know if you've ever been quiet this long."

At that, a smile tugged on his lips. "Just waiting, I suppose."

"Waiting? For what?"

"Dreams like this, I usually wake up right about now."

She breathed a breath that made the air shake. "I've dreamed about you, too, you know. For a while now."

"Is that right?"

"First time"—she stepped closer, not taking her eyes off him—"it really wiggled me out."

"Just the first time?"

"I guess I got used to them after that." Another step. "Especially after Willow's little 'Spike and Buffy should make out' spell. They got all...technicolory." And another, and suddenly she was so close he could feel her breath on his lips. Close enough he knew she could feel *him*—all of him. The new tension in his body, the delicious sort that built and strengthened before it snapped, the hard ridge of his cock pressing against his zipper. She could feel him and she wasn't running. Rather wetting her lips, dropping her gaze to his own, murmuring softly, "They were a little...intense after that."

"Wouldn't mind hearin' more," Spike replied, and then his hands were on her, starting at her wrists, gliding up her arms and over her shoulders, along the sides of her neck so he could pull off the scarf concealing the bite. He wanted to feel that too, explore the grooves left by his fangs. Show her how much fun it could be when a man knew how to pay those marks proper respect. But first, and he was such a ninny, but he had to do it. Had to say it before he let himself go. "Be sure, love. No spell to perform. No magic to blame. I kiss you and it's just us here, you with me because you want to be. Gonna hold you to that."

"Then get to holding already."

Spike cupped the back of her neck and pulled her to him, crashing

his mouth over hers with a growl that seemed to make the whole bloody crypt shake. And Buffy fell into him, her arms going around his neck, her breasts against his chest, her lips in motion, feeding him those kisses that he'd been certain he was staring down an eternity without. But no, she was here, fighting his tongue with hers, making the little sounds that drove him batty, pushing when he pulled. And he was so light he could have laughed or wept, the cold place in his chest suddenly burning with warmth. He had no idea what had happened to change her mind, what had brought her to him tonight, and he was half-terrified she might yank away at any moment, but she didn't. The flesh under his fingers was hot and alive and real, the scent in his nostrils was *Buffy*, as was the taste in his mouth, the hard twinge in his chest where his inner predator warned *slayer*; and all the things that had been true before. All the things that mattered, at least. No candles fixed in a certain way, no timer, no rules. Just her. Just *them*.

Buffy broke away from his kiss just long enough to pant, "Downstairs?" against his lips, her hands having slipped to tug his tee free. Spike grinned and let her, giddy and lost and found, dragging in air just because it tasted of her, and Christ, she was hot. She was fire. She was liquid perfection and he was parched. And his body must have recognized the craving before the rest of him did, for he shook his head and twisted her around so the green chair was at her back, and then she was in it, falling against the back hard enough the whole thing threatened to topple.

But not yet. Not before he got his taste.

"Spike?" she asked, looking up at him with those doe eyes, all sweet innocence in so many ways. "I thought—"

"You're perfect there," he told her, and lowered himself to his knees. Then he glanced down, realized for the first time that she'd come to him wearing one of her frilly skirts. Better and better. "All of you is perfect. Love the heels."

She shifted as though self-conscious, sending a heavenly waft of slayer musk to his nostrils. "You do?"

He nodded and slid his hands along her calves. "Would love them even more diggin' into my shoulders," he murmured, the fabric of her skirt between his fingers now, inching delicately up her strong legs,

which had started to tremble. Not much but enough to clock, enough to pair with the thump of her pounding heart and the increased intensity of her breaths. "Told you what I wanted, love. The one thing missing from the other day."

"Oh. *Oh*." Bless her, her eyes went wide and her kiss-swollen lips round, like he'd really taken her by surprise. "You, uhh, painted quite the picture."

"Meant every word." He dropped a kiss on her knee, then higher along her thigh, following the heady aroma of her until he had her skirt bunched around her hips. Would like to get the whole thing off her, but there was something about seeing her just like this, halfway indecent, that he didn't want to sacrifice just yet. Buffy with her quivering legs spread for him, watching him through eyes that were somehow both round and half-hooded, or perhaps that was just dreamlike. Like she couldn't believe where the night had led them any more than he could.

Then there was the matter of her knickers, that scant slip of fabric that was already soaked through at the crotch. He'd gotten to feel her cunt the other day, gotten to see it too, but not at this view, and he'd been serious when he'd told her he wanted to take his time. As much as he relied on scent and sensation, sometimes seeing was believing. Like what he'd seen just a few seconds ago when she'd told him she wanted to try—what she'd said was heaven but the look in her eyes even more so, because that was Buffy. The heart and soul of her, pouring out, giving him what words alone could not. And now he was seeing more, believing more, as he slipped his fingers under the elastic of her panties and truly undressed her for the first time. Then moaned when he brought the knickers to his face after they were free of her, first to sniff, then to taste. Just a quick sample of where her juices had flavored the fabric.

"You smell this good for me, precious?" he asked hoarsely as he tucked her panties into his pocket. That was one pair she was not getting back. "This *wet* for me? You get yourself all worked up knowing your Spike would take care of you once you were here?"

"I didn't need to get myself worked up. You did that."

He grinned, seized her by the hips to pull her closer to the edge of

the cushion. “What about last night? And the night before? Your bed feel extra big? Get lonely in it, Slayer?”

“What do you mean, lonely?”

“I mean...” Spike sucked two fingers into his mouth to wet them, though there was truly no need—she was soaked enough for the both of them. Still, he was nothing if not considerate, as he might have hoped she’d have learned by now, and it made his skin glide extra nice the second he began spreading her open to take that look he’d wanted so long. And she was just as he’d imagined. Pink and swollen, her honey spreading along the back end of her skirt, and his fingers made a pleasant wet sound when he pushed into her. One that went straight to his dick. “Did you play with this pussy while thinkin’ of me these last couple nights?”

“I’m not telling you that,” she said, clearly going for the same bitchy air that made him want to bite and snog her at the same time. Lucky for him, both options were on the table. Unlucky for her, she didn’t quite manage the tone. It came out all breathy, like she was in a battle with herself.

“It’s all right, love.” Spike grinned, watching the way her pussy molded around him as he pulled his fingers back. “No shame in admitting it.”

“I’m not admitting anything.”

“No? Then I suppose you’ll be all right if I take my time here.” He pushed back inside her, fighting a groan when she clenched and tightened. He hadn’t been lying when he’d told her he wanted to watch, and she was about to find out just how long he could draw something out when motivated. Now that he had her here, warm and wiggling and without the pretense, burning him hot and bright with hope and happiness and other things that might oneday become familiar, he was determined to make good on everything he’d told her. Perhaps overwhelm her with so much pleasure that if he started to slip in other areas, she wouldn’t mind.

Only Spike knew it wasn’t that easy. Nothing with Buffy ever would be, and as much as that might come back to bite him in the arse, he couldn’t say he’d want it any other way. The fight with her was half the fun. Made everything between them feel earned—feel like he’d actually

won. Even now that she'd come here of her own volition, the tension was still there. The knowledge of the stakes she'd set, the stakes he would have to meet to keep her forever.

They were just getting started, him and her. There was so much to explore. So much to do. So much to show her.

Starting with this. Spike couldn't say for certain, but if any of the plonkers who had shared her bed before had ever spent any decent amount of time worshipping her pussy the way it ought to be worshiped, he'd swallow his own sodding tongue. When she began moving, pushing herself into the thrusts of his fingers, releasing those little whimpers, her agitation was almost thick enough to taste. The sounds erupting off her lips varying between hisses and sighs, frantic little grunts and deep, breathy moans. And then, when he decided he'd gone as long as a man could be expected to go without putting his mouth on her, the first swipe of his tongue had her mewling as though he'd nudged her with a live wire. A cry so close to pain he might've been fooled had she not immediately forked her fingers through his hair—he hadn't gotten around to gelling it tonight, so she had an easy go of it—and dragged him down so his mouth was flush with her cunt.

And maybe it wasn't following the exact script he'd given her, but it was close—close enough, at least. Spike growled into her wet flesh, seizing her by the hip with his free hand to tug her to him. She was whimpering louder, wiggling against his face, drenching his mouth and nose and chin, and he wanted to taste her everywhere at once. Run his tongue between her folds, lick her from her opening to her clit, lap up all that decadent wetness, the part of her that told the absolute truth without hiding, and feel her burning his mouth and his throat, and that's what he did. Long, desperate strokes as she writhed and thrust and gasped his name as though she couldn't decide if she was begging or praying or cursing. Angling toward him in such a way he knew exactly what she was after even if she didn't.

"It's this you want, isn't it, love?" Spike rasped, his lips hovering just over her swollen clit. "Need me to lick you here."

To get his point across, he drew a circle with the pointed end of his tongue, and was rewarded with a sharp inhale and a violent thrust of her hips.

“Yes,” Buffy panted, nodding hard. “God, Spike, please, there. Please touch me there.”

“Can do a lot more than that,” he replied before flattening his tongue against her clit, and Buffy bowed off the chair with a howl, tightening her grip on his hair to hold him where he was. And this part he remembered telling her. How he would lick and flick and play while filling her with his fingers, while she tightened and squeezed and made his aching cock hurt with anticipation. Only he wanted to fuck her with his tongue too, so he pulled away from her clit and slipped his fingers free of her pussy. Buffy whimpered again but didn’t object, for she must have known what came next. Remembered what he’d said. She breathed and waited as he danced his hand up her abdomen, between her breasts, along the side of her neck, and he dragged his nose down the seam of her cunt so he could thrust his tongue inside her just at the moment she closed her lips around his fingers. Sucking herself off his skin while he growled and lapped and fucked her with his mouth, trying not to go bloody cross-eyed when she hollowed her cheeks and swirled her own tongue in ways that made his cock ache with envy.

“You’re amazing,” he whispered into her pussy. “You’re amazing, Buffy.”

She didn’t respond with words, rather scraped her teeth along the pad of his index finger, and that was all he could take. He needed her to lose herself now, needed to taste her orgasm, and she must have needed it too, for she let his fingers fall free of her mouth, nodded when they speared inside her again, and was practically vibrating as he made his way back to her clit and closed his lips around her. She might have whimpered, might have arched, might have said *please*, but he didn’t hear it at all, too focused on teasing her with his tongue one last time before sucking hard.

And Buffy detonated in his mouth. She spasmed and clenched and drenched, and it was better than he could have imagined. The way she moved and bucked, the little whimpers she let loose, how hot she was and how she drowned him in it. If he hadn’t known before that he was damned for all time he sure as fuck did now, for tasting Buffy was something beyond excess, and he wasn’t about to stop. He’d be here

again. Over and over until she was as lost as he was. Until they were so entwined they weren't home unless they were with each other.

For now, though, Spike gave her pussy one last lingering lick, then rested his cheek against her thigh to relish the way she felt as she came down. Her heat, the rush of her blood, the rhythm of her body settling after orgasm—all the parts he'd enjoyed before but could indulge in now, with the hope of a future he knew he might not get but would reach for anyway.

Still, she was here. She'd chosen him for now. It was more than he could have hoped. It was everything.

"I do love you, Slayer," he murmured, trying not to tremble when he felt her fingers along his scalp. "God help me, I do."

"Do you still hate that you do?" she asked in a sex-roughened voice.

"At the moment?" Spike lifted his head to meet her eyes. "Only thing I hate is that I might bollix this up, this chance you gave me. But I'm yours, however long you want me. Use and abuse me. Bloody break me. Love me. Do what you fancy, it's your choice. Nothing can change that I love you, and I'm not gonna try to stop anymore. You were always bloody inevitable for me."

Her eyes seemed to shine in the crypt's weak light. "I think you might be inevitable for me too."

"That works out nicely then."

"It hasn't so far, but maybe we've been going about it the wrong way." Buffy paused and wet her lips. "I don't know what I feel, Spike, except what I told you. I meant that. Everything else is... I need time. This is new and... Just wait for me?"

Balls, he was going to start crying like a sodding joke, he just knew it. "Till the end of the world."

"That might be next Tuesday."

"Not with you around."

Buffy smiled softly, then sat up and braced her hands on his shoulders. "Or you," she said, applying gentle pressure until he understood she wanted him on his back, and he hurried to do the rest. Watching with hungry eyes as she tumbled after him, fell over him with a gasp. Ran her hand over the bulge in his jeans before dragging down his zipper. "You made a promise and I'm holding you to it."



Spike nodded, gasping a gasp that turned into a groan as she fisted his cock. "Yes. Yes."

"Good," she replied, pumping his length once, twice, and then shifting, and he was pressed into her heat and she was swallowing him. Taking him into her, sliding down his shaft until there was no further to go. "Let's get started."



❧ II ❧  
FUCKED



## FUCKED

This. This was what came to mind when someone called Spike *evil* these days. Not the century of carnage. Not the multiple attempts on her life. Not trading them to Adam. Not even that one time that he'd kidnapped an Initiative doctor and nearly gotten Riley killed in the process. No, all of Spike's past evilness had been wiped out, as far as she was concerned, for the only thing she could think of whenever pressed to enumerate on his less-than-soulful tendencies was how he swirled his tongue around her clit while fucking her with his fingers. The sounds he made, too. Deep and rumbley and *yum*, very *yum*. Like he couldn't get enough but damned if he wouldn't try.

It was intoxicating, overwhelming, and sometimes embarrassing. She could be somewhere completely innocuous—neutral territory, even, like flipping through books or reshelving weapons she'd been trying out—and *boom*, sudden X-rated show going on behind her eyes. And Buffy's stomach would tighten, her heart would somersault, and if Spike was around, he'd smirk at her, wink, make some sort of lewd comment or gesture, do whatever he could to make sure she knew that *he* knew where her mind had gone.

She hated it. Right up until the time they closed the door to her bedroom and fell into each other, and he reminded her exactly why

she'd been daydreaming about him in the first place by taking a tour down her body, stopping at all his favorite sites, before burying his face between her thighs and feasting to his heart's content. Encourage her to be as vocal as she pleased, test out that handy soundproofing charm Willow and Tara had added to her room, and indulge in things she hadn't done before. Things that weren't, actually, all that wild, just that she hadn't been with anyone that had encouraged exploration up until the spell that had sent her into Spike's bed.

Tonight, for example, Buffy had been adamant about giving him a blowjob (that was another thing that verified his evilness—sometimes, without provocation, she'd be overcome with the urge to suck his cock, an urge she'd never had with any past boyfriend, thanks) and Spike had been adamant about eating her out, and his solution had been why not the best of both worlds? So he'd flopped onto the bed, tugged her down onto his face, then given his hips a little wiggle to show her exactly where she could put her mouth.

And when she'd tensed up, uncertain, he'd sensed that too. Stroked his hands down her ass, kissed along her inner thigh, and murmured that they didn't have to if she didn't want, but god, having her mouth on his dick while he had his tongue up her cunt would be fucking heaven. At the very least, she could see for herself how hard she made him, how much he loved having her taste on his lips, and if she decided to show a man some mercy, that would be just swell. If she didn't, that would be fine, too. Would drive him crazy by upping the anticipation. Win-win for everyone.

Buffy hadn't known why she'd thought it'd be weird, though it was likely tied to some of what Spike called her *puritanical hangups* when it came to sex. Things that she had decided were bad or deviant at some point, maybe around the time Angel had lost his soul, and had kept categorized as such after the night she'd spent with Parker and nearly a year of what she now knew had been exceedingly mediocre sex with Riley. After all, if good, sturdy, dependable Riley hadn't been interested in sixty-nining, then Buffy was better off just never considering it at all.

"Riley wasn't interested in getting you off, either," Spike had grumbled when she'd mentioned this. "Bet the few times he managed were a bloody shock to the system."

Buffy hadn't wanted to encourage ex-bashing on the grounds that she knew Spike had a lot of ammo in his arsenal where Angel was concerned, but she hadn't rushed to disabuse him of the notion, either. Which had led to him telling her that if she tried it and didn't like it, they could stop, but he was banking on her being a fan.

And, well, the second she was dangling above his swollen shaft, quivering as he spread her open and started taking long, decadent laps of her slit, her lips parted and the head of his cock was right there, all slick with precum, and considering how good he was making her feel, giving him a little suck only seemed polite.

Spike responded immediately, rumbling a low part-moan, part-growl into her pussy, sending shockwaves and shivers along her skin and immediately filling her with the need, the drive to make him do that again. To respond to his every lick with one of her own. Slow at first, getting used to the angle, the sensation, the challenge of concentrating on him while he was doing whatever he could to drive her out of her mind, then finally embracing that it was a game like everything else. A way to communicate, to compete, to fight (mostly) without words. If he chuckled when she whimpered and thrust herself against his face, she'd suck the smug right out of him. If she snickered when he whispered a throaty, "Please," into the air, he'd twist his fingers to rub her in that way that turned her muscles to jelly. He'd lap and she'd suck and he'd fuck her with his tongue as she fucked him with her mouth, both of them writhing and pushing and teetering and desperate to get the other there first.

But Buffy knew it'd be a while before she won that. For the most impatient guy on the planet, Spike's stamina and willpower were off-the-charts. The entire reason they were together at all was that time they'd fucked for an hour and he hadn't come until the end. And remembering that moment, the way he'd been pounding into her, desperate and hard and hungry, muttering into her ear while her neck throbbed with the echoes of his fangs, was all she needed to send her over the edge. She whimpered and ground herself against his mouth and stifled her scream by closing her mouth around his cock again, and then he growled and bucked so hard his balls slapped her nose, and he was coming too. His dick pulsing against her lips as he emptied himself

down her throat, along her tongue, and he was still coming when the need for oxygen became too much for her. Spurting across her cheeks and chin as she gasped for air, pumping him with her fist to make up for the absence of her mouth. Watching his foreskin slide along his shaft, sticky white smeared across the head and leaking into the crevices, and it was another thing she figured she shouldn't like but did.

Or maybe it was okay that she did. She hoped it was because she didn't see that changing anytime soon.

"Bloody hell." Spike was also panting, and god, if that wasn't one of the headiest things she'd ever experienced. Making someone who had no functional need for lungs forget that using them was optional. "I'll never get enough of the way you suck me, baby."

The next thing she knew, the mattress was at her back, and Spike was above her, his hungry gaze roaming over her face. Then a low growl rumbled at his throat, and he was kissing her in that hard, desperate way he always kissed her. With all the hunger of the first time and all the desperation of the last, lips roaming, teeth nipping, flooding her mouth with the taste of the juices still on his tongue. She trembled and he trembled too, muttering all the while about how hot she was, what seeing his cum on her face did to him, and then thrusting himself against her pussy, sliding his shaft along her slit, making his cock a different type of wet, restoking a fire she wouldn't have thought possible to light up again, but here they were. *God*, here they were, Spike still panting as he licked along her neck, lapping up his own spendings, her head dangling precariously close to the edge of the bed, Spike lifting himself on his elbow with one arm and reaching between them to tease the head of his cock against her trembling flesh, making a circuit between her clit and her opening, grinning when she mewled and mewling when she slapped his shoulder and told him to just do it already. To just *fuck her*.

And Spike's face was right above hers, his eyes so dark they looked near black, his stupid unnecessary breaths crashing against her lips. "You want it?" he asked. "Want my cock?"

"Yes."

"Where do you want it?"



“Inside.”

“Awful vague, that.” He smirked and nipped at the corner of her mouth. “You want me inside that pretty wet pussy?”

“Yes.”

“Not the end of the world, is it?”

“It will be if you keep me waiting much longer.”

He arched an eyebrow, grinning his villain grin, and rubbed against her clit with the spongy head of his cock just to get her to curse him, she was certain. “World ends unless I fuck you? Sounds familiar. Sure that’s not something you just tell yourself so you can have your way with the Big Bad?”

Buffy glowered up at him and all his unrepentant evil, then did what she figured he’d been angling for. “World ends unless *I* fuck *you*,” she snapped, trapped his hips between her strong thighs, and forced him over until he was the one on his back, nearly dangling over the bed, and she was the one doing the teasing, her hand wrapped around his cock, stroking and pulling as she positioned him at the mouth of her pussy. Spike’s eyes flashed with his grin as she lowered herself onto him.

“My hero,” he cooed before blowing her a kiss.

“My vampire.”

“You’re bloody right I am.”

She pressed her eyes closed, focused on the sensation of him inside of her. The length of him, the steel, how he groaned and bucked and chased her when she began dragging herself back along his cock and the hiss of victory when she slid back down. This part was easy, this part she knew how to handle. The other part, the part where he was hers, wasn’t nearly as straightforward, and becoming harder to ignore, the more he said things like that.

The more she *wanted* him to say things like that.

Eventually she’d have to reckon with whatever this was. The relationship that should never have been, the monster in her bed who was starting to worm his way into her heart.

But eventually wasn’t today.



It was a strange sort of conflicted she felt these days. On one hand, Buffy had gone into this thing with Spike with her eyes wide open. She knew she wanted him, knew she had feelings that were complicated and messy, knew she wanted to explore those feelings and allow them the room to start making sense to her. He'd asked for a chance, and a chance was what she'd given him—given herself, too, because she'd figured she'd deserved it as much as he did. A chance to find the sort of normal that would work for the Slayer. To have someone who could truly help shoulder the awesome weight of her responsibilities in a way that made her feel supported rather than guilty and bedraggled.

The longer she was with him, though, the more Buffy realized that part of her had expected it to run its course. Expected Spike to get bored, realize that the fun in being with her had been the thrill of fucking the enemy, that life as the Slayer's boyfriend wasn't that exciting and to revert to the Spike she'd known before they'd sent Glory back to her hellhole. Even worse now, though, because of the vulnerabilities she'd shared with him over the last few months. And Spike had way more ammunition than Angel had ever had; if he wanted, he could do ten times the damage, even before factoring in that the chip had been switched off.

But nothing had run its course. If anything, the course just seemed to be ramping up in intensity rather than evening out. There was the way he touched her—always desperate and hungry, often softly reverent. As though he couldn't believe his hand was on her skin, never mind his lips or his tongue or any other part of him. He pouted on the nights she insisted he go home, always trying—often succeeding—to coax his way into an invitation to stay. Then he would wrap himself up in her, her vampire-shaped barnacle, and fall asleep with his nose buried in her hair or the crook of her neck, all so he could enjoy waking her up in a way that had the Folger's method completely smoked. He set out with her on patrol each night, as well—eager to get in his nightly spot of violence, as he called it—before throwing her a purely sinful look and suggesting they find themselves a nice, secluded corner to work out any lingering tension.

And that was before she considered all the things he did that weren't related to sex at all. Sex and Spike, Buffy understood. He loved

sex, and he seemed hungry for it—for her—all the time. He was a vampire, and satisfying those basic urges, overdosing on pleasure as much as he could, seemed as intrinsic a part of him as the need for blood. When it came to everything else, though, the less-pleasant parts of being Buffy, the *human* parts, she'd fully expected him to bail. After all, every other serious guy in her life had.

Like the day she'd come home and found her mom on the couch, staring into nothing. Buffy hadn't thought of Spike then. Hadn't even occurred to her to swing by Restfield, let him know she wasn't going to be home that night so there was no point in coming over. She'd just gone to tell Dawn, gone to the morgue, gone through the motions of navigating the pieces of death she didn't understand. Signing things. Making arrangements. Answering questions she'd never imagined she'd be tasked to ask at twenty years old. Did her mother have life insurance? Did her mother have a favorite dress? What sort of casket would her mother like? Which of Sunnydale's many cemeteries was ideal for Joyce Summers's eternity?

It had hit her all at once. No time to breathe. No room to mourn. Just snap to it and start making decisions. Giles believed it wasn't like this in other parts of the country—that questions and arrangements weren't always discussed the same day as the loss. But Sunnydale was Sunnydale, and people had to move fast. Buffy had nodded as though she'd understood and plugged along as she always did. Signed here, initialed there, and at some point had gone back home to a house minus one heartbeat alongside a sister who had decided this was somehow her fault. Trying to feel through the numbness and getting nowhere.

And Spike had been there, waiting for her when she dragged herself back downstairs after seeing her sister to sleep. One look at him and she'd known he expected nothing. That he wasn't there to ask where she'd been or why he hadn't been told, to pressure her for explanations or conversations she wasn't ready to have. He hadn't even spoken, just sat with her grief, with her quiet, not telling her it was all right and she could cry, or grimacing when she did. All he'd done was offer his wonderful thereness, giving her the shoulder she'd needed, the time and the space. And that had stuck with her in the days that

followed. The absolute misery of planning a funeral while negotiating her way around the yawning maw of grief just waiting to swallow her whole. Forcing herself to live minute to minute because any more was too much for her brain to handle. Then the funeral itself, and the parade of well-wishers, and Angel coming to town, and Dawn deciding that everything could be solved by necromancy (thankfully, she'd been stopped before she could get herself killed trying to grab the ingredients), and everything had been so much, too much. And through it all, the only person who never asked her how she was, who never designated themselves the Buffy cheerer-upper, who just let her exist with all her thoughts, was Spike.

*"I'd love you when you're soft, too," he'd said. "When you need to be soft. And you do, love, you need it. Just on your terms."*

That was it. The moment she'd realized that this thing they had, whatever it was, might have a lot more course to go before it was over. That, in fact, perhaps there wouldn't be an over. That Spike's interest in her was more substantial, more *real* than she'd been prepared to grasp.

It was terrifying.

It was everything.

And she had no idea what happened next.

Not helping matters was the fact that, as together as she and Spike were, they weren't really in the open. None of this had been by design or intent—she and Spike hadn't sat down and decided who got to know what; rather she was erring on the side of caution because historically, dating vampires had not gone well, and it seemed gun-jumpy to immediately stress everyone out over something that might not last. She hadn't exactly said any of this out loud, but she was almost positive Spike understood that was the reason, and so far, he hadn't called her out on it. Which both made it easier to breathe and made her feel like a real scumbag.

It was hard, though, knowing exactly how to broach this conversation with the others, because while she and Spike weren't in the open, they weren't really in the dark, either. Like, Willow and Tara knew because they'd been the ones who had helped Buffy reach the decision to go for it. Anything that Giles had put together was owed to the fact

that he had found the spell she and Spike had performed in the first place. It was possible Dawn knew from the amount of time Spike spent at the house, but if she did, she was being uncharacteristically quiet about it, which made Buffy think she was either clueless or waiting for the opportunity to blackmail her for something like NSYNC tickets. There was every chance Anya knew and just hadn't mentioned it and almost zero chance Xander knew because, well, Buffy hadn't gotten a lecture yet.

Oh, and Angel knew, and he'd been super gross about it.

She'd been walking through the cemetery alone the night they'd buried her mom. Needing some distance from everyone, vampire boyfriend included, to let her thoughts run rampant without feeling obligated to explain them with every facial change. Not that Spike had been like that but she'd insisted on space anyway, and he'd given it to her. Told her she knew where to find him if she changed her mind, that he'd swing by later just to make sure she ate, but that he wouldn't impose. And god, he'd been understanding to the point it had almost pissed her off, because where in the world did he get off being understanding and sweet and everything she needed when he was a *vampire*? When her normal, human ex-boyfriend had made her feel like an inconvenience? It was brain warpy and confusing, almost to the point where it felt like a trap. Like he was setting her up to fail. Only that wasn't what Spike was doing at all and she knew that—she did—but knowing it and having these thoughts at the same time was a dangerous sort of trippy. It just made her feel worse.

And then, out of nowhere, that familiar Angel-specific ping had almost knocked her off her feet. Buffy had whipped around, surveyed the landscape of trees and headstones, and known even before she'd completed turning back in the direction she had been facing initially that he would be there when she did.

"Sorry," he'd said by way of greeting. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"Cloak and dagger act says otherwise, but okay. What are you doing here?"

"I heard about your mom."

It wasn't fair to say she'd experienced another ping there, as she felt she was pinging all over with the loss, but it had twinged regardless,

the ache left by the Mom-shaped bruise on her heart. Buffy had shaken her head, though, looked at Angel, and arched an eyebrow. Waiting.

"All right, so, Giles calls sometimes just to tell me how you're doing. He..." And then he'd paused and his nostrils had flared—she'd watched them flare, too, thinking, *wow, those suckers are flarey*—and when she'd met his eyes again, something behind them had changed.

"Spike," Angel had said, his tone darker than Buffy had ever heard. Sharp. An accusation. He'd stormed forward and taken her by the arm, his grip strong enough to hurt. "Is there a reason I can smell him all over you?"

Buffy's heart had seized. All of her had seized, actually, with that old familiar yearning—one that blinked out everything going on in her life. Erased the fact that her mother's grave was just a few headstones away, that Buffy had spent the bulk of the day in this very cemetery, wandering among the graves she knew so well out of habit and some deep, intense desire to hear the familiar rustling of earth. Knowing, of course, that her life would not be better if her mother rose from dirt but still stupidly holding out the hope that she'd be able to steal at least one more second with the woman she hadn't appreciated enough in life to tell her that she loved her. Even if she had to do it before killing her a second time.

No, all of that had fallen away and all she'd been left with was the feeling she used to get in high school when she'd been certain she was about to lose Angel for good. That low simmering dread that had contributed to some truly remarkable saves but also terrible, deadly decisions. And realizing it was *that* feeling had catapulted her out of dread and into resentment, because *god*, she did not deserve that. Not the day she'd buried her mother.

"You can smell Spike all over me because he's my boyfriend," Buffy had replied, forcibly jerking herself free of him. "Boyfriends tend to be all over their girlfriends at least part of the time, and vice versa."

Angel had ogled at her. "Your...boyfriend. Spike."

"Yeah."

"Spike as in...Spike."

"I don't know of another, do you?"

"Buffy, what happened? I don't..." He'd furrowed his brow. "Weren't you with that soldier?"

"I was. He's gone. I'm with Spike now."

"I can't wrap my head around this."

"Lucky for you, understanding your girlfriend's relationship decisions is not a requirement once that girlfriend is an ex," she'd replied. Then, as though she didn't have control of her mouth, she'd heard herself saying, "Spike and I... I don't know how to explain it, but we were both feeling something and I wanted to see where it would lead. It's...different. Everything with him is different. But it's the kind of different I need right now."

"And it doesn't bother you that he's a killer? A vampire?"

Buffy had bristled. "It didn't bother me with you, so why should it with him?"

"Please, you can't compare me to him!"

That was what she'd thought, too, the times Spike had broached the subject, though he admittedly hadn't been heavy handed about it since the ritual sex that had kickstarted their relationship. Still, she remembered well the things he'd said then. How Angel was inherently selfish and destructive, that he enjoyed breaking people just to watch the way the pieces scattered. Spike had overplayed his hand, as she'd noticed he did from time to time when he was feeling exposed, and though he'd apologized for upsetting her, his apology hadn't erased the words from her memory. Hadn't made her not wonder how much of what he'd said had been true and how much just jealousy talking. She'd also found herself wondering a lot about the sanctity of a soul over a chip, because Spike had been without an active chip since the spell, and not once had he left dead loved ones for her friends to find.

And maybe she'd been a bit raw, a lot exhausted, and thoroughly done dancing around the feelings of others, for she'd said as much. Opened her mouth and channeled her inner Anya and let the truth roll out uninhibited.

"There is nothing to compare because, unlike you, he hasn't started killing the people I love."

"Well, of course not," Angel had argued. "He can't, or so you told

me. Something about a chip. Don't tell me he's scoring points for something he has no control over."

"The chip is switched off."

"It's *what?* Why in the world—"

"Because Spike might be a lot of things, but he's not a liar. Have you seen him try to lie? He's terrible. And if you think I don't ask if my soulless, chipless vampire boyfriend is snacking on the locals *regularly*, then you don't know me at all."

"Are you listening to yourself? You seriously want to be with someone who you *have* to ask?"

"It's better than being with someone who can never be happy."

Angel had flinched as though she'd slapped him. "And you think this is happiness? Asking your boyfriend *regularly* if he's killed anyone? How did this happen? How did you become *this*?"

And that time, she hadn't had a clever comeback. She hadn't had anything—worn down and beaten, and desperate to be done with the conversation so she could head home to her morally ambiguous boyfriend, who had *not* killed anyone recently, and let him rail against Angel uninterrupted for a few hours until she felt better. The truth had seemed the easiest way to end the conversation, so the truth was what she'd given him. Just enough to cover the basics—a spell with a very specific clause that she'd done to avoid facing a hellgod and that afterward, she'd been left with feelings she'd wanted to explore. That she didn't know what it was or if it would last, but it was what she wanted right then and she didn't owe him any explanations beyond that.

And Angel had gotten pissy all over again, though this time for a completely different reason. Apparently, one of his friends had gone missing. A friend not likely to go missing as he had a thriving karaoke business which, yes, was a bit to wrap her head around—a demon karaoke bar—but no one had had the first clue what might have happened to him until now. And it hadn't been any good trying to reason with Angel, claim that she hadn't known the larger consequences of the spell until it had been over, that Anya had already raked her over the coals for her oversight. She'd given him another reason to be disgusted with her, and he'd seized it with both hands.



At least Buffy had experienced an actual sense of finality when they'd finally parted ways. Like the next time Angel showed up out of the blue, or she had reason to make the trip to Los Angeles, it would be sans past-relationship residue. Without Angel looking at her like he still owned a piece of her, or thought he should, and definitely without Buffy reserving that piece for him.

Two years was all it had taken to finally make them true exes.

Buffy had waited until she was sure he wouldn't follow her, then cut her patrol short and headed over to Spike's crypt. Found him in his green chair reading a ratty old paperback, one he'd quickly placed aside once their eyes had met. She'd watched his nostrils flare the same as Angel's had, watched the shadow cross his face along with the doubt and uncertainty, and the relief that had come over him when she'd crawled into his lap and burrowed into him. Let him encompass her with his arms and just hold her as she shook and sighed and raged and cried, and finally looked up and kissed him, and kissed him, and kissed him, and asked him to help take it away for a while, to love her the way he did best, and Spike had done just that. Laid her out on his bed downstairs and taken a slow, methodical tour down her body until the last few days had been thoroughly jettisoned, numbed with enough pleasure to chase away the pain, at least for a while, and finally fallen into a true deep sleep tucked up against his chest.

And she'd thought, if this was life with a soulless vampire, there were certainly worse things.



Like all good sleeps, though, Buffy had had to wake up from hers. And when she had, Angel's words were still there, having no obligation to follow him home.

For the first few days, she'd managed to ignore them. Brush them aside whenever they reached up beyond the shallow waters of her psyche, dismiss them as the bitter rantings of an ex who somehow, every time, managed to make her feel like she was the one who had done the initial scorning.

But Angel had this way about him that made it impossible to fight

off the doubts forever. And little by little, she'd found that despite her grief and her resolve, despite the calm spring she'd thought she had ahead of her, she couldn't shake what he'd left her with. It was there, every time she asked Spike the question and every time he gave her the answer, whispering that this wasn't sustainable, that she could never be happy in a relationship where she had to ask in the first place. And she *did* have to ask, even if she was confident that nothing had changed. It was the price of being with someone without a soul. The last time she'd let her guard down people had died, and she couldn't let that happen again.

And what she was doing now, fair or not, was acknowledging the possibility that the day would come when he would give her a different answer. That she was biding time until the inevitable betrayal. Playing chicken with the next human life Spike would eventually claim, and the responsibility that would be hers and hers alone. That whatever they had was temporary, despite how good it felt or how much she had come to rely upon it, and eventually she would be forced to give it up. The way she was forced to give up everything.

But even knowing that, Buffy found she didn't want to stop.

Not until she absolutely had to.



Even amid her worries, Buffy couldn't deny that there were definite perks to having a vampire boyfriend who could take a swing at her. Spike was a force of nature unto himself, unpredictable in the best ways, and that made every sparring match an adventure. Kept things from getting stale or routine—kept her thinking on her feet and improvising rather than relying on methods that had always been tried and true.

"Slayer's got strength us wee vampires do not," he was telling her today, smirking as he dodged her swinging fist and danced a few feet out of range. "First thing a bloke's gotta learn if he aims not to be stake fodder."

"And if he's nuts enough to seek the Slayer out," she shot back, her

nerves ablaze with the thrill of the fight. “It’s not like I can be everywhere at once.”

“Well, you got me there.” Spike smirked and dashed forward, dropped to the floor before she could blink to sweep her legs out from under her. Thankfully, Buffy knew how to fall with grace, lean into gravity in a way that best prepared her for the rebound. But Spike knew that too—knew to anticipate her next move, the way her mind responded, and while he wasn’t always quick enough, he was this time and had her pinned beneath him in a flash. His eyes blazing, his chest heaving with those mystifying breaths he took, his lips tugged into the sort of smile that had her tingling in ways no slayer should tingle for the enemy.

“Imagine what a dull little life you’d be leading right now,” he murmured, nudging her nose with his own, still grinning, “if yours truly hadn’t been a thrill seeker. Better count your blessings, pet.”

“You think you’re that interesting?”

“I think I’m a lot to handle. And I know you like handling me.” He grabbed both her wrists in one hand, his skin cool against hers, and pressed her arms to the floor above her head. Then, *yes*, he was nipping at her lips with just enough hint of teeth to make her gasp before he thrust his hips so the hard ridge of his denim-clad erection was rubbing her exactly where she needed friction the most. “Or do you need a reminder?”

She had essentially two choices in moments like these—shove him off her and give him another rendition of the *we’re in public (kind of)* talk or answer his bluff. The good girl in Buffy knew what she should do, especially since literally everyone she knew was in the shop part of the Magic Box and could run in here at any minute. The part of her that had been steadily unleashed over the last few weeks, though, was not interested in being good. No, that part was interested in getting another lesson in how well Spike knew how to use his cock and other parts.

And if things hadn’t exploded into absolute chaos the next second, she might have thrown caution to the wind and gone for it.

But things had exploded. Someone had screamed for help, chaos

had ensued, for that was what happened when you were Buffy Summers and were in danger of enjoying yourself a little too much.



There were three of them in the shop. Just three, but a whole legion waiting elsewhere. An army, a crusade that had descended upon Sunnydale with one objective.

They were called the Knights of Byzantium. And they were here for Dawn.

Of course, the others didn't know that. No one knew that. No one except Spike and Giles, the latter of whom went sheet-white the second the knights made their intentions known. Her friends had started sputtering a bunch of things, mostly having to do with Glory being gone, and what exactly was up with the Renaissance getup, anyway? Not exactly stealthy.

"We are aware the Beast has been banished from this realm," one of the knights said with a dismissive sneer. "But the Beast is not the only entity that could command the powers of the Key. The only way to ensure the survival of this world is to see that it is destroyed."

Then he fixed his eyes on Buffy, sending a hard shiver through her body—the sort that sank beneath the skin to the muscle and bone.

She'd been wrong. Whoever these knights were, they knew, too. They knew the Key was human. They knew the Key was *her sister*.

"That's not happening," she replied, crossing her arms. "The Key is protected. No one is getting to it because no one is getting through me."

"You are flesh and blood," said Knight Two. Were it not for the fact that his eyes had an intense laser quality to them, she would have thought he was bored. "You may have strength, but the Key is more than strength. In the right hands, it is death itself."

"The only hands that matter are mine in this scenario."

"You are truly so arrogant to believe yourself invincible?"

"Oi," Spike barked, coming around to take his place at her left. "If it's a fight you want, you'll get one from the pair of us."

"Watch it there, chip boy," Xander observed from where he stood

beside the checkout counter. "These guys look a little too human for you." He also crossed his arms, planted his feet shoulder width apart, his focus intent on the knights. "But the sentiment isn't wrong. If Buffy says you're not touching this Key thing, then you're not. You have all of us to get through."

Though she wasn't looking at him, Buffy felt Spike roll his eyes. She also caught the look Willow and Tara exchanged and the way Giles bristled, but no one seemed eager to disabuse Xander of the notion that Spike was fangless. Which was good, because now, with medieval fish to fry? So not the time.

"It matters not," Knight Three intoned, setting his glare on Buffy. "Cut us down all you like; we will keep coming. There will be no rest until the Key is destroyed. We came here in good faith in the hopes of sparing your people unnecessary bloodshed. What happens next will be on you."

"You think that scares me?"

"If you were as intelligent as it is boasted, you would not take our words lightly."

"Get out," Buffy said, what was left of her patience evaporating. "Before I throw you out headfirst."

Knight One sighed as though she were a great disappointment but didn't argue. None of them did. Rather, they all turned as one and filed out of the Magic Box, harsh rays of sunshine striking the metal of their getup in a way that made even Buffy flinch. But she didn't look away until the door was closed. Didn't let herself relax until her nerves began to calm and her senses, so unaccustomed to flaring for enemies not of the preternatural variety, told her that the coast was clear.

"Giles," she said without moving.

"Yes, I know."

"What is this Key and why is everyone obsessed with it?" Xander asked, turning to Buffy. "Do you know? 'Cause this guy sure thinks you do."

Buffy held her breath. There were no breaks in her world, after all. The most she could expect with a win was a delay. Even after she'd done something as monumental as banish all non-native creatures from this world to their dimension of origin, the danger remained. If

not Glory, then these Knights of Whatever. If not them, then something else. Something potentially worse. Something that would make it impossible for Dawn to be exactly what she deserved to be. Normal lives didn't exist if you were a Summers.

She glanced at Giles, not knowing why until he nodded, small to the point of being imperceptible, but she understood what it meant. The game had changed.

"All right," she said with a sigh, every inch of her body suddenly aching. "Fill them in while I'm gone."

"Where are you going?" Xander demanded.

"To pick up my sister."

He blinked at her, checked his watch. "Uhh, it's the middle of a school day, Buff."

"And she's unprotected."

"From math?"

"No," she replied. "Giles will explain. I have to get there before they do."



The only part her friends didn't take well was the revelation that Dawn already knew.

"You told her before you told us?" was Xander's refrain. As though he had been personally betrayed. "Do you not trust us?"

"It's not a matter of trust," Buffy argued once she was back, her sister safely sequestered in the training room with Spike. She looked to Willow for support and found nothing but more hurt, only this time in the form of wounded puppy dog eyes. *Not even me?* those eyes demanded. *Not your best friend?*

And no, she wanted to say. Not even you. What exactly would have been the point of sharing this mind-altering revelation aside from changing the way everyone looked at Dawn? No longer viewed as a person but an anomaly, someone whose existence was even less explicable than Buffy's. Someone whose entire life had been fabricated and inserted into an ongoing narrative with such fluidity no one had noticed. Hell, Buffy had been on the fence about telling Dawn in the

first place, probably never would have if she hadn't accidentally let it slip to Spike one night after he'd fucked away all her filters. But then, Spike felt a bit safer than her friends in that regard—less likely to stare or stammer or act in any way around Dawn that would make her feel like something other than human. Just another check in the plus column for Buffy's quasi-secret boyfriend.

"How'd the Bit take it?" Spike had asked after Buffy had finished with the bean spillage, resting his chin on her crown.

"You mean when I sat her down and explained that her entire life was imagined and implanted in our brains and she is actually not my sister but a glowy blob of energy meant to undo the world?"

A beat. "You didn't tell her."

"Of course I didn't tell her. How would you react?"

"Buffy..." It was possibly the first time she'd ever heard anything like disappointment in his voice, and she hadn't been prepared for how it hit her. "She deserves to know."

That had been it, all he'd said. Just the thesis statement without the accompanying argument to convince her that his conclusion was the right one. But the way he'd said it, how his voice had molded the words, how his tone had remained even and kind, had broken through every one of the counterarguments she'd had at the ready, because he hadn't told her she was wrong—he hadn't said anything about her at all. All he'd done was support Dawn. It had been simple and effective, maybe even more so than it would have had Giles or Angel or anyone else said the same, specifically because Spike didn't have a soul, didn't have anything beyond his rather simplistic view of what was good and what was bad, and he'd understood that withholding information was bad, even when that information had the power to hurt.

And honestly, there was no telling what Dawn's Key status might mean for the future. Who might discover the truth and how that truth might be exploited. Telling her was a matter of respecting her, of giving her vital information about herself. Information that couldn't be weaponized if it was already out there. So the following night, Buffy had taken Dawn to a movie and dinner at her favorite restaurant, and then come home and told her the truth. It hadn't been pretty, but even with the tears and the screaming, she couldn't say it had been terrible.

Actually, Buffy felt it had made them closer, brought them together as people who both shouldered terrible burdens they hadn't chosen.

When she saw Spike next, Buffy had pressed close and kissed him, perhaps more tenderly than she normally did, before whispering her thanks. He'd looked a little surprised but pleased and had promised to tell her any time he thought she was making a wallop mistake. She'd snickered and punched him in the shoulder, but ultimately felt really good about the whole thing. Like an actual grown-up.

Once everyone else was in the know—and no longer grumbly about the fact that they were the last—the conversation had shifted to research and solution mode. Who the Knights of Whatever were, how large a threat they posed, how they could be handled without crossing the killing-humans line.

"There's a memory spell we could try," Willow eventually volunteered. "It looks pretty straightforward, just calls for a lot of Lethe's Bramble."

"We have that in stock," Anya said. "Loads of it."

"Memory spells are really tricky, though," Tara argued. "Any magic involving the mind like that... It's dangerous. You could do some serious damage."

"And we care why?" Xander asked.

"Because they are people," Tara replied. "And even if they're wrong about Dawn, that doesn't make them bad. Just...misguided."

Xander narrowed his eyes. "Did you not hear them? They want to kill her."

"Make that *really* misguided?"

"Well, sorry if they don't get a sympathy vote from me," he replied. "If it's these guys or Dawn, these guys are out of luck."

In situations past, Tara might have retreated. Buffy expected her to, in fact, and was surprised when she tightened her jaw and squared her shoulders, not breaking Xander's gaze. "I won't perform a spell that might hurt people," she said firmly. "And Willow won't, either."

"She won't?" Willow asked, sounding uncertain.

"No. That's not what magic is for. I'm all for protecting Dawnie, of course I am. I'll do whatever we need to do to make sure these guys don't get their hands on her. But I don't want to hurt anyone. Not if I



can help it.” Tara nodded as though to reassure herself it was the right decision. “Which means we need to do this spell right, if we’re going to do it.”

“Just for the record, I wasn’t thinking you’d do it wrong,” Xander retorted, and though it was very typical of him—that binary black and white view of the world set in place as always—Buffy felt her patience with him beginning to fray.

“I mean we’re going to make sure the spell doesn’t screw up their minds,” Tara said. “We’ll need to test it before we cast it on anyone.”

“How can you test it without casting it?”

At that, Tara faltered, the conviction on her face melting into doubt. That was until Willow swooped in, suggested practicing on something small—like mice—which was definitely better than practicing on people, even if Tara was reluctant to do anything to bring potential harm on any creature. It did seem the most optimal solution—get a maze, some mice, work with them until they could seamlessly run it, then cast the spell and observe.

In the meantime, though, Willow had a different spell to consider—the sort that would never work in the long-term but could buy them time to test ethical use of magic where memory was concerned. A spell that would provide a sort of shimmer, making Dawn blend into her surroundings, not turning her invisible exactly, but close enough that someone who didn’t know for certain she was standing in front of them wouldn’t see her. It would help ensure she couldn’t be snagged at school or anywhere else where she was vulnerable, relaxing the need for Buffy or someone to be her constant shadow. And no skipping classes, either—the shimmer would fade when Dawn spoke but fall back into place once she stopped talking, so she could continue answering role call, taking tests, turning in homework. She just got a brief pass not to be called on class-participation style, and Dawn was more than happy with that.

“Any moral objections to this one?” Xander asked after Willow finished with her explanation. There hadn’t been, for that spell was one of camouflage rather than plucking something right out of someone’s brain. A temporary fix until the permanent one was ready. The best sort of solution.

And it worked great. Better than they could have hoped.  
Until the day Spike went missing.



Spike was not the sort of person one would expect to be punctual, being very much a *go where I want, when I want it* kind of guy. The exception, as Buffy had learned, was when they had plans to see each other. Tell him she was going to be at Sunnydale Cemetery at ten o'clock and she'd find him waiting, having arrived early on the off chance he could sneak in a few more clandestine minutes before they set out for patrol. And she'd pretend not to be touched and he'd pretend not to be annoyed but then she'd kiss him and he'd do that growly thing she liked and things would be right with the world.

One of these days, Buffy swore she would work up to doing something less shop-specific—something less vampire and slayer and more boyfriend and girlfriend, like cuddling on the couch and watching bad movies. It was just a matter of graduating from *not sneaking around but not making announcements*, either to *making announcements*. All she had to do was get over the fact that announcements about her love life, especially when that love life involved vampires, had historically gone down as *not great*.

And if she were being honest with herself, Angel's words had yet to fade. The doubt they'd stoked, the worry. She'd have to confront it sooner or later, figure out exactly what she wanted, but that was a problem for another day—something to reckon with after the knights were yesterday's news. Until then, Buffy would continue meeting Spike for patrols, continue training with him at the Magic Box, continue sneaking him up to her soundproofed room to steal as many minutes as she could steal—as many minutes as she could pretending they were normal.

Only Spike wasn't waiting for her when she started her patrols that night. The first thing Buffy felt was mild disappointment, followed by a surge of annoyance when he didn't show up over the next ten minutes. Or the ten minutes that followed. Eventually she gave up, set out on patrol by herself, her mind filling with images of him drunk at

one of his poker games or causing problems at Willy's, perhaps launching into a brawl, since he couldn't seem to keep out of those. She resolved to swing by his crypt afterward, then hit those places he was most likely to haunt before heading home. Not admitting to herself, not willing to, that there was another possibility, because that possibility meant she'd let her love life overrule her once again. Committed the unthinkable, this time with her eyes wide open.

The fact that she could see it happening, understand how it wouldn't even be intentional, made matters worse. Spike wandering home drunk, accidentally bumping into some guy on the street. The guy takes it personally and gives him a shove. Spike grits his teeth and tries to continue on his way, but the guy doesn't let him. Perhaps he's had a shitty day at work, perhaps he's been laid off, perhaps his girlfriend has ended things; whatever the case, the guy decides Spike is his problem, so he ups the ante. Punches him in the back of the head, or throws him against the exterior of a building, and Spike is trying because of course he's trying. He's trying so hard, but he's drunk and this guy is in his face, and all he wants to do is get home so he can get ready to meet Buffy. So he uses some force, breaks loose, and the guy, now with something to prove, storms forward and swings and swings, and finally Spike's patience snaps. He has better things to do than play punching bag. The next thing he knows, he's sent the man to the ground, or perhaps head-first into the nearest wall. There's a crack and a spatter of blood, and it's all over. A man is dead, and Spike is the one who killed him.

And what does Spike do in that scenario? Does he tell her? Does he try to hide what happened? Does he skip town? Any and all of it could so easily be true, and what did that mean for her? For them? That she could have these thoughts about someone who was sharing her bed? Could she ever love someone she never entirely trusted, and if not, what the hell were they doing? What was *she* doing, aside from setting herself up for guaranteed heartbreak?

Spike deserved better, too. He deserved someone who wouldn't have thoughts like this. Who wouldn't start assuming the worst on some level just because he was a no-show for patrol. Who wouldn't harbor doubts about the lifespan of their relationship. Who could just

let go and love him as he was, because that person, somehow, was someone she liked. Someone she wanted to believe she might one day love.

Buffy's eyes started to burn, her vision to blur, and she shook her head and wiped at her cheeks. Wondering if she'd just broken up with him in her mind. Hoping she hadn't. Worried she had. And sick to her stomach about all of it.

Angel had said she couldn't have a relationship like this. And goddammit, she hated it when he was right.



Buffy would never forgive herself for not realizing it sooner, for not putting the pieces together, for having the thoughts she'd had—slayer thoughts—rather than what should have been the kneejerk girlfriend worry. In response, he'd tell her that she was bloody daft and it wasn't like he hadn't given her ample reason to suspect the worst of him over the years. But there would be something weak in the smile he gave her, in the light in his eyes. A part of him she'd hurt without trying. Without totally appreciating how easy it was for her to land a blow like that.

To be fair, it didn't take her long to get over the worst of her bad thoughts. Not even a full hour before she caved and headed over to his crypt, ready to get whatever confrontation over with. What she found had her stomach dropping to her knees and her heart seizing with an awful combination of panic and guilt. It happened that fast—a quick flip and she'd known.

The fact that Spike's possessions were already few and far between made the damage look even more devastating. The duster draped over his chair, which was on its side, shattered glass on the stone floor in the middle of drying blood, lamps overturned, books and fragments of candles scattered in every which direction. And no vampire. No vampire anywhere. No vampire tinglies, either, and she had no idea how much time she'd already lost.

Either way, she wasn't going to lose any more. Buffy turned on her heel and darted back out into the night, her feet thundering along

grass then pavement as wind whipped at her hair and blood pounded in her ears. It was early enough that the gang might still be at the Magic Box—Anya had taken to staying open after dark just to make sure she capitalized on the needs of the entire Sunnydale populace, including those who had sunlight allergies. Giles had protested at first, citing the already high mortality rate of magic shop purveyors in the area and arguing that this was inviting more trouble, but he'd promptly eaten crow when the profit and loss margins the following month reflected a healthy seventeen percent increase.

But Buffy didn't care about that—she didn't care why the shop was still open when she rounded the corner on Maple Court, just that it was. That when she burst through the door, nearly tearing the bell above it off its hinge, she found herself among her friends rather than in an empty room. Friends who immediately went on the alert because they were *her* friends. The Scoobies. The people who were always there when she needed them most.

"Buffy!" Willow tore herself away from the bookshelf where she and Tara appeared to be reviewing spell ingredients. "What's happened? What's wrong?"

"Spike," Buffy gasped, staggering slightly as her legs broke out of their sprint. "Spike's gone."

A heavy silence crashed over the place, the type that usually followed a record scratch. Willow and Tara exchanging glances, Giles going unusually still, Dawn's eyes wide with concern, Xander blinking at her from the cash-wrap. The only person who didn't stop what they were doing was Anya, busy as she was thumbing through the day's receipts.

*Is this the moment?* the silence seemed to ask. But it already had its answer.

"And we care about this why?" Xander finally demanded. "The way you burst in here, I thought there was a problem or something."

"His place was trashed and he's gone," Buffy repeated, stronger now. "Like blood on the floor, no vampire in sight. And his coat—he never leaves without his coat. Ever."

"So?" Xander replied. "He probably just pissed off some big demon by cheating at cards or something. Not like it'd be the first time."

There had been no shortage of instances in Buffy's past where she'd had to quell the instinct to punch her friend in the face. This was no different. "Or it could be the knights. The knights who are looking for Dawn?"

"Dear lord..." This from Giles, whose stoic expression was slowly transforming into horror. "He *does* know, Buffy. If these knights have taken Spike, he *does* know."

And just like that, Xander changed his tune. Went rigid, all business, steely-eyed. "Then what's the plan?"

"The plan is I find him," Buffy replied coolly.

"And kill him?"

"What?" Dawn squawked.

"What?" Buffy echoed, her throat already sore.

"Well, it's like Giles said. He knows about Dawn. There's no way he's not spilling the beans."

The thought hadn't even occurred to her. Hadn't so much as blipped across her mind. But of course that's why the knights would have taken him, believing him the most likely to crack under pressure. And why not? He was a vampire, after all. One whose loyalty had a price.

Except it didn't—Buffy knew that too. Knew it the same way she knew the sun would come up in the morning, the same way she knew water was wet and what colors were in style this year. She just knew.

Then, when Spike proved her right, when he refused to give up Dawn, the knights wouldn't see any value in keeping him around. They were on a holy quest, and he was an unholy creature. He wasn't getting out of there alive.

Not unless she went in and got him herself.

"Will," Buffy said, willing her voice not to shake, "the timetable for your memory spell is about up. How close are you?"

Willow exchanged a glance with Tara, the sort in which conversations were held. The sort Buffy and Spike had been sharing now for weeks in this room and so many others. Looking at each other and seeing each other and hearing each other even when they didn't say a word. And it hit her then, powerful and terrible and unforgiving, just how much losing Spike would hurt. Not a flesh wound kind of hurt,

either, but a visceral, slice-it-open-and-scrape-the-insides-away kind of hurt. A hurt that would hit her like an amputation, the complete separation of a piece of herself that she needed to function. That she didn't want to live without.

And yeah, she was still looking at a lose-lose situation. The knowledge that she was falling a little more each day for someone she shouldn't fall for, could never fully trust, and would always suspect on some level despite how hard she tried not to. That was still true. But so was this. So was the knowledge that Spike was a part of her. A big part. A part she needed to save.

"We're close," Tara said, sounding uncertain at first but then squaring her shoulders. "Close enough. If it's him or them, Buffy, I understand. We can't afford to wait."

"I can do a location spell real fast," Willow added. "See where he's being kept."

"Am I missing something here?" Xander asked loudly. "Why the hell are we rescuing Spike? Shouldn't the objective be shutting him up? Preferably with a stake?"

"Let's try shutting you up first," Buffy spat, flushing hot. Perhaps not the best move but she was beyond caring at this point. She'd already danced around Xander and Giles and everyone else's feelings on her love life long enough. "You shut up and Giles can shut up and Anya can shut up—"

"Buffy," Giles protested.

"Hey!" Anya chimed in. "I didn't do anything!"

"Well, keep not doing anything, because if one more person suggests that I stake my boyfriend, I'm going to start throwing things. Sharp things. Things with pointy edges. And no, I will not be careful."

Well, there it was. Out in the open. Boom goes the dynamite.

And Xander, being Xander, responded as only Xander would. "He's your boyfriend? Your *boyfriend*? Your boyfriend is Spike? Spike is your boyfriend?"

"I knew it," Dawn said, pumping her fist in the air. "You guys were spending way too much time together."

"He's your *boyfriend*?" Xander shouted.

Buffy narrowed her eyes. "Do you enjoy saying it or did a screw

come loose? And don't answer. I don't have time to care." She turned to Willow, her nerves starting to fray. "You said something about a location spell? What do you need?"

"Something personal, if you have it? I can work it without it but it'll take longer and—"

But Buffy was already in motion, reaching under the collar of her shirt to tug out the chain there. More specifically, the skull head ring dangling off the chain. Her skin was hot with a mixture of embarrassment and shame and anger at feeling either embarrassed or ashamed, because she didn't deserve to feel anything but worry right now. "He gave it back to me," she said to Willow, knowing full well Xander was hanging onto every word. "The ring from our engagement. He gave it back to me. Not, like, to be engaged or anything, but that ever since the spell, he thought of it as mine so I should have it."

Willow made the sort of guttural whimpering sound she usually reserved for especially cute puppies but otherwise didn't comment. "Okay," she said, closing her hand around the ring. "Give me maybe fifteen minutes? Perk of being in a magic shop—all the stuff I need to do it is here."

"Good." Buffy nodded, her nerves buzzing, and turned to Tara, who stood at the ready. A loyal soldier waiting for orders. "Is there any chance we can do the memory spell today? I know you said you were close, but how close is close?"

"I can get it set up," Tara said quickly. "It's... It's like Willow said when we were talking about it—really straightforward. I'll need a crystal and the Lethe's Bramble, but I think I can have the casting part done before you leave."

"Good. That's good." Really good. It might be the difference between walking out of wherever the knights had Spike and fighting their way out, and Buffy really didn't want to have to fight. One moral crisis at a time was her max.

"So you're just breaking all the rules for this guy?" Xander asked once both Willow and Tara were otherwise occupied, his eyes hard and his jaw harder, and all of this was so unbelievably predictable yet all the more frustrating because of it. Buffy couldn't afford to have this



conversation now so of course now was when he would insist on having it.

"Xander," she started, hearing and hating the note in her voice. How familiar it was, how awful. How that feeling she'd thought she'd left behind in her teenage body had somehow found its way home, and that Xander was the reason. After a prolonged beat, the weight of arguments already had and lost and had again on her shoulders, she released a breath and forced herself not to linger. There were more important things. "Can you stay with Dawn? Make sure she's okay and keep her somewhere safe until I get back?"

"Oh, so now you remember Dawn."

"Hey!" Dawn was full red in the face. "I want Spike saved too."

"Because all Summers women are suckers, apparently."

And that was it. The moment Buffy broke. "Would you stop?" she all but shouted. "If it was you or Anya or anyone else, I'd be doing exactly this."

"You're seriously comparing us to a vampire."

"I'm comparing you to someone who is important to me," she snapped, heat surging anew across her skin. "I'm comparing you to someone who I want in my life. If you have a problem with that, it's *your* problem. Not mine. The only problem I have at the moment is my boyfriend is missing and apparently, I can't count on one of my best friends to do the bare minimum."

"I can't believe we're doing this *again!* With one that doesn't even have a soul this time."

Buffy sucked in her cheeks, the urge to lash out, strike back, just let out the pressure that was building with each poisonous word, as swallowing it would make her explode more than she already had. But Spike didn't have time for that—not if she was right. So instead, she turned to Anya, drew in a breath, and asked again. "Can you please stay with Dawn?"

She was prepared for more resistance, and almost crumbled in relief when Anya nodded. "We'll handle it."

"Thank you."

"There's no way he didn't tell them how to find her," Xander argued. "You have to know that, Buffy."

"He would never," Dawn shot back, her voice containing a very Spike-like edge to it. "Spike would never tell them."

"You're both delusional."

"If he told them, it'll be pretty damn obvious the second I get there," Buffy said before her sister or Giles or anyone else could weigh in. "And then you won't have to worry about me dating him or any other vampire again, because if he's not dead then I'll kill him myself." Something in her chest seized as she spoke but she let herself slow down to analyze it. "But he hasn't told them, Xan. I know he hasn't."

"How could you possibly?"

"Because he loves me."

The look he gave her was one-half incredulous, one-half pitying, and altogether, she figured it earned him that punch to the face once she got her vampire back safe and sound. But a different Buffy could worry about that—one who wasn't about to explode out of her own skin.

Everything else was on hold until she had Spike back.



At first, Buffy thought Willow's spell must have gone awry, but only at first. Then the shock had cleared and reason had set in, and even she had to admit it made a sort of sense. The mansion on Crawford Street, where she and Angel had once battled to the death, had sat empty, as far as she knew, in the years since her ex had left town—large and sterile and not exactly homey, with its concrete walls and floors and vaguely castle-like aesthetic. Plus, there were all those chains she assumed Angel had just left lying around, along with god knows what else. Really, taking everything into account, the mansion tied Dracula's castle for the most likely place to house a crusade.

It also settled something else for her. There was no way Spike would come to this place of his own volition—not now. If he was here, it was because someone had made him be here, and suddenly those images of knights bursting into his crypt armed with crosses, holy water, and perhaps other holy implements were no longer just murky maybes. No, these guys had swarmed in and overpowered him, the

strongest vampire she'd ever encountered—yes, counting Angel—and even if he had managed to draw blood, it hadn't been enough to slow any of them down.

She paused outside of the mansion, trying to shake off how familiar this felt, approaching the place with a sword clutched in her hand and dread pooling in her belly. In retrospect, it was amazing she'd ever been able to come back here at all after Acathla. She'd never thought to ask Angel how he'd braved living within these walls, remembering the things he'd done here. What he'd almost succeeded in doing. It had just been handy—an empty house for a vampire who had lost his apartment, or so she'd assumed. She hadn't stepped foot in there again after the morning he'd told her she'd been a real pro. Just another piece of Angel that had crumbled away, or maybe that she'd never understood in the first place.

Buffy worked her throat and pulled the crystal Tara had given her out of her pocket. Black meant the spell had been successfully cast and the memories of everyone under its influence muddled. Only it wasn't perfect, Tara had warned her, for they weren't sure just how far back the spell would stretch. Perhaps enough just to remove Dawn but not enough to make them question why they were holding a man captive. It wasn't much of a reset button, but it was all they had and the best bet for Buffy to get in without having to think too hard about what she might be pressed to do if left without option.

"They're human, Buff," Xander had spat as she'd selected a sword from the training room. "Are you really gonna cut them down to save a vampire?"

Spike wasn't just a vampire, though. He wasn't *just* anything. He was her boyfriend. Her best enemy. The man she might not be able to keep, might never trust the way she needed to trust the person she shared her life with, but someone important to her. Someone she'd hated and tolerated and needed and liked and, if not loved, then as close as a person could get to love without falling the rest of the way. She couldn't leave him. And no, she didn't know what she'd do if she needed to swing the sword she'd brought along with her, but she'd figure it out. Wouldn't be the first time she'd been forced to come up with a plan on the fly, or even the first time she'd had to contend with

human bad guys. The only difference here was the objective was to save a soulless, unrepentant vampire for no reason other than Buffy had feelings for him. It was personal. It wasn't the apocalypse.

And she wasn't going to let that stop her.

Especially not now that the crystal was black.

Buffy released a shaky breath, having not appreciated until right then how worried she'd been that it might not turn at all. But this much had gone right, at least, or as right as it could—right enough that she could shift her focus to the next part of her hasty plan. According to Tara, even a teeny crack to the crystal would compromise the integrity of the spell, if not obliterate it entirely, which made it the opposite of an ideal thing to have on hand when in combat. Her first thought had been to leave it behind for safekeeping, but the need to know if the spell had worked had been more important, and led to the second thought—finding a place to leave the crystal so it wasn't in danger of being damaged in whatever came next. She didn't have much time, but she also didn't need much time, just a minute or so and a rock with a flat edge to dig out a chunk of earth. Then in went the crystal and on went the dirt and hopefully that would be enough because she'd waited as long as she thought she could without storming inside.

So she pulled back and gathered herself.

Then got to storming.



If she lived a thousand years, she would never forget the way he looked at her as she approached the cross where he was mounted. A genuine cross, the sort she'd seen movie versions of Jesus haul up to his own crucifixion site, only Jesus's skin hadn't hissed and sizzled upon contact, and presumably hadn't filled the air with the stench of burning meat. Buffy had stood in a familiar space made unfamiliar, made downright profane, as the befuddled and mind-blanked knights wandered away from the scene of their crime. Some asking questions, some poking at the armor, some trying and failing not to stare at the vampire they had crucified with a mixture of open confusion and

disgust, some looking at her as though desperate for reassurance that they weren't seeing what they were in fact seeing. That there was an explanation for all of this, including their missing memories, that she could help guide them toward.

Buffy would never forget the way Spike had looked at her then, but she would forget, and quickly, what she'd told the knights to get them to leave the premises. What lie she'd spun to keep them from panicking and making a bigger mess—making it impossible for her to collect her vampire and take him home. All she knew, after, was that it had worked. Whatever she'd said had been enough. She'd been able to approach the cross, place her hand on Spike's feet, and watch his face dissolve, watch all of him dissolve as he realized she was real.

It wasn't until she got him down, got him home, that she learned the knights had been playing with magicks of their own. Magicks they had conjured but only he had seen, all with the intent of ferreting out the location of the Key. His body was marred with burns and bruises, with splash patterns of holy water and the impression of small crucifixes, and when torture hadn't worked, they'd turn to the thing they'd been sure would. And they'd been wrong.

Almost as wrong as Buffy had been.

Nothing had been certain at first. Buffy took Spike home—to *her* home, the one with doors and locks and weapons and her to get through if anyone intended to come and abduct him again. She made quick work of securing all the vulnerable points of entry, then called the Magic Box to let the others know the plan had worked and she had him back. That she needed some time to patch him up. That she didn't want Dawn to see him like this, knowing her sister would already be blaming herself and not wanting to make anything worse.

Once arrangements were made and she knew she'd have the house to herself for the rest of the night, Buffy coaxed Spike up the stairs and into the bathroom, where the unforgiving light made every welt, cut, and burn he'd suffered stand out in sharp relief.

"Not as bad as it looks, I expect," he told her with the worst attempt at a brave smile she'd ever seen. "Bloody unimaginative gits."

"Spike—"

"Truly, love. Had worse from your ex."

"That doesn't make it better!"

"Maybe not, but still the truth. I'll be right as rain in no time."

Buffy glared at him but figured arguing wouldn't do him any favors right now. "I'm going to run you a bath," she said instead. "And we'll see how bad it is."

"Gonna play nursemaid, too?"

"If it gets you to take this seriously, then yes."

He chuckled himself into a coughing fit but otherwise didn't reply, rather started stripping what little he'd been wearing when she'd pulled him off that cross, carrying tension still in a way he might have thought was invisible but Buffy saw clearly. Part of him still alert, not ready to relive the thing she'd just rescued him from, maybe convinced in a stupid guy way that his past with Angel should have immunized him against the effects of torture. But when he lowered himself into the tub a few minutes later, it was with shaking legs and a long whimper. For a few minutes, he continued with the jokes and the innuendos, not flinching when she dragged a washcloth over the more serious wounds, but not relaxing either.

It wasn't until she stroked his hair away from his brow that he let go of everything else, and finally began to talk for real. As though he had been waiting, needing something from her that wasn't all business. That spoke of things that weren't Slayer and the person she'd saved, but the them that they had been building ever since the ritual.

And once he started, he didn't stop.

The worst part was she'd already guessed the bulk of it. The knights had come in with crosses and stakes. Said they knew he knew how to find the Key and while they were perplexed by his allegiance to the Slayer, they were also prepared to compensate him richly for his cooperation. When that hadn't worked, they'd put those crosses to use. Not that crosses really did much for Spike—he didn't care for them but was too used to flirting with fire to be intimidated at the prospect of sizzling a bit of skin—but paired with the stakes and their willingness to use them, he'd found himself cornered.

"More by myself than them, though," he said, and she understood without him having to go on, but he went on anyway. Explaining how he'd been distracted—no, worried. Hell, *terrified* that he might use too

much muscle, send someone crashing into a wall with more energy than he'd intended. That he'd have to look Buffy in the eye and explain how it was there was a dead human in his crypt, one he'd killed, all while knowing how she'd take that news. Knowing she would blame both him and herself and that might be the end of it. The end of *them* altogether. It wasn't like he'd ever fought for his own life with anything other than lethal force, and he'd been too aware of how fragile humans—even humans done up in medieval armor—were in that moment. Spike had pulled his punches for her, and as a reward, he'd been captured and tortured, first with crosses and holy water and more of those fake stakes like what Riley had ("What?" she'd asked, and he'd shaken his head, and she'd let it go but was absolutely going to circle back to it in the future).

When it became clear he wouldn't blab even under those circumstances, though, the knights had upped the ante. Brought out the magicks. Made him hallucinate her, Buffy, standing there amid the carnage begging him to stop being stubborn. To talk, to save himself. To save *her*, for they had her too, and were doing unspeakable things to her. Things they'd keep doing if he didn't speak now and stop it.

"Mighta worked if I hadn't lived with Dru all those years," Spike said, then laughed. Actually laughed. Not a happy sound, granted, but a sound that shouldn't exist at all. "Surface-level read's all they got on me. Dru, she'd dig deep when she wanted you to believe somethin'. Might've been outta her mind, but she knew how to do a job proper."

Buffy didn't know how to reply so she didn't try, her mind somehow both spinning and standing completely still, locked in the moment with him. With Spike covered in welts and ugly, purple bruises, patches of skin that had been seared or burned away, his chest a map of scars and one of his eyes swollen shut, never mind the holes in his hands and feet because the knights had indeed been that twisted. Enough to test her resolve to let them walk away once the extent of his wounds had been clear.

"Or if I didn't know you," he continued, oblivious. "If I didn't know you'd sooner skewer out your eyeballs before letting anything happen to Dawn."

"Spike..."

"It's all right now," he told her, placing a hand over hers as she tended to the last of the dried blood on his chest with a washcloth she doubted she'd ever want to use again. "She's safe, yeah? You did what you hero-types do. All without spilling a sodding drop." He paused at that, flashed her another grin—the sort that was genuine despite the pain behind it. "Next time, maybe let one of 'em bleed just long enough for me to have a nip. Human blood's better for healing bones."

"What about Slayer blood?"

Spike went still, looked at her with that open wonder that she doubted she'd ever get used to, truly. The bits of him he'd let her see since the hour they'd spent in his crypt together, entwined and connected, pulling and pushing at each other as only they could, until the façade had crumbled and it had just been him. Spike as she knew him now, unguarded and exposed, telling her how he saw her, changing her life and challenging everything she'd thought she'd understood about him and herself. He opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again.

"Can't say it wouldn't do the job," he told her at last. "But Buffy—"

"No *but Buffy*. Now is so not the time to go noble on me."

"Not noble. Fuck, if you're offering..." Spike studied her for a moment longer, one of his rare, inscrutable expressions. It wasn't often he thought this much before talking. "Just that it's going to hurt if I do it like this. It won't be like last time."

"Funnily enough, I remember it hurting with the others." Buffy sucked in a breath, considered. "But maybe if I'm... Like the time Dracula bit me, we weren't fooling around or anything, but it also didn't *really* hurt. Just pinched a little."

Spike's expression shuttered but not entirely. Just enough to let her know he didn't care to be reminded that anyone else's fangs had ever been inside of her. Angel was bad enough but Dracula, as Spike put it, was a "sodding insult." More so than the Master, who hadn't been trying to seduce her when he'd captured her under his thrall. Really, the idea that Buffy had been marginally open to letting another vampire get close to her and she'd gone with, again as Spike put it, that "showy wanker" wounded his pride a bit.

"It didn't hurt because he had you hot," Spike said now, his voice



pitched lower than usual. "Might not have been touching you, but you were warming up to him."

"I was not."

"Buffy, it's all right."

"Not to me. I don't get hot for vampires who aren't you or... Well, just *you*, now."

At that, he grinned, though it looked more like a grimace. "Thanks for that."

"The point stands. I was not hot for Dracula." Though her cheeks were certainly hot now, a mixture of embarrassment and shame at the lie. Not that she'd ever really wanted to bone Bram Stoker's poster boy, but he'd definitely awakened a sort of curiosity in her that she hadn't understood until very recently. "But maybe I was... Okay, so, I just need to be warmed up, then. We can do that."

"Fuck yes." Spike sat up then, water sluicing down his scarred, burned chest in a way that shouldn't have been sexy, given the circumstances, but definitely was. That was kinda Spike all over—sexy despite the circumstances. "But only if I can watch."



It was ridiculous, she knew, to be self-conscious about performing for Spike after all they had done together. Yet Buffy was nothing if not ridiculous with nerves that would make themselves known at the most inopportune times. Say, like now, when she was settling on Spike's thighs as he lay reclined on her bed. The rush from the bath to the bedroom had been a blur, Spike moving with speed she would have thought if not impossible, then certainly painful given the extent of his injuries. Hell, his feet had holes in them, but that didn't stop him from hobbling with enthusiasm through the door that led to her room and plopping onto the bed with gusto. He'd watched with hungry eyes as she'd stripped herself bare, then patted his thighs when she'd hesitated a moment too long trying to figure out how best to position herself.

Buffy knew better than to question Spike when he told her he wanted something, so even though it hadn't seemed intuitive to her—again because of his injuries—she'd straddled him anyway. Taken in the

hunger in his eyes, the brightness, the intensity in spite of the bruises, and been swept away by an undeniable rush of power unlike anything she'd ever experienced. One tied to the parts of her that were not slayer at all. That were just her. Just Buffy.

That didn't make the nerves go away, though. If anything, it made them more pronounced.

But this was for him. And Spike, despite his many faults, would never make her feel self-conscious about this. He was the president of the Buffy Should Touch Herself Club. So when she sucked two fingers into her mouth and Spike answered with a low rumble, she kept going. Let her cheeks heat up, let her body warm, let herself trail her hand from her lips over her chest, pausing long enough to wet a nipple, then further down until she was there at her opening. Slipping between her folds, feeling the corresponding pull from deep inside herself, the knowledge that she had probably already done enough to keep his fangs from hurting but the desire to keep going because as scary as this could be, it was addictive too.

Particularly when he started talking.

"Fuck, yes, baby, that's it. That's it." Spike squeezed her ass with a long groan. "Spread that pussy open for me."

With a shaky breath, she did as instructed, tapping her clit as she went. Not hard—just enough to send an electric jolt through her body, to catch his attention even though she already had it, to take in the hunger in his eyes, the slight dip of his chin as he nodded.

"Play nice, now," he told her, slipping one hand around her hip then down along her inner thigh. For a moment, she thought he was going to take over, but he didn't. Just stroked her skin, all soft encouragement. "That clit needs to be treated right."

"Oh, does it?"

"Not wet enough for full contact just yet."

Buffy arched an eyebrow at him. "Since when do you know my body better than I do?"

"You really want me to answer that?"

Well, that was just uncalled for, even if it was true. Another thing that was like Spike. All of it was like Spike. Spike coaxing her, telling her how to stroke herself, his voice velvet and his eyes liquid, every-

thing about him so effortless despite all the roadblocks that should be there. The things she'd let herself believe—the things she knew she was smart to consider overall, just not smart to consider as grounds for breaking up.

Spike might be evil at his core, but evil was fundamentally a choice. A choice Spike had not made, even when pressed. Even when it would have spared him the sort of torture that made him hard to look at right now. And that made him someone she could trust. It might not be a smooth ride all the way, but he would never stop trying. He would never stop putting her first.

It was then, when he raised himself off the mattress to start pressing kisses along the column of her throat, bruised lips and all, ignoring her protests and reprimands, brushing off her worry that he might hurt himself, that it hit her. Something just as large as the fear that she'd have to break up with him—larger, even, and far more devastating. A revelation that started as a low purr, coaxed to a growl when he shifted and began teasing her with his teeth, and by the time he sank his fangs inside of her, exploded into an all-out roar.

The revelation that not only was she not going to break up with him, but he *was* someone she could love.

A vampire without a soul who, even wounded, pulled back after just a few pulls at her neck to make sure she was all right. To kiss her softly. To look into her eyes as his own began to heal and tell her he loved her. Then beg her to ride his cock because he was in new pain now and only she could save him. Make her feel wanted and needed and cherished all at the same time. All without effort.

When she'd made the leap into this relationship, she'd told him she didn't know how she felt, only that it was something. That it was real. And while she'd meant it, believed it, she somehow still hadn't been able to imagine where the journey would take her. This place where she knew she could love him.

"My hero," he whispered against her skin, and god, she could feel the love in the words—the love she wanted. The love that was hers.

And she had absolutely no idea what to do now, except, perhaps, surrender.



III  
LAID





## AND WHAT HE KNOWS YOU AIN'T HAD TIME TO LEARN

SPIKE HAD BEEN ACTING STRANGE EVER SINCE THEY'D ARRIVED IN Los Angeles, and while Buffy knew part of that was to be expected, he was seriously beginning to get on her nerves. Especially now that the whole thing was done—Angel's friend recovered, round-trip complete, and time to start thinking about the journey home. Not that she was looking forward to being in a car with a moody boyfriend for the next couple of hours, but it was better than being at the Hyperion and all the not-so-subtle looks everyone kept throwing her way.

And, okay, it wasn't that Buffy couldn't fathom *why* Spike was all bad-moody, but he so didn't need to take it out on her. She was just here doing what she'd promised she'd do once she'd discovered that Glory's expulsion spell had done more than simply remove Buffy's regularly scheduled spring apocalypse from the calendar. No matter that she and Angel weren't exactly friends at the moment, she'd felt she'd owed him the courtesy of helping recover the colleague that had been caught in the crossfire. And if Spike had a problem with that, well, that was *his* problem. No one had dragged him along for the ride.

Except, again, she actually wasn't a crazy person and knew perfectly well why Spike had insisted on coming along. It was just one of those

things they hadn't yet talked about. The last thing they hadn't yet talked about.

Now, Buffy was left staring at the elaborate staircase that led to the second-floor rooms—more specifically, *their* room—as Spike's duster swished around a corner before disappearing entirely from sight. He'd muttered something about needing a smoke and *so help her*, if he was making their room stinky and unfriendly to human lungs, she was going to lose what little part of her patience this trip hadn't already cost her. As it was, she had plenty of other things to focus on and busied herself trying to do just that. Angel's friend, for instance, was on his hands and knees, planting wet kisses on the floor of the hotel lobby.

"Oh, mama, I will never take you for granted again," he was sputtering. "My beautiful, music-having, culture-tolerating, gun-obsessed adopted home-world. You are so, so beautiful to me."

"Gross, Lorne," Cordelia said, seizing the green demon by the scruff of the neck. "Do you have any idea how covered in demon entrails that is?"

Lorne pulled a face and climbed to his feet, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Would it kill you guys to whip out the Pine-Sol every now and then?"

"Sorry we didn't anticipate you Frenching the floors."

"Well, you should have, quite frankly, and it's not my fault that you didn't." Lorne wiped his mouth again and glanced around the lobby. "Friends," he said, looking at each of them in turn. "I know you all aren't the touchy-feely type, but if you can pardon some mush, I just need to say *thank you*, from the bottom of my heart—which, yes, is in my buttocks, but that doesn't change the sentiment one iota."

"Well, it was kind of our fault," Buffy said with a forced grin. Her PR grin, as Spike called it. "Happy to help you find your way home."

"You saved my life, little darling," he said, setting his gaze on her. It was an unnerving gaze, being all red and all, not to mention set within the face of a green-horned demon, but the past couple of days had done a lot to endear Lorne to her in ways she truly couldn't have predicted. Enough to make her feel a fresh ripple of shame for the pain



she had caused, however inadvertently, by completing a ritual that had sent him to Backwards-Land.

If anyone had told her ahead of time that would be the *only* shame she felt from having completed that ritual, well, Buffy probably would have done something drastic. The version of herself who had agreed to the sex-a-thon magic was almost foreign to the person she had become in the time since, but not so much so that she didn't remember how it felt. The things she'd thought, believed with the sort of intensity typically reserved for the worst sort of zealot.

Instead, she was here. Gazing into the red eyes of a demon she had just dimension-hopped to rescue, along with her vampire lover, who was upstairs probably working himself into a jealous rage and getting cigarette smells into the carpet and bedspread because he didn't know the most important thing. Because she hadn't told him the most important thing. Because she was a coward.

But a coward with good reason, she thought, all too aware of who was watching her at the moment. Not Cordelia and Gunn, who couldn't care less about her love life, or former watcher Wesley, who, though appalled at the start, had quickly become more focused on the whole rescue mission than the social life of a slayer he hadn't been responsible for in nearly three years. Not their other Pylean rescue—the human cave-dweller who had MacGyvered some pretty ingenious contraptions on the other side of the portal. Not Willow and Tara, either, who had tagged along to help open said portal. The only looks they were giving her were of the *what now* variety.

No, as all things seemed to, the story began and ended with Angel. The reason Spike had stomped upstairs, the reason he was in a crappy mood, and the reason he'd been riding her nerves ever since she'd volunteered to make this trip. Spike was secure in pretty much all the ways that mattered, except those involving Angel, and as much as that bothered her, she knew he'd earned it. She also knew she hadn't done anything to make things better; not too long ago, Angel had swooped in and seeded her with enough doubt that she'd nearly broken up with Spike over literally nothing.

Maybe she shouldn't have told Spike as much. Even now, she didn't know what had possessed her...except perhaps the intense, gnawing

guilt that she had let Angel into her head at all. That she had been ready to throw away what they had over the possibility that Spike might decide to get back on the murder wagon someday. Like anything could be that simple. But she'd felt she owed him her honesty. Felt that he deserved to know the thoughts that had run through her head when she'd discovered his crypt vacant. After everything they had been through, the pieces of himself he'd given over without hesitation, how he'd surrendered to her wholly in his determination to prove he could be someone she trusted, it was only right that he know what it meant to be her vampire boyfriend. That he could radiate love, drown her in it, and some part of her would always doubt. Would hold her back from surrendering in kind. Would wonder when the other shoe would drop. Would wait for the day when he proved she'd been right to keep a part of herself walled off, unscalable.

She'd told him, knowing how it would hurt and hating it would hurt, might even end them, but believing wholeheartedly that lying to him, even by omission, would only do more damage in the end. After all, he'd proven himself willing to be tortured to death, nailed to a literal cross by a bunch of holy knights who had been trying to provoke him to monstrosity, and he'd held back, proving he had the sort of faith in her that she hadn't had in him. He'd chosen an excruciating death over ripping his way to freedom. He'd chosen *Buffy*—chosen to show her yet again what it meant to be loved by him.

And after he'd recovered enough to start patrolling with her again, first with a limp owing to the healing holes in his feet, Buffy hadn't been able to shove her remorse for the bad thoughts down far enough to keep them from bubbling up. Tainting every smile, every kiss, every tender tuck of her hair behind her ear. Making her wonder what he would do, how he would react, if he knew what the person he loved most in the world had thought he was doing when he'd been earning those wounds.

So no, Buffy couldn't be surprised that Spike had invited himself along, knowing what he knew. It had only taken Angel ten minutes during the last visit to poison her thoughts about their relationship—no way was Spike going to sit at home, twiddling his thumbs while she took off on a journey that could last weeks, alone with the man who

had been the love of her life with nothing to do between rescue missions but listen to more reasons why Spike was a bad idea. Of course he wouldn't have allowed that. There was no reason why he should.

It was over now at least. Job done. Demon rescued from his home-world dimension, though not without casualties.

She just didn't know what those casualties were yet. If the last one had been her relationship.

"Little Miss Buffet," Lorne said, snapping her back to herself as he moved forward to sweep her into a hug, "I cannot thank you enough for coming to my rescue."

"It was nothing," Buffy replied, because that was how Buffy was expected to reply. All manners and grace, but Lorne had a way of making it easy, something she couldn't have anticipated. "I've always wanted to go to a renaissance faire. Just never having the time or, you know, opportunity."

"If that was a ren faire, I think someone goofed," Gunn drawled, favoring her with the same I-guess-you're-all-right look he'd been giving her ever since she and Spike had rolled into town. "Or maybe I was right the first time, and it's just a white folk thing I ain't ever gonna get."

"I don't know," Cordelia replied almost wistfully. "Up until the end when they wanted me to com-shuck the hunky not-quite-human-but-human-in-all-the-ways-that-matter guy to take my visions and stuff, I was having a pretty good time."

"You know you were just a figurehead. They were using you."

"Whatever. I still abolished slavery."

Gunn rolled his eyes, but in the sort of way that telegraphed how unbothered he was. And more than that—how much he loved Cordelia. It wasn't a big thing but still something Buffy couldn't help but note with wonder. The girl she'd survived high school with was very much not the same person as the woman standing beside her in Princess Leia skankwear.

"Yeah, whatever, Mr. Lincoln," Gunn drawled, clapping her on the shoulder as he passed. "But next ren faire, the brothers better be in charge or I ain't gonna bother showing up."

"And if it takes place in Pylea, wild horses couldn't drag me back," Lorne agreed loudly, looking at Buffy still with open fondness that almost made her uncomfortable. "Seriously, doll-face, if there's anything you ever need, well, ask Angel first 'cause I'm guessing slayer-sized favors are going to be more his specialty than mine. Unless the favor you want is the secret to pouring a perfect sea breeze. Then, strudel, you can come straight to Uncle Lorne and he'll set you up."

But then there were worse things than being hero-worshipped by a demon who could help see the future. Buffy grinned, allowing herself to relax. "And you're welcome to Sunnydale at any time. Especially when we're about to fight to the death. It'd be useful having an inkling of what plans are worse than others."

"I'll have to make a day trip at least," he agreed. "But first priority now—shower. Hot. Extra. And maybe sleeping for the next forty-eight hours. I cannot tell you how much I've missed running water and lumbar support." He offered a wink, but was gone before she could reply, moving with speed that shouldn't be surprising to the staircase. Not that she blamed him—she wasn't even an empath demon but could sense the pending explosion. She just didn't know whose it would be.

"So, Buffy," Willow said in a forcibly bright tone, tugging on her attention next. "Now that the, you know, *ren faire* is over and we're back on this side of reality, are we heading back tonight?"

And that was all it took to have her tumbling back to earth. Buffy very much wanted to leave. The past couple of days had been a different kind of hell—sometimes exhilarating, some terrifying, and some downright funny. If she lived a thousand years, she doubted she'd forget the joyous expression that had bloomed across Spike's face once he'd realized the Pylean sun wasn't lethal to him...or the blows he'd nearly come to with Angel when her ex had also gotten wistful about the sunlight he no longer enjoyed. Why no longer? Because Angel had decided the Gem of Amara was too easy a solution to the whole how-to-solve-a-problem-like-daylight conundrum.

And that had just been the first of many disappointing revelations she'd had to contend with over the last few days. Now she was back and her debt fulfilled, and yes, god, she wanted to rush to the car and

tuck into the backseat and just sleep until sometime next week. Or better yet, she wanted to have never come here at all, because her ex was a giant vampire-shaped baby she let get to her when she shouldn't. Unfortunately, that didn't magically make this her decision. "Your car," she said softly. "Your call."

"That's why I was asking you. 'Cause if you wanna go to sleep in your own bed, you'll need someone who's not completely wiped from portal magic voting on when we leave." Willow offered a weak smile, the sort that betrayed just how exhausted she was. And she had a right to be—she and Tara had been the stars of this dimension and the one they had just traveled from, first opening the door there and then grappling with the variations in the rules that governed the worlds to find the correct ingredients to bring everyone home. That was in addition to being hunted by Pyleans who were in the market for fresh human cows and then helping overturn the system that encouraged slavery. Put like that, it had been a busy couple of days.

"You guys can stay," Cordelia said, not bothering to so much as throw a look in Angel's direction to verify. "Really, you probably should. I'm beat and I didn't even do anything except be worshiped like the goddess I am."

"Yeah, looked like real hard work," Gunn agreed as he strode past her. "I'm out for now, y'all. Been real but I need some space and some sleep." He turned and locked eyes with Buffy, grinning a little. "You're all right, sis. Wish I'd known slayers were a thing when I was a kid. Felt like we were out there fighting on our lonesome this entire time."

Buffy didn't know what to say to that, so she settled for a tired smile and a nod, which was apparently all he expected, for he was gone the next second. Gunn and Cordelia had been two unexpected bright spots over the past couple of days, the former eager for information on all things slayer and the latter almost unrecognizable from her former sort of frenemy. It had also been eye-opening, watching Angel around people that weren't *her* people. Getting a glimpse of the life he'd built for himself outside of Buffy—the relationships he had and how they differed so radically from the context she was used to seeing him in. It made him seem less imposing in a way that surprised her, for she hadn't realized she thought of him as imposing until that thought had crossed

her mind. But it made a twisted sort of sense; the entire time she'd known him, he'd been this larger-than-life figure, a fount of knowledge and experience, wise and authoritative, and perceived only through Buffy's lens. He hadn't had friends in Sunnydale, so she'd been his connection to humanity. Except now he had all these other connections, and none of them seemed to regard him as Buffy had. Hell, he wasn't even the boss of the company that bore his name. No one did what he said just because he was the one who had said it.

"I think I'm going to head out, too," Cordelia said, making her way toward the hotel's rather opulent front door. "I promised Dennis it'd just be a couple of nights, and I don't wanna worry him. Guessing you'll be here tomorrow, though? Hard to drive home in the daylight with a vampire."

Crap. Buffy hadn't thought that far ahead. "Give Spike a blanket and he should be fine."

"Well, if you change your mind, we should do something non-slayage or search-and-rescue related before you head back."

She nodded even if she wasn't fully sold on the whole *staying* thing—not until she glanced back at Willow, saw her eyes drooping, and admitted defeat. It would be better for everyone if they didn't rush back, but that didn't magically make the solution of bunking at the Hyperion any easier.

As though sensing her reticence, Tara offered a soft, "Spike could drive if you want to leave tonight, couldn't he?"

"He can drive but I don't think—"

"I've seen his car," Willow argued with a scowl. "I am not letting him drive mine."

"Spike has a car?" Tara asked. "I didn't know Spike has a car."

"It's not in the best condition," Buffy agreed, hazarding a glance in Angel's direction just in case her ex felt the need to contribute to the conversation. Thankfully, he seemed to be doing what he could to ignore the fact that they were still there. "But good to have around, especially when it's time for Dawn to start driving lessons. If it gets beat up, you won't notice."

There were also the private driving lessons he'd been giving her for the last few weeks, but she thought it might be best not to bring those

up, as they tended to bicker so much that the only recourse was to climb onto each other's laps and work out their differences in ways that would definitely be frowned upon by highway patrol. Buffy could say she had improved since taking on those lessons, but not enough to brave a multi-hour drive home, especially when the first part of that drive would be getting out of Los Angeles. She was just as tired as everyone else. She only wished she weren't.

"Oh my god, stay," Cordelia said, waving a hand. "It won't kill you."

Easy for her to say. She had a place that was not-here to retreat for the night. Still, Buffy didn't have an argument that wouldn't sound stupid or selfish.

"It is okay if we stay, right?" Tara asked once Cordelia had left, her gaze fixed on Angel, who hadn't done more than glower at all of them since they'd hopped through the portal. "I didn't—we didn't ask. If you'd rather us go—"

"No, it's fine," Angel said in a very *it's not fine* voice, but he wasn't looking at Tara. He was looking at Buffy now, a look she knew both well and not at all, for somehow she understood what it meant despite the fact that she didn't think she'd ever had the sort of conversation with him that she was about to have. "We have the room, and there's no need to hurry when you're tired."

Willow offered a flat smile as thanks, then rubbed a hand along Tara's shoulders and they were heading toward the stairs the next second. And with Wesley off making their Pylean refugee comfortable, that left Buffy alone with Angel for the first true time since he'd come to visit following her mother's funeral.

Since she'd allowed him to do the sort of damage that had nearly ended her relationship. And that's what this all came down to, ultimately. That she'd almost let Angel have the final say in who she dated. Who she loved. As though his opinion mattered as much as what she had actually experienced for herself—as though he could tell her who Spike was when she saw every day with her own two eyes who Spike was. When Spike was there regardless, even when she hurt him the way she knew she had, showing her over and over again that he was someone who didn't believe in empty promises. Who didn't give up.

Who still had something to prove. Who still loved her, despite that hurt.

And even if she had done the sort damage that was irreparable, that didn't change what she had to do now. For herself if no one else.

But hopefully for both of them.



# TO LIVE MY LIFE THE WAY I WANT

HE WAS GOING TO DRIVE HIMSELF OUT OF HIS SODDING MIND.

It was his own fault, too, which didn't make anything better. He was the one who had insisted on hitching along for the ride, on going where Buffy went even if it meant subjecting himself to days of Angel's company. He was the one who had promised he would be all right—that he could swallow all the rot and the resentment and play like none of it mattered. That he didn't care about the poison Angel had filled Buffy's head with or the fact that she'd let her head get so full in the first place. No, he was the wanker who had sworn all that mattered was she'd decided it *was* rot. Never mind that convincing her had involved Spike letting a bunch of holy wankers string him up on a cross while trying to carve Dawn's location out of him. Put like that, he was a lucky bloke. All that had stood between him and being kicked to the curb by the woman he loved was a matter of self-sacrifice. She'd needed a demonstration.

Spike cursed, turning again to stride back up the strip of carpet he was going to have worn down to its fibers by the time they left. He just barely managed to keep from aiming a kick at the dresser, too, if only because he knew what she'd say when she finally stopped gabbing down there, making nice with the bastard who had gotten her all

twisted up in the first place. Safe money was on the bet that a lecture was coming either way he sliced it—it wasn't exactly like he'd been on his best behavior while hitching along that rescue mission. They were likely to have it out and then...

And then what?

*Then it might be over.*

He stopped pacing.

It wasn't the first time he'd thought it, but the punch it landed was always the same. Abrupt, brutal, a fist flying toward his face from out of true nowhere the way nothing else had ever struck. For that was what it had felt like when she'd told him. Spike still bearing the scars of what had ultimately been unimaginative, however agonizing torture, his bones creaking when he bent certain ways, the holes that had been driven through his hands and feet on their way to healing, but covered in skin that was too thin, pink, and tender. She'd sped along the recovery process nicely by volunteering her blood, and he'd been grateful. Less so after he'd sussed out that much had been out of guilt. Something about learning what she'd thought him capable of, what she'd been planning to do, had made the gesture less meaningful. Go bloody figure.

She hadn't wanted to, she'd promised. The thought had been cutting her up. But if it was inevitable, and it had seemed like it might be, then oughtn't she do it now before their relationship became even more serious? Before she had a chance to forget what he was altogether, give him the opportunity to blindside her with the monstrosity that would always be there below the surface, waiting to be let out? At least that was the reasoning Angel had left her with—that Spike was a bloody ticking time bomb she could never fully trust. And she knew it, too, on some level. Otherwise, why would she bother with things like regular reassurances he wasn't getting his eats fresh off the tap? What kind of example was she setting for Dawn if she remained with someone who might one day prove what a mistake it was thinking monsters could be tamed?

It made a sort of terrible sense. A logic he could follow, if only because he knew her and how logic in the world of Buffy worked. In the end, he'd been saved from certain heartache through his ability to

withstand torture and pull his punches, to restrain his inner demon even when cornered by a bunch of holy wankers who fancied putting holes in him. That had demonstrated to her that Angel had been wrong, and wasn't that just swell? A load off. Never mind the bit of gambling Buffy had done, the things she'd been thinking and considering and damn near doing without involving him in the conversation at any point. What consideration was there for the monster whose heart you were about to break?

Spike glanced at the mirror that hung above the dresser, saw the empty room it reflected back. Felt the stir in his gut, in his chest, the anticipation of pain and more than pain. The certainty of what was going to happen tonight, tomorrow, the next day, sometime next week, maybe in a year, maybe longer, but *would* happen, and there was fuck all he could do about it. He could let himself be strung up, could go on rescue missions to save the chum of a man he hated, could be a part of a bloody revolution and come back no worse for wear, but there would always be something missing. Something lacking. And that something was him.

He swallowed back a familiar burn, the sting of tears, then swore and rolled his head back because yeah, he was a pathetic git. It was all he ever had been. And he'd had a good run the last few months—thought he might have actually done some good, too. Not in the grand sense, because he was too deficient to care about that, but for Buffy. He'd been there for her in ways that had made a difference. Been there when her mum died, done his best to do all the things he would have liked himself, back in the day. All the things he'd never gotten because, well, that was the monster again. A crime he'd committed against them both.

But still, despite his woeful lack of capacity and experience, Spike liked to think that he'd made something better for Buffy when the loss had been at its rawest, its freshest, while she'd been in that fog that followed, the upturning of her world into something else, and just when she'd started to breathe freely. That he'd given her enough to not survive it, because she didn't need him for that, but to keep pushing forward. To allow herself some grace while the world reshaped itself around the void Joyce Summers had left behind.

Hopefully she'd remember that when it was all over. Enough not to think she'd been barmy for trying this out at all. Giving him a shot to prove to her that he could love just as well without a soul as others could with one.

Because that's what it came down to, wasn't it? The thing he was missing and would always be missing, unless he decided to hit up the witches for a curse. Or see if any of the legends of soul quests had any merit to them. There was rumored to be a bloke in Uganda that would put seekers through their bloody paces to see if they had what it took to win back a soul they had lost. Even closer was another set of trials he'd heard about, though his source had been Dru so he wasn't sure how reliable that was—something about how *Daddy* had tried to save *grandmum* and hadn't been able because she'd already won her second life and that was why the big bad lawyers had recruited Dru for the job. If neither of those yielded results, he could pursue something even more nebulous—a poker game in Vegas with a bloody big buy-in but Spike hadn't given that one too much thought. If he had to saddle himself with a soul, he'd do it in a way that came down to proving his worth rather than his gambling skills, and *bugger all*, the fact that his thoughts had led him here again just pissed him off.

Not that that was anything new. These things had been living in his head, bloody haunting him, ever since Buffy had confessed the truth. Quietly at first, as he'd done what he could to put all else behind him and pretend that her distrust was reasonable or something other than gut-wrenching. Tried to talk himself into understanding why she'd felt the way she had, why she'd been ready to put an end to everything on a sodding *maybe*. The fact that he knew for certain what would make her understand just how much he loved her and what that love meant—that he could do it, pull it off, turn himself into the sort of person she didn't have to worry about trusting—had smarted as well, because he'd already sacrificed his inner monster. Had already harnessed himself better than any sodding soul ever could simply on the merit of his word, and why the bleeding hell wasn't that enough?

Only, he knew the answer. Of course he did.

So yeah, when Angel had called and told Buffy to jump and she'd asked how high, Spike had decided to go along for the ride. Mostly just

because he didn't think he could stomach the not knowing, but also because it would put him here. In a place where there might be a way to prove to her once and for all what it meant to be loved by him. Just how much of Spike he was willing to give up—what he was willing to do to show her the words, what he felt, that none of it was window dressing. Worse case scenario. The bloody nuclear option—the thing she and Angel and the whole sodding world would have no choice but to accept.

Christ, he never would have thought he'd end up here. Still wasn't sure how that had happened. But at the same time, by the same bloody token, he wondered why he was surprised at all. Why he hadn't seen it as inevitable from the moment Buffy had come into his crypt, shared her plan to expel a hellgod from this world and what it would involve. There was no way he'd ever had a chance of walking out of that unscathed; the fact that he'd been allowed as much of her as he had, gotten this time with her, been at her side, in her bed, in her heart if not in possession of it, was more than a creature like him should dare to hope.

Yet that was who he was and always had been. Someone who bloody dared.

And now he'd be someone who dared to do the impossible. Now as in *now*, before Buffy had a chance to come up here and shatter his heart for good after she finished hearing the piece he knew Angel had to say to her before he let her out of his sight. The next twist of convenient argument that would have her turned around on him again. Angel could make a case against a demon but not against a soul.

Spike sighed, cast another look at the mirror and its empty reflection. Much as he'd like to just throw himself out the bloody window and scale the building to avoid the nonsense downstairs, the part of him that wasn't rubbish at coming up with plans understood that he couldn't well go on a soul quest on an empty stomach. And with time running against him, the best bet was to pilfer the fridge, hope that the blood there was still good, which meant perhaps putting himself in the line of fire before he had his soul to use as a shield. Risky, yeah, but worth that risk just to know he'd succeeded in taking at least one thing from Angel.

And perhaps luck would be on his side just this once. Perhaps he'd go downstairs and find Buffy and Angel too involved with each other to pay him any notice at all.

That was how Spike ever got his way, after all. He had to lose to win.



FOR A GIRL who was about to have an argument with someone whose track record included regularly shattering her heart, Buffy felt oddly calm. She had arrived at the last rush. The final hurdle. Spike might be upstairs stinking up their room with his cigarettes, cursing her and Angel both, furious that she'd lingered behind, believing that when she walked through the door, it would be to end things for good. One more lecture from the great arbiter of her life to sound the death knell in the relationship she'd let him believe they could have. Hurting himself with the possibility of what might be coming.

She'd let that happen and let that happen and let that happen. It would only stop if she stopped.

*So what will it be, Buffy? Are you ready to stop?*

She was more than ready. And the world was about to find out.

"Thanks," Angel said at last. He'd shifted on his feet, the movement both casual and deliberate, so he was angled toward her while still maintaining a distance. "For helping us get Lorne back."

Buffy nodded, all politeness. "Least we could do."

"There we disagree. The least you could do was not bring *him* along."

The fact that she'd seen it coming didn't make it any easier to swallow. "Do we really have to do this again? Hasn't it already all been said?"

"You mean can you waltz in here with your evil boyfriend and expect me to keep my mouth shut? No, turns out you can't."

"Angel—"

"Except I did, Buffy. I kept my mouth shut the entire time we were there."

"That's bullshit." Anger was starting to burn through the calm, an

anger she welcomed. Less uncomfortable than all the other feelings she'd been living with, and definitely something she could mold into a weapon. "Come on, if we're going to do this, let's do it for real. *No* bullshit."

"Just a wonderful influence he's been on you."

"Are you kidding me right now?"

"I am not. You never used to talk like this."

"You're seriously going to lecture me on my language." She might have laughed if she weren't holding in a scream. "You know what? Maybe I was wrong and I don't need to do this."

"Do what?"

"The closure thing."

"Closure."

"Why else do you think I'm down here?"

"I don't know, Buffy. I stopped getting you a long time ago."

"I'm not sure you ever got me," she shot back, her cheeks burning. "But hey. Look on the bright side. We'll both be out of your hair gel by tomorrow night."

Angel rolled his eyes. "Are you going to stop channeling your boyfriend anytime soon? If we *are* going to do this, I'd rather do it you and me."

"It was a joke."

"A joke *he* would make."

"He *is* my boyfriend, Angel. Couples tend to rub off on each other." Something she'd only recently discovered was true for other people, not just her, and damn if that wasn't eye-opening. That while she'd accepted Angel's ideas as her own—mirrored the conclusions he'd reached about their relationship without ever fully understanding them—Angel had never done the same for her, consciously or subconsciously. Her language had never become his language. In fact, she was fairly certain she would have passed out from shock if he'd ever used the word *wiggins*. And the same for Riley—she'd absorbed military terms into her vocabulary and he hadn't been able to separate her from her calling. The most she could say was that being with her had gotten him out of the army, only no, it hadn't. He'd gone right back, and the part of him okay with capturing, exper-

imenting on, and torturing sentient beings had never gone away. It had just gone quiet.

Then there was Spike. Redefining her everything.

"Great," Angel intoned. "Great. Spike's rubbing off on you. What the world absolutely needs is more of that."

Buffy's patience, which had already been teetering, abruptly fell off the ledge. "He showed up, didn't he? And despite all the crap you threw at him, he didn't hesitate in going all in while trying to save *your* friend."

"All the crap *I* threw at him?"

"Don't even pretend like you were on your best behavior. You started sniping at him the second we got here."

"Again, he's the one who chose to come."

"I wanted him to," Buffy shot back. "He's strong, he's reliable, and he has my back. If I'm going into an unknown situation, you're damn right I want Spike with me."

"I just don't get it."

"That much is way clear."

"Not just that, Buffy, I don't get this. And believe me, I've tried."

"Yeah, you're all about the effort-making."

"It's just that after what happened with us," he said, speaking as though she had not, "I never thought you would be this...this careless. The Buffy I know would never try another relationship with a vampire, let alone one as...volatile as Spike. Someone without a soul—"

"Oh good, can we talk about this a lot more? I am really iffy on where you stand on the whole *soul* thing."

"How can you make light of it?" Angel snapped, his eyes flashing. "I don't get you."

"I know you don't, and not just because it's the second time you've said it in the last two minutes." And the umpteenth time he'd said it over the course of their knowing each other, but no sense bringing that up.

"Then—"

"Because I can't keep basing the choices I make in my relationships on what you want for me." Buffy crossed her arms, her heart thumping. She hadn't meant to say that—hadn't meant to say any of it, actually—



but now that it was out, it felt good. Right. The natural culmination of her resentment and uncertainty, the way he'd played on those vulnerabilities and nearly cost her something she knew damn well she didn't want to live without. That she had almost sabotaged herself because of the Angel who lived in her head rather than anything Spike had done to prove his monstrosity.

And that was the crux. Months after the ritual that had convinced her to give Spike a chance, and the obstacles she'd expected to confront, the ones she'd believed wholeheartedly would make themselves known the more she relaxed into the relationship, simply weren't there. In fact, the only obstacles that existed were the ones she'd invented in anticipation of their arrival. That was not lost on her. Nothing was.

"I left you so you could have a normal life," Angel said, his voice low and strained. As though speaking the words cost him something. "Do you have any idea how hard that was for me? It went against... It was the last thing I wanted to do, but it was the right call. The call I had to make in order to give you what you deserved."

"Oh good. More bullshit."

"Buffy—"

"You left because you didn't want to be with me," she retorted, then shrugged at the hurt look he shot at her. "What? It's the truth. If you wanted to be with me, you would have found a way. You would have listened to me when I told you what I wanted. You would have stayed and fought."

"He's convinced you that love is being selfish, then. That's fantastic."

"How? How is it selfish?"

"Because you're more than this." He was animated again—his expression cracking, his anger shining through the way it had only once before to her memory. Only then he'd been furious with her for coming to his town and asserting how great her new life was while balancing the latest in a series of violations committed by someone who had previously shot Angel with an arrow tipped with a very specific and deadly poison. He'd told her to get out, that they weren't supposed to see each other anymore, and had somehow managed to

make her feel like shit for having had the audacity to worry about him in the first place. "You deserve better than to be some vampire's chew toy between apocalypses, and what's more, that's what you wanted. You wanted a life outside of slaying, something more than someone who couldn't go with you into the sunlight. Who—"

"And whose fault is that?"

"What?"

"The whole sunlight thing. I seem to remember sending you something that would've made that section of the What's Best for Buffy speech moot." Buffy took a step forward, her pulse pounding so hard she could feel the beat in her throat. "I sent that to you, but you haven't been using it. Clearly. You were way too happy frolicking in the Pylean sun for someone who's catching plenty of rays on this side of the portal."

He stared at her for a long, hard moment, then swallowed. "I destroyed it."

"You destroyed it."

"Yes."

"Why on earth would you destroy it?"

"Why on earth would you give it to me?"

"That's the first reasonable thing I've heard you ask in over a year, you know that? What the hell was I thinking?" She barked out the sort of hard laugh that made her chest ache. "One moment of happiness and you're an unkillable psychopath who, last chance you got, nearly sucked the world into hell. So yeah, chalk one up to idiot Buffy being an idiot putting Angel first. Kinda like that time I nearly killed a slayer to save your life."

"That's not fair. I didn't ask for that."

"No, and that's the point, isn't it?"

Angel blinked at her. "The point is that with Spike, you have all the reasons it didn't work with us in addition to the reason of *it's Spike*. Evil vampire with impulse control issues who will inevitably cause you pain of some sort. Could you live with yourself if he got someone hurt? Killed? Can you really trust him around your sister or—"

"Stop assuming that Spike is *you*, Angel."

"Well, no, he's very clearly not. And—"

“And that’s why it’s working,” she snapped, her temper reaching critical levels, but the words rushed out and they felt good—hard and righteous—and given the stunned expression on Angel’s face, had landed their punch just as well. “It’s working because he’s *not* you. He doesn’t keep things from me. Doesn’t leave me guessing what he’s thinking or feeling. He’s already as evil as he’s going to get so no worries that I’m going to wake up some morning to a version of him I’ve never met before. He gets me, unlike Riley and as we’ve established, way unlike you. He understands about being the Slayer—”

“And I didn’t?”

“The way Spike does?” The fire in her chest began to rise, scratching along her lungs and up her throat, making her skin burn, but a good burn. A burn that she usually felt on the battlefield, the sort that drove her to victory. “No, you didn’t. It’s not... I’m not *performing* for him when we’re together. I’m just me. All me. With my crazy and my girly stuff and my rambling and I can talk to him about pretty much anything without boring him to death. When I ran out of tampons last month, guess who volunteered to make the emergency run to the store?”

Somehow, she was both surprised and woefully unsurprised when Angel flinched—like yeah, guys didn’t like hearing about periods, but he was a vampire, for crying out loud. Being reminded that she bled once a month should not invoke that reaction. No two vampires were the same, granted, but as Spike was extra invested in when she had her period, confronting the idea that anyone else might not be was just...weird.

But she decided not to dwell. There were other points to make. “He takes me to movies he thinks I’ll like,” she went on. “He’s even started making book recommendations and holy moly, Angel, I like to read. I never knew that. Like actual books, not magazine articles or fashion tips—but *also* magazine articles and fashion tips because why the hell not? But you know what I like to read?”

“What does this have to do with anything?”

“Me. It all has to do with *me*, that’s what. And what I like to read is romance. Guaranteed happy ending where all the bad guys are caught

or stopped and the girls get sex and love and men who understand them.”

“I don’t see what your taste in literature has to do with Spike.”

“Of course you don’t. Because much in the same way you don’t get me, you don’t get Spike, either.” She held up a hand before he could sputter a response. “And that’s why we wouldn’t work. You left because you couldn’t go in the sunlight, because I’d age and you wouldn’t, because we couldn’t be physical—you left for a lot of reasons and you told me they were for me. Maybe even you believed it. I know I did when you said it. But the real reason we won’t work is *this*. It’s you assuming what I should think or believe or do and making me responsible for those assumptions. It’s you deciding what I want without considering or even asking me to weigh in. I’m with Spike because with Spike, I don’t have to be anything but me. Because he asked me to give him a chance to show me what it’s like to be loved by him, and that’s what he’s done. That’s all he’s done every day since I said yes, and the only people who have ever made me doubt this relationship were people who aren’t in it.”

“Don’t do that.”

“What?”

Angel narrowed his eyes. “You have doubts about you and Spike, they’re *your* doubts. If they didn’t exist, there’s nothing I could say that would—”

“Stop.”

“Stop what? Telling you what you already know?”

“No, stop pretending like you had nothing to do with what *you* did to me. That you had no part in making me like this.”

“You can’t keep blaming me, Buffy. At some point, you have to accept responsibility for yourself.”

Buffy’s mouth fell open but the words had been punched out of her, leaving her to gag on air and indignation. It probably only lasted a second or two, but it felt longer—standing there, agog, staring at Angel and willing him to hear the insult, if not the hypocrisy. But if he did, he didn’t let it show, just gazed back at her as though daring her to contradict him.

Despite what he’d put her through, the pain and the heartache and

the guilt and everything else she'd ever felt or thought about him or herself as a result of loving him, Buffy had only truly hated Angel once. It hadn't lasted—had just taken understanding that what she'd walked in on hadn't been what it seemed. That Angel hadn't attacked her mother after she'd invited him into her home, trusted him in her private space. Even fleeting as it had been, though, she remembered the potency of that hate. How it had consumed her inside out, bolstered by her feelings of complicity. The horror that she had allowed it to happen at all, knowing what she knew about the world she lived in. That she'd been manipulated, lied to, that her good faith had been taken for granted hadn't crossed her mind then. Whatever happened to her mom would be her fault, and she could put all her self-hatred on Angel, too. Hope that staking him would help make up for her short-sightedness.

That had been then, though. And what she felt now was not the fury of a child who had been lied to. It was the fury of a woman who had grown up believing that lie, staring down the person who had packaged and sold it in the first place. Made a convincing enough argument that she had let it go unchallenged for years.

Not anymore.

And somehow, when she managed to find her words again, she didn't scream them. She found her calm. "What exactly do I have to take responsibility for?"

"Exactly what I said," Angel replied in his Angel way. "If you have doubts about your relationship, maybe you should stop blaming others for making you face them and ask yourself why they exist in the first place."

"Doubts like what? Like that my vampire boyfriend might hide things from me? Sanitize huge swaths of his past and gloss over others? Or maybe that I'll wake up one day and he'll have decided to get back on the people diet, with an extra side of torture Buffy as a treat." She crossed her arms. "That I'll do something, say something, in a relationship I'm already incredibly insecure about because I'm just a kid and he's had *all* this experience and maybe, sure, I'm not like other girls but I'm also not *not* like other girls. I bleed the same, and when I break, I break the same too. And maybe sometimes I

actually *want* to be like other girls. Just like them, actually. I want to share things that aren't shop talk. Maybe I just want to complain about something boring and normal, and I want the person I'm with not to look like he's bored with me because I'm not always about the next apocalypse."

"You're still doing it. You're still making it about me."

"Because it is about you, Angel. Every thought I've had, every doubt, every time I've wondered when the other shoe will drop with Spike, it's not because of anything he's done or said or made me think he might do—it's because I already lived through it once with you." Buffy stepped forward, not taking her eyes off him. Wanting, *needing* this done. Needing him to understand even a little, despite however much she knew he never would. "I was young with you. Hell, I'm still young, but not so much in slayer years. The things I think to worry about now aren't things I thought of then because I didn't know. Because you made it so I *had* to know. But the thing is, Angel, I've been doing this apples to apples thing with you and Spike when that is supremely unfair to him."

Angel blinked. "To him," he repeated.

"Yes, to him," she said. "See, because you had a soul to lose. Spike doesn't. It was a soul that was forced upon you by magic, and magic? Not the most reliable thing out there. Even Willow, who has gotten pretty damn powerful, still has spectacular flubs. I never thought to ask about your curse, to wonder if it was like every curse in the history of fairy tales in that it could be broken. And yeah, that was my bad. It was also Giles's bad. Most of all, though, it was yours. You had more than a century to learn everything you could about the curse and its conditions—"

"You've got to be kidding me."

"By expecting you to take some responsibility of your own? I can see how you'd feel that way."

"All I *do* is take responsibility, Buffy! That's why I left in the first place. To take responsibility. To *be* responsible. You have no idea what I gave up—"

"You keep saying that."

"Because it's true!" he snapped. "I gave up... God, I gave up

being *human* for you. The chance to be together, really, because I knew that I would get you killed. That you were—”

But that was it. Buffy wasn't listening anymore. She couldn't, not with her ears ringing the way they were. Not with her heart thumping so hard she thought it might burst free of her chest a la Ridley Scott, her blood pounding her temples at a rhythm that made her head feel like it might just give up and cave in on itself.

She didn't know how long it lasted—ten seconds, a minute, five and a half hours—before she flexed her fingers just to reassure herself they were still there, even if they felt distant and numb. Slowly, sound began to filter back through the shrill, take the form of a voice she knew and, at this moment, was pretty sure she hated as it molded around words meant to explain the awful thing he'd just said. Something about blood and a prophecy and he'd been human for a whole day and Buffy had been with him and there had been ice cream but then no, he'd had to take it back for her own good. Another decision made without her knowledge, this time without even her memory of having had the chance to know it was being made. A burden Angel carried all on his own because he was so *responsible*.

And then came another thought—not a new one, not a revelation in the making, but something she'd known for a while now. Something she'd been holding onto, clutching close to her chest, unwilling to let anyone else see, all because it scared the crap out of her. Because *this* was what she was risking in admitting it. The sort of pain that, even if it didn't break her, didn't shatter her, could be felt through the echoes of time regardless. Angel was three years in her rearview window and he could still do this. Still make her feel this. Giving that power to anyone was terrifying in its own right, especially knowing how it had been used before.

But Spike wasn't Angel, and she knew that. Among other things, Spike would never have done this to her.

It was one of the many reasons why she loved him.

Angel was still talking. Or his mouth was moving, at least, so Buffy assumed that meant sound was spilling out of it, but she wasn't paying attention to the shape it took. It didn't matter. None of it mattered. She was through standing here trying to justify herself—of letting him

have this much of her mental real estate, of arguing with him at all. They would never be on even footing so long as she kept adhering to the lines he'd drawn. Kept playing by his rules. Waiting around to have a conversation that honestly, she didn't owe him at all. Owing was something that happened between couples and that stopped when those couples became exes.

The only person she owed right now was upstairs, and she'd let him be there by himself long enough.

So Buffy turned, Angel still in mid-whatever, and started toward the staircase. It took him a few seconds of continued whatevering to notice she was moving away, and then a clipped, "Buffy, we're not finished here," that she figured she only heard because the cadence of the original whatever had been interrupted.

"I am," she replied without slowing down.

"You're not going to say anything?"

"Oh, I'm going to say a lot of things," she retorted, still not breaking her stride. "Just not to you."

"You can't just—"

"And yet here I go. Watch me as I *just*." Buffy did stop once she reached the stairs, though. Not wanting to but figuring this was one of those things she had to do to make sure he understood how over this was. "Let me put this as plainly as possible so there isn't any confusion. I'm done. I'm done with you, with this, with *us*, this play you've been putting on ever since *you* broke up with *me* where I owe you anything for having the foresight to get out of my life before you could do more damage. You were right in the sewer—not for the right reasons, but right overall. I do deserve more than a freakshow. I deserve to be with someone I love who loves me so much he'd put up with all this"—she gestured at the lobby, at him, at the whole everything that encapsulated whatever her relationship with Angel had become—"just because I insisted on a makegood *for you* after I did what was needed to save the world for the thousandth time. And *he* deserves not to be punished because once upon a time, when I was young and very stupid, I fell in love with someone I let control way too much of my life. Spike and I will find somewhere else to sleep tonight. If you have any decency,



you'll let Willow and Tara get the rest they need. We'll be by tomorrow night to pick them up and head home."

And without awaiting a response, without bothering to see exactly how those words landed, Buffy continued up the stairs at a pace. Not breathing until she was on the landing. Not smiling until she had turned a corner.

And doing her best not to gasp in surprise when she crashed, quite literally, into her very stunned boyfriend.

## TRY TO SET THE NIGHT ON FIRE

LISTENING IN ON CONVERSATIONS WAS THE SORT OF THING A soulless creature such as himself would find acceptable, even if that hadn't been what he'd set out to do. The fact that the only reason he'd left their room at all to grab some nosh before setting out on a soul quest was incidental. He'd stopped the second he'd realized that Buffy was having a go at her ex and lingered there, evil prick, and listened as it unfolded.

And Christ, Spike couldn't will himself to be sorry. Not after everything she'd said. Everything he'd heard. Hell, he hadn't even been able to convince his legs to carry him somewhere else as Buffy moved to the staircase. He'd stood stock still, knowing full bloody well she'd turn the corner and run right into him, that she'd know he knew, knew everything, and as much fun as it would have been to watch her try to say it all over again, that wasn't them and it never had been. They had gotten this far being honest, hadn't they? Even when it would've been easier, less painful, to swallow down truths or pretend those truths didn't exist.

Buffy loved him. She'd said it—he'd heard her say it. She loved him and he didn't want to pretend he didn't know. Or hell, that he was anyone other than the exact sort of bloke that would stop and soak in

the soundtrack of the woman he loved taking the mickey out of Angel's righteous arse. Especially now, practically vibrating as he was with a renewed sense of being and purpose. Gone was the anger and resentment; gone was the bloody certainty that he should sacrifice what was left of himself out of a means of avoiding heartbreak. Now, Spike felt faintly like he had detached from his body. That his feet were just barely skimming the floor of the hallway, his head blessedly absent the pressure that had been building steadily ever since Buffy had told him about Angel's cemetery-side visit.

And she was staring at him and he was staring at her, his ears ringing with the thundering of her heart and the rush of her pulse, Buffy on full display for him as she never had been. All cards on the table, all secrets out, true equals at last.

Spike had no concept of how long they stood like that, staring each other down, listening, waiting, but finally Buffy moved. Tried for a smile, nervous and sweet and so full he thought he might just start sobbing like an infant.

"So," she said hoarsely, that grin still in place, "how much of that did you hear?"

"How much do you want to say again?"

"All of it, then? You heard all of it?"

Christ, she was nervous. Buffy was *nervous*, and she never had been before. Not because of him. Not even when she'd stormed into his crypt all those months ago to ask him to shag her out of an apocalypse. She'd been indignant, brassed, all but daring him to run his mouth—which, of course, he had—but not nervous. Just resigned to do whatever was needed in order to secure her win. To save the day. Be the hero.

She was nervous now, though, and the only reason he could fathom was because she knew he knew that she loved him.

"Didn't plan on it," he replied softly, speaking the way he had once to a horse he'd been told spooked easily. "Was popping down for a bite, actually. Then I heard you two and, well..." He swallowed, considered, then decided *fuck it* and hazarded a step forward. "Not sorry, if that's what you're waiting for."

"I'm not. I can't..." Buffy licked her lips and—with difficulty, it

seemed—glanced down. “Sorry, my brain is going *abbb*, like, all over the place right now. I should’ve guessed you’d be up here waiting for me after that, but I didn’t because, well. *Abbb* brain. And... god, Spike, there’s just so much I need to—”

But that was as far as she got—as far as he could let her get, anyway. At least for now. There were things to say and things to hear and things to know, but right then, all that mattered to him was being with her in this moment. Fighting the doubt away from her face, the tension from her body, and doing whatever he needed to assure her that he wouldn’t take anything for granted. Not her, not what she’d said downstairs, and certainly not the fact that she’d said it. He’d been ready to seek out a soul for her and as it turned out, she’d had it all along.

So he took her face in his hands and brought her up to him, swallowing her words, her doubts, taking all of that into him and hoping, bloody hoping, that she understood. That she felt it in the strokes of his mouth, tasted it on his tongue, surely as he tasted it on hers.

And either he’d done something very right or Buffy just needed an out, for the next second, she was all but crawling over him, melting into him, against his chest, chasing kisses, doing what she could to consume him whole, and he was very okay being consumed. She tasted of sunshine and sweat, of wild berries and Pylean rain, and most of all like the Slayer. Like Buffy. The woman he loved who, *god yes*, loved him back. Who was trembling and doing her bloody best not to cry, which was making it almost impossible for him not to, and then they were moving. Stumbling back on legs that were somehow both sure and unsteady, into the room that had been theirs since they’d arrived in Los Angeles.

“I told him we were leaving,” Buffy whispered in a frenzy against his lips, shoving Spike’s duster off his shoulders so that it puddled to the floor behind him. “That’s what I was coming up here to do—get you so we can leave.”

“Well, you got me,” Spike replied, tugging her shirt over her head. It was a little worse for wear, given what it had been through the last few days, but he wagered it’d go down as one of his favorites. The

thing she'd been wearing when she'd said she loved him. "And we're on our way out."

"Are we?" Buffy reached behind her to unsnap her bra before bloody well attacking his belt with a fury, fumbling over the leather while he stripped off his tee and still fumbling, his Slayer, his Buffy, with her shaking warrior's hands, stumbling into him when he shifted to kick off his boots, cursing and laughing and then giving up to kiss him and keep kissing him, and he loved her so much it almost hurt, the sensation stretching his chest. Like being so full of that love would make him burst from the inside, pierce through his skin until he was nothing left but a pillar of light. Only it would be hers—her light. The light she had given him, the light she made possible.

"Is this a new belt?" she asked a moment later, her voice somewhere between a laugh and a snarl as her fingers continued to miss the landing. "Does it not work like other belts? Is it Pylean? Do they do belts differently than we do?"

Spike laughed. She was too bloody cute when frustrated. "Same belt as always, love."

"I refuse to believe that."

"Fuck, I love you."

"Spike." His name came out as two distinct syllables, separated by a whine. "Less with the loving and more with the helping so we can get to the loving."

"Someone's eager."

"Are you not someone?" Buffy raised her eyes to his, arching one of those perfect eyebrows, then ran her hand down along the length of his cock, teasing him through the denim, and suddenly nothing was funny anymore. Suddenly, Spike felt every second of the last few days in that other world—hell, and the few weeks before that, when she'd cracked his heart with her little confession—and he realized it had been long, too fucking long, since he'd touched her without pretense or guard or anything other than the simple joy of touching her. And yeah, put like that, he was more than eager. He was bloody well starved.

"Bugger it," he cursed, batting her hands away. Worried for a second that his own would have the same problem, and then they'd be

a pair—vampire and slayer alike, done in by a bloody belt—but no, thank god, he knew how to do this, and then the thing was off. Off and tossed to some far recess of the room for Angel to find, maybe, if karma was a thing that actually existed in this world. Then they were fighting with his jeans until he was hopping on one foot, completely undignified, in the loose direction of the bed but ended up pressed against the dresser instead—the one he'd nearly kicked less than a half hour ago and how was that? How had his life changed so radically so fast? And when would he stop being surprised when she did just that, swirled in with cyclone fury to up-end everything he thought he knew?

Never, he hoped, as Buffy boxed him where she wanted him, her hands braced at his sides. Fuck, he hoped she never stopped doing this—making him crazy, making him whimper, making him hers over and over again, in ways new and familiar. Words and action and all else combined. In the way she kissed him, the sounds she rumbled while she kissed him, while she took and gave and fought and surrendered all in one go, making him struggle to keep up with her where he'd never struggled before. But that was them all over, wasn't it? Buffy in the lead, challenging him in ways he hadn't realized he could still be challenged until he'd met her. And, he thought as he seized her hips to flip her around, position himself between her legs, feel her slick heat teasing his cock as he rubbed and stroked and did his bloody damndest to drive them both out of their heads, that was what made them work. What made them make *sense* when they shouldn't. He hadn't lost sight of how buggered all this was, hadn't lost a damn thing, but he'd given up trying to parse it through because they were beyond explanation. They were legends, both of them, and legends didn't need to explain themselves. Legends simply were.

"Spike," his glorious legend whispered against his lips now, making a prayer out of his name as she locked her ankles around his waist to bring him into her. "Tease later. Want now."

He grinned and kissed her, reaching between them to take hold of his cock. "But I like teasing you," he replied, dragging the head along her soaked folds, feeling her heat and her fire and her need all in one. "Like the way you feel. How you tremble."

She pulled him in tighter, or tried, and whimpered when his dick

slid along her slit. Nudging her the way she liked and loathed being nudged, for it was never enough. “I don’t tremble,” she argued, clearly trembling. “Just fucking fuck me, already.”

“So naughty. Who taught you to talk like that?” He smirked at her scowl, then dipped his head to nibble at her lower lip and groaned when she responded in kind. There was nothing quite like being bitten by the Slayer, especially while she was wet and wriggling and desperate for your cock. Especially when you knew she loved you.

And at that, the memory of that perfect confession reverberating through the hotel’s airy acoustics, the swell of something beyond words, beyond bliss or relief or sodding exultation, he was done teasing. He needed to feel her, this girl who loved him, who had argued her freedom away from someone who had been a captor to them both. Spike dragged his dick back down until he was there, pressing into her where she was hottest, and letting that heat swallow him whole. An inferno of her, clamping and squeezing and dragging him in deeper, and she was trembling harder now, but a good tremble, and it was okay because he was, too. He was lost and found and hers all at once, and for the first time—the first true time—he knew he wasn’t alone in that.

He wasn’t alone at all.

Spike released a breath that shook more than he wanted to admit, pressed his brow to hers and drank her in. “Being inside of you is a revelation.”

Buffy slid her hands up his arms, scratched along the back of his neck as she brought them together. “Can it be a fast revelation this time?” she asked, wiggling her hips a bit and working those muscles she knew drove him out of his head. “Slow revelation later?”

“Was hoping you’d say that.” He took her mouth as he started to move, but broke away just as quickly, for he hadn’t been kidding—the way he felt, he wouldn’t be able to hold onto her for long. So instead he buried his face against her shoulder and found the rhythm he wanted, let himself sink into sensation, into the decadence that was her pussy wrapped around him, the sounds she made, the sounds they made together, and the way they reverberated across his skin. The jostle of the dresser, subtle at first but not for long, then thumping hard against

the wall at its back in time with the wet slap of flesh striking flesh, the mirror shifting in and out of focus, and there she was. Buffy with her head thrown back. Buffy panting at the ceiling, entangled around nothing at all but not nothing for even if the reflection was empty, she wasn't. She was full. Full of him. He was the one doing that to her, the one brushing her hair from her face and cupping her cheeks and making her mewl so loud there was no way the whole bloody block didn't hear it. He was the one she loved and even if she hadn't said it to him, even if he'd only overheard it when he oughtn't, he felt it all the same. In the fact that she was up here, that she was with him, that he was inside of her, that she was clawing at his arms as though to anchor herself home. The home she'd chosen.

And then more of those sounds, those little twists of syllables that were words but not. Buffy pulling him closer so he was flush against her, letting his mouth wander the curve of her exquisite neck, over the place where he'd twice tasted her now, the scars that were so much more than scars. Letting him coat his lips and tongue in the sweet, hot salt of her sweat, driving into her with enough force to hurt and bloody well demanding he give her more.

Her hands were in his hair, tangling through locks untamed by gel, making his scalp tingle and his balls tighten, and he wanted more. Wanted everything. Buffy scratching at him, stealing little bites across whatever skin she could reach, her pussy vising around his cock at a rhythm, as though she was as desperate to keep him as he was desperate to be kept, and he was swimming in it, swimming in her, and everything was perfect because she was here, because she was with him, because she had chosen him after all. She had chosen this.

"Spike," Buffy whimpered into his ear, her hot breath making him shiver. "I need..."

"I know what you need, baby," he rumbled in response, and slipped a hand between their warring bodies, pulling back just enough to admire the view. Her cunt swallowing his juice-slick prick, her sweet clit hard and pink and waiting for him. "Spike'll take care of you."

"That's not..." She rolled her head back, releasing another whimper that turned into a hiss the second his fingers slid over her. "I need...to say it."



Spike whipped his gaze to face, would have sworn his dead heart jostled. "Say what?"

But he knew. He knew and he didn't. Felt it there in the air between them, which seemed to pulse with its own anticipation. He hadn't expected this—even after hearing what he'd heard, the idea of Buffy's love being given to him, a thing he could know for himself absent of anyone else, touch and hold and have with his own hands, had seemed distant. Just knowing it existed, that she felt it, that she had embraced it rather than run from it, was more than he could have ever hoped. And maybe it wasn't that, but he knew it was. Her eyes were dark and full, and she was looking at him as she never had, slick and sweet and warrior and girl all rolled into one.

Then she parted her lips again, and her words washed over him.

"I love you. I love you, Spike. I—"

He choked out a sob and bloody burst, both in his chest and inside of her, everything in him burning with something more than pleasure or ecstasy, a whole new sodding stratosphere of light. A sound unlike any he'd ever heard himself make scratched free of his throat as he dropped his head, finding her shoulder once more. His eyes stinging and his chest tight and her arms were around him, and she was hugging him to her, letting him feel the cadence of her heart against his breastbone, and saying it again. Saying it like a prayer, the same way she'd said his name before. Filling the air with that, with her love, and nothing but that.

"Fuck," he said at last, the word riding out on a laugh. "Sorry."

"Sorry isn't exactly the thing a girl wants to hear at a time like this," she teased, tickling her fingers along the back of his neck. "Why are you sorry?"

"Wager you expect more from the bloke who lasted an hour without popping his top."

"Actually, I think I'm going to put it on my resume."

Spike chuckled, nudging her brow with his once more. "Nothing more powerful than your love, Slayer," he murmured, and leaned in for a kiss. But she was too fast for him, pulling back, blinking in that doe-eyed innocent way that completely unmade him.

"You... Did you just come because I said I love you?"

There it was again. He groaned low in his throat, his cock nearly returned to full mast. "Looks like."

"Oh my god."

He peeked an eye open. "Bad?"

"No. Just...oh my god, Spike, really?"

"Are you really surprised?"

"I just..." She blinked some more, her eyes taking on a watery sheen, and he didn't want that. Not now. There would be time enough to talk about all this later—all the time in the world, it seemed—and she was still hot and pulsing around him, and that wasn't something a man took for granted. So, after pressing a kiss to her lips, he pulled back, slipped out of her, and was on his knees almost before she seemed to realize that he had moved at all.

"Spike—"

"Only thing that tastes better than you, Slayer, is *us* together," he whispered, fitting one of her legs over his shoulder. "Don't mind, do you?"

"Oh god."

"And if you feel the need to hold onto anything..." He took one of her hands and placed it on his head, then winked at her, the picture she presented. Looking down at him, breathing hard, her breasts slick, her hair tumbling around her shoulders, her eyes wide and her lips parted, and then her cunt, all pink and wet and swollen, dripping with him and her alike. And he hadn't been lying—tasting himself inside of her was one of his favorite things, and he was in a mood to indulge.

She gave another little "Oh god!" as he began to lick. Soft, exploratory laps at first, then bolder, hungrier, up and along her slit, then inside of her, deep and thrusting and drinking her into him, their combined flavors bursting inside his mouth, down his throat. He didn't waste much time teasing, his cock was throbbing again, hard enough that he might not have believed he'd just blown his load if he didn't have it on his lips. And Buffy did hold on, seized him by the hair and pulled hard enough to hurt, making him moan, making him rumble, and making her scream. He fucked and sucked and licked and slurped and she trembled and gasped and bloody well rubbed his face into her pussy, begging him—sweetly at first, then not so sweetly—to give her

what he knew she wanted. To touch her, lick her, in the way that would have her tumbling in earnest. And he would, of course. He'd give her anything she wanted. Everything.

"I've got you," he told her, dragging his mouth from her opening to her clit as he filled her with his fingers. Wrist-up so he could press against that spot that made her go wild, and he was licking and rubbing at the same time. His face drenched, his hand coated in her, and her clit between his lips, under his tongue, and Buffy's voice, hoarse and raw, filling in the air at a volume that was both music and too much for his sensitive ears. A cry to disturb the sodding dead, or in his case, bring them back to life entirely. And she was spasming and wiggling and clutching at him hard enough to hurt, needing to feel that, feel her, more than anything in the world, Spike rose back to his feet, took his cock in hand, and thrust inside her just in time to enjoy the last of the waves. But that wasn't enough, and thank fuck it wasn't for her, either, for she was clutching at him tightly the next instant. Clasp him by the face and kissing his Buffy-smeared lips and whimpering anew, either at the sensation or the taste or him or all of it, and neither of them would last long like this, which was just fine as they didn't need to. They already had lasted where it counted.

Still, he was a selfish sort of bloke, and he wanted badly to feel her clench and lose herself on his cock, and decided to gamble it. Slide his hand between them again, see if she was too sensitive to be stroked, see if he could get her there anyway, for sometimes she liked it when it was too much. When she was a bloody live wire that jumped under the softest caress. But before he could give her clit a soft, experimental nudge, Buffy had her hands around his neck and was tugging him down, kissing reason right off his lips but not stopping there. Not stopping until his mouth was over that perfect patch of scarred skin that he'd claimed before, until he felt her blood as well as heard it, the rush humming against his lips and making his fangs ache and his balls tighten and everything amplified.

And despite this, despite everything, despite the need pounding through his own veins, the instant hunger, the bits of him that were monster through and through, the man nothing but a pleasant thought, he found the strength to choke out her name. "Buffy."

"I want it," she told him, locking her ankles at his arse again, as though to prevent him from tearing away. "I want it, Spike."

"But..."

But he didn't even know what he meant to say, pleasure and desire running roughshod through his head, determined to chase hesitation aside in favor of instinct. *But* they didn't do this, unless there was a spell that needed an ingredient. Or a vampire who needed healing. *But* this was too much, too great, too perfect for the likes of him. *But* she had nothing to prove. *But* he understood already.

In the end, none of that came out. The only thing that came out was his fangs, bursting into his mouth, and then into her, and then she was screaming for real. Screaming with a mind to shake the walls to dust, crumble the floor and structure down to its foundation, and her pussy was fisting him into new life and her blood was in his mouth and she was still screaming, the best bloody scream he'd ever heard, and he was a bomb, and he was exploding, filling and taking, and she had her hands in his hair again, her mouth at his ear, and she was saying something. Words. His name. Perhaps nothing at all, just falling apart with him, pulsing and pure and Buffy, and it was the best moment of his life. Buffy tangled around him, sobbing and loving him, trusting him to catch her when she fell.

He did, of course, even if it meant falling ahead of her. That was the thing. If Buffy fell, he fell, too. Odds were he had been from the start. A never-ending state of freefall, so he was always there when she landed.

"Say it again," he whispered when it was over, when they were cuddled on the floor, a messy tangle of parts that was neither her nor him but *them*. Her sweat his sweat. Her blood his blood.

Buffy lifted her head from where it had fallen against his shoulder, found his eyes without blinking, and gave him a dopey, happy smile that would have stolen his soul had he had it on him. How beautiful she looked like that. Flush and bright and alive, his bite mark stark against her skin.

"I love you," she said, and kissed him. "And I love that hearing it makes you come."

Spike barked a laugh at that, reclined his head against the floor.  
“Think I’ll have more control next time. Be expectin’ it.”

“Is that a challenge?”

“Oh god, yes.”

Buffy snickered and began nibbling along his jaw. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

## STOP AND SMELL THE SMOKE

IT TOOK BUFFY AN EMBARRASSINGLY LONG TIME TO REALIZE SHE AND Spike were probably not, actually, going anywhere that night. Almost as long as it took her to realize just how gross she probably was, having spent the last few days in pre-indoor plumbing land. Her plans for seducing her boyfriend had been in the early development stages as she'd made her way upstairs to fulfill her promise of a dramatic exit, but they had definitely included a shower, a chance to shave her legs, brush her teeth, and look like something other than Jane of the Jungle by the time she pushed him into bed. As it was, she'd still been in the same clothes she'd been wearing since before they'd left, and considering all the places his mouth had gone since then, well, maybe she was better off *not* thinking about it, otherwise she might become the definition of self-conscious.

Not that Spike seemed to mind. Or hell, notice, which she would definitely be grilling him over when LA and Pylea were distant enough in the past to feel less like an errand and more like the closest thing to a vacation she was likely to ever get. Of course, for every finger she pointed at him, she had three pointed right back at herself, even if the vampire equivalent of roughing it didn't leave said vampires in nearly as stinky state as it did humans. Not being able to sweat was a compelling

sales pitch in the undead arsenal. Like, she wasn't and would never be tempted, but there had been times over the last few days, particularly when bathing had been a thing done in creeks and rivers, where she'd been able to concede that particular attribute as one that almost made the whole blood-drinking-monster thing worth it. Throw in lack of morning breath and yeah, humanity had definitely been handed the fuzzy end of the bodily function lollipop.

By the time Buffy successfully extricated herself from the sex vortex that had apparently opened up in the center of the room, she was aching in new and exciting ways and probably filthier than she had ever been in her life, and that counted that one time she'd been covered in innards after killing the momma of the egg creatures that had turned her classmates into pod people. She wasn't surprised when Spike followed her into the bathroom, or when he invited himself along to her shower, but she did slap his hand when he started to reach for her in a way that would not promote cleanliness.

"What?" he asked, grinning. "Though I'd help you with those hard-to-reach spots."

"You know what you were doing."

"And you knew I was gonna do it. Could've stopped me from following you in but you didn't."

He had her there, and she knew it, so she didn't try to summon a counterargument. The truth was that despite the fact that all her intentions had gone to hell the second she'd stepped into that hallway, this wasn't the sort of hell she minded. Actually, of all the hells out there—and she had it on good authority that it wasn't a conservative number—her intentions-hell might be the best. The strain, the awkwardness, the tension she'd let live between them since she'd unburdened herself had been a slow-moving poison, one she felt she could only see clearly now that she'd doused it in antidote. All it had taken was...well, a cross-dimensional road trip and observing what her own reticence had wrought. What it had been on the verge of claiming for good.

So Buffy didn't mind at all when Spike gathered her in his arms and pressed her against the shower wall, kissing her and stroking her and entering her, bracing his hands under her hips, fucking her slowly at

first, then not-so-slowly, then leaving *slowly* behind in the dust and pounding into her so hard the shower tiles imprinted on her wet skin. All the while muttering all the things he always made sure to tell her. How good she felt, how hot she was, how wet, how she squeezed and teased and commanded, how he was hers, all hers, how he loved her. And even though she was definitely sore and more than a little light-headed, she tugged his head back to her neck, back to the still-tingling place his fangs had opened up, and she didn't have to ask this time. He knew. He licked. He praised. He bit. And she hit the stratosphere.

Things after that became a little murky. The next thing Buffy was aware of was being in bed, draped in clothes that she didn't remember packing, and Spike beside her, wearing jeans and nothing else, a glass of orange juice in one hand and a pack of Oreos in the other.

"What happened?" she asked hoarsely, fighting against her protesting muscles to sit up. "Where'd you get all that?"

"Went a little faint on me," Spike replied, smiling in a way that told her he'd been more worried than he wanted to let on. "Took it as a compliment. Always wanted to shag you so good you blacked out."

Buffy frowned and, without thinking, reached up to rub along her neck. It was warm to the touch, not to mention tender. And also made parts of her that were still waking up instantly alert. "Oh."

He sat on the edge of the bed, handed her the Oreos. "Don't know much about this, except you're supposed to eat after blood loss. Think I heard that somewhere."

"It wasn't that much blood loss."

"Twice in one day's a bit much, even for you, love."

She arched an eyebrow at that, hesitated, then ultimately decided it probably wasn't worth arguing over. Also, she could eat. There had been a feast of sorts before they'd departed Pylea, but she'd missed living in a world with butter and spice. And while Oreos might not be the dinner of champions she'd choose for herself, she couldn't deny they sounded good. "All right," she said, handing the Oreos back to him before swinging her legs over the side of the bed. "Except you need to learn how to cookie. Milk, not orange juice."

"Where are you going?" Spike asked, all wide-eyed and alarmed.

"Well, I know it's just the one night, and you wouldn't kick me out,



but I'd really prefer not to sleep on a crumby mattress." She blinked at him as he stared at her. "You know, for eating cookies in bed?"

"What's that?"

"You've never heard that saying? Sometimes it's crackers. Does it make more sense with crackers?" Buffy waited a beat, then snorted when the look on his face didn't clear up. "Nice to know that even though you're way ancient, there are things I know that you don't." She rose to her feet and started to make her way toward the table and chairs set up. Perk of this being a hotel—there was all kinds of furniture.

She didn't get far, though. "Spike? Why is the carpet wet? And...twinkly?"

Spike followed her gaze and snorted, the confusion and concern on his face being edged out by an unmistakable grin. "Seems there was one of those globe what's-its in the dresser," he said, and yeah, he was definitely amused. "We knocked it around a bit. Started to leak."

It took a moment for the pieces in Buffy's mind to align. "A snow globe?"

Spike ignored her, though. Apparently not even glittery carpet could distract him from being all mother hen when he put his mind to it. "Come on, Slayer, if you mean to sit, then bloody sit. And eat something, for god's sake."

Buffy rolled her eyes but nodded, strode the rest of the way to the table, and helped herself into one of the chairs. No sooner had she sat than Spike was hovering over her, peeling open the Oreos before pushing the package over to her.

"I still say orange juice and Oreos don't go together."

"I'll keep that in mind the next time you go all damsel on me."

"I did not go all damsel."

Spike gave her a narrow look that served as argument aplenty, then sank into his own seat. He didn't relax until she'd dutifully plucked a cookie from the tray and taken a nibble.

"So...snow globe?" Buffy glanced pointedly to the spot on the carpet. "Explain."

At that, the lines in his face relaxed again. "Reckon it's a safe bet Angel didn't do more than poke through these rooms before he and his

lot moved in,” Spike said, the laugh in his voice intensifying without breaking. “Lots of rot got left behind by past tenants and the like.”

“Why are you so giggly?”

At that, he raised his dancing eyes to hers. “You know he heard everything, right?”

Buffy could have played dumb but decided not to. She, in fact, had suspected that their sexcapades had been of the loud but had also tried very hard not to think about it—not only because of the ick factor, but also because she just didn’t want Angel taking up space in her relationship anymore, and worrying about what he might have overheard when it was none of his business certainly counted. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Just seems like just desserts, is all.” Spike was full-on grinning now. “He can scrub this room top to bottom all he fancies to get the stink of us outta here, but that?” He pointed at the decidedly glittery floor. “That’s gonna be there for a long bloody time. And he’ll know why.”

*Oh god.* Buffy looked down again, horror and humor wrestling it out. Done with Angel as she was, she understood there was a difference between saying goodbye and being a brat about the fact that she had moved on. Or maybe that was all in her head, there because she thought it should be rather than because it actually was. She *should be* a mature adult-type person who scolded her decidedly immature vampire boyfriend for his pettiness, but, well, Angel had said that Spike had rubbed off on her, and she couldn’t deny that was true.

Also, the thought of Angel wandering in here, even years down the line, and catching even the mildest hint of a twinkle, all the while knowing what put it there, was kind of karmically perfect after the absolute shit-show of the last few days. Or months. Or years.

“Maybe we can have Willow and Tara do some... I don’t know, anti-glitter spell,” she said in an effort to be the mature adult-type person.

“Would be a trip, especially if Red’s mojo went wonky in the doing. Maybe turn the whole bloody room into a disco ball.” Spike grinned for a second, clearly relishing the thought, before eyeing the still-untouched helping of OJ. “Slayer, drink up.”

Buffy wrinkled her nose but reached for the glass anyway. It was easier than arguing.

Easier than talking, too. Too bad there was no getting around that.

Or rather, there was. She just didn't want there to be. He would let her get away with pretty much anything, including the last few weeks, and while there was comfort in that, there was imbalance too. Imbalance that she didn't want, no matter how uneasy addressing it felt, because imbalance was ultimately what had led to Riley taking a hike. Not the same sort of imbalance, sure, but still there. Still all...out of balance. And beyond the mistakes of relationships past, Buffy just didn't want that with Spike. She remembered all too well what it had felt like being the one always on edge when the players had been her and Angel, and that was not something she would wish upon anyone, especially not the man she loved.

And to that end, there were things she had to say—things she owed it to him to say, that he needed to hear, even if he already knew the most important thing. Things that would be hard for her to get out because talking about her feelings was a skill she'd lost two heartbreaks ago.

But Spike wasn't Angel in any respect. If she gave this part of herself to him, he would treasure it.

"I'm sorry," she said before her nerves could overpower her will. "About...well, everything."

Spike raised his gaze to her, not quick enough to hide his surprise. "Huss'at?"

"You know what I mean." Buffy bit the inside of her cheek. That wasn't good enough. "I'm not good at this. Any of it."

At that, the corner of his mouth quirked, and some of that playfulness she loved so much leaked into his eyes. "Dunno. Seemed all right when you were screamin' it at His Forehighness."

"Well, I don't want to have to be someone who only says things that matter when screaming. Every big conversation Riley and I had about us was because we were fighting."

"And so will we if you compare me to Captain Cardboard again."

"I'm not comparing you."

"Or try to fall on the sword for that wanker."

Buffy blew out a breath, her nerves fading in favor of different nerves. Nerves that were used to being triggered when Spike was in

the vicinity, talking. "I mean it," she said. "We've been in this...I don't know...trial period since the spell, right?"

He blinked, frowning now. "It was never a trial," he said, not bothering to disguise the hurt in his voice. "Not for me."

"I know. But..."

"It was for you."

Buffy licked her lips, her eyes suddenly hot and prickly, her mind and heart screaming at her to pull the emergency brake, backtrack, change the subject. "I didn't know how I felt," she said hoarsely. "Spike, this...*everything*... It was scary. And big. And scary. You wanted a chance and that's...that's all I could get my head around then. I don't think that's news to you."

Spike didn't answer for a moment, just sat there, staring at her with those eyes that always seemed to read her more than they saw her—like she was a book he'd reached for so many times the spine had cracked. That his favorite pages were dog-eared, the passages he found most relevant underlined or highlighted, and the margins were full of notes he'd taken in an effort to thoroughly understand the material so that he didn't see the cover anymore at all. She was the sum of the inside, not the out.

Finally, though, he broke his gaze from hers and jerked his chin in a nod, which he immediately followed up with a firm shake of the head. "I knew it, yeah," he said, not trying to disguise the edge in his voice. "At the start. But it's been a minute since the start, hasn't it? Reckoned we'd become more than a sodding test run."

Her chest lurched. "We did—we are."

"Yeah? Seems you need to get your story straight, Slayer."

"I know—I know what I said was... I didn't mean it like that."

"Like what?"

"Like...how it sounded." Great, now her temples were starting to pound. "Or god, maybe I did. We just never talked about it—*that's* what I'm trying to say. We did the spell and after that, we... I showed up and I told you I wanted to try and that maybe it would work and maybe it wouldn't, that we would define it later. But we never did define it. We just kept on going. And that was fine with me because then I didn't have to think about it. It wasn't...really real." She

cringed and lurched forward, dropping her head in her hands, not wanting to see how those words landed because if it was at all like how they sounded, then they had to cut deep. “*God*, that came out wrong. I just mean that really real relationships and Buffy have been the opposite of mixy. Real could hurt me. Real *does* hurt me. I’ve never not been in a real relationship that didn’t end with hurt, and I didn’t want us to hurt. Whatever happened—and I’m not saying it’s right or good or that it makes sense, because we *are* real, Spike, we’re so real, but the longer I put it off, the longer I felt safe from that hurt. Like if I never followed-up on what I told you when I came to see you that night, then I could hide in what I said then and pretend that it wasn’t as bad when it went wrong.”

Buffy paused, breathing hard, still not looking up but knowing she needed to, at least, give him a chance to throw a few names her way. Maybe all the names. Find some barbs that would cut especially deep, as was his specialty, and hurl them where she was softest, most vulnerable. Make her bleed without bleeding.

Except he didn’t. He didn’t say a thing, didn’t move, didn’t even breathe. And that was worse.

But she had to keep going.

“So because I was a scaredy Buffy, I kept us in this...place. And then Angel showed up after Mom died, and losing her was terrible. More than terrible. It hurt so much—hurt like I didn’t think I could hurt. And Angel... What he said was wrong, but it scared me. Not so much the *you* part as the thought of having to lose again. Lose someone I love.” Her throat grew tight, dry, and she forced down a swallow. The weight of his gaze was a physical thing, one with a gravity all its own that she knew she wouldn’t be able to resist much longer. “So yeah, I thought it might be good to walk away while the hurt would be less. When I thought I could get through it without it just... But then the knights came. And you were gone. And I realized... It took me about half a second to realize that the whole hurt thing? Too late. The only way to avoid it would’ve been to have never tried.”

There was a beat. Then another, the silence between them fast becoming oppressive in a way that made the echo of her own words seem feeble and hollow. Like there was an explanation out there good

enough to justify what she knew had been a hellish few weeks for him, and an even more hellish last few days. Still, Buffy didn't know what else to say. Not right then, at least, and she was pretty sure rambling wouldn't do her any favors. So she waited. And stared at the table. And thought about eating another Oreo, but also afraid to move. Afraid of the other side of this silence.

And when Spike finally shifted in his seat, she thought her heart might catapult out of her chest.

"I thought it was what he told you that did it," he said softly. "The bit about not bein' able to trust me, and all else you threw back at him down there."

Buffy steeled herself then raised her eyes to his again. "It was that, too. That was the part that made me worry about the eventual bad. How much... But then the knights—"

He held up a hand, his expression annoyingly unreadable. Her walking mood ring had closed up shop. "I know this story, love. Did a bit of heroics and spared myself from being shunted to the sodding curb. Least those wankers had good timing, eh?"

It was no less than what she deserved, but it still hurt to hear. Hurt even more knowing the hurt she had caused in all this. Hurt that Spike definitely didn't deserve.

"I meant what I said," she whispered, lacking anything else. "I'm in love with you. I have been since then. *Before* then. Before Mom died. Hell, probably before I even came over that night to tell you I wanted to give us a try. That's when she said it. I was getting ready to go hang out with the gang at the Bronze and she came in and... Well. She said it then, that she thought maybe I was in love. And she was right. I didn't know it until the knights, but she was right."

There was more she wanted to say, more just waiting to spill from her lips now that she had finally started, all of it desperate and probably more than a little selfish. Regardless of what she'd felt and when, it had been her own issues that had led them to this particular place. Trying to talk Spike out of feeling whatever he was feeling as a result wasn't fair to him, and she was done not being fair. All she could do was give him the truth and hope that was enough.

"Past little bit, I've felt it," Spike said at last, his voice low and

even. “The trial bit. Felt it in ways I hadn’t since you showed up to sweep me off my feet.”

A white-hot pain lanced across her chest, radiated upward until it was pressing at the backs of her eyes, threatening to spill down her cheeks. “I’m sorry. That was... I never should’ve let that happen.”

“Wasn’t just on you though, was it? Could’ve pressed the issue myself if I wasn’t so bloody terrified of losing you.”

Buffy released one of those chest-rattling breaths. “I hid behind that.”

“I know you did.” A beat. “Told you when you came upstairs that I was on my way to find some nosh because I was peckish, and I was aimin’ to pilfer any blood Gramps had on ice.”

She frowned when he didn’t continue. “Was that...not true?”

“It was mostly true.”

“Define mostly.”

Spike held her gaze for a long moment, then slid his own away. “Heard a rumor there might be a place in town a fella could go if he aimed to win something of real value.”

Her heart started hammering again, her pulse making her temples pound. “You were going to try to *win* me? Like with magic?”

“Balls.” He rolled his eyes and, the next second, was on his feet, shaking his head hard. His *I can’t fucking believe you* head shake. “You think that? Really? Think that I’d want some bloody wrap-up prize that has your face? That if it was as easy as going to a warlock or what all to get you to bloody see me—”

“Spike, I don’t know what I think. You just said you were going to go try to win something—”

“Yeah, Slayer,” he snapped, whirling back around to glare at her, his nostrils flared, his everything flared, as though she had lit him on fire from the inside. “*My soul*. That’s what I was out to win. My own stupid, sodding soul so that you would see—would finally see what I’ve apparently been absolute rubbish at trying to tell you these last months. Can’t even give me that, can you? Make your big bloody apology while still thinking I’m a monster—”

“Oh my god.”

“But joke’s on me, right? Never gonna be the sort of man you take

at his word. Always looking for an angle, even now.” Spike shook his head again, a tragic laugh tearing off his lips. “Juiced up now on slayer blood. Maybe I ought to still—”

Buffy didn’t realize she’d stood until she was against him, didn’t realize she’d moved at all until she had her arms around him, had pulled him into something between a hug and a plea. Her face buried in his neck, her body trembling under the weight of her own stupid expectations, of her shock that was more than shock, but also somehow not shock at all because *of course* that was what he’d meant. *Of course* that was what he’d been ready to set out to do. *Of course* Spike would leave here to seek a soul, because that was who he was. Who he had been ever since he’d barreled into her life, turned her world upside down.

And there was nothing she could tell him. Nothing he would believe, and why should he? After everything he’d given up...

“I’m stupid,” Buffy sputtered into his skin, her own going red-hot. “I’m so stupid.”

“Christ,” Spike muttered, and then his arms were around her, and he was holding her to him, kissing her temple and shaking his head. It was unfair, how quickly his anger melted. How fast he was to forgive. Someone without a soul shouldn’t have that, but he did. He always had. “You’re not stupid, love. Bloody brilliant, you are.”

“For a brilliant person, I am really stupid.” She shuddered, clutched him tighter. “I don’t know why I keep doing that. I love you. I *do* love you. And I just keep assuming the worst.”

“Ever think it could be because love’s done you no favors?” he replied, pulling back just enough to catch her eyes, or catch her in his, pulling at her center of gravity in a way that used to scare her, maybe still should, but didn’t, because she knew he’d be there when she landed. “That you’re used to love being hurt?”

“That’s no excuse—”

“Not tryin’ for an excuse here.” Spike pulled back more, not enough to dislodge her but enough so that more of his face came into focus. The skin around those eyes, the ridge of his nose, his cheekbones, his brow, and the bow that made up his mouth. “And it’s not like I haven’t given you plenty of reason to think the worst of me, either.”



“Not since we became a thing.”

“Doesn’t erase all that came before. I *am* evil, Slayer. But I’m yours. Everything I am is yours. And if you need me to get a sodding soul to prove that—”

“No.” Buffy shook her head hard, gripping his shoulders to steady herself. “I don’t.”

“No? Might spare the pair of us a lot of frustration going forward.”

“Spike, if we’re doing this, we’re really doing it. It’ll be...hard sometimes. Messy. I’ll get mad or you’ll get mad and...that’s okay. That’s the way it’s supposed to be.” Buffy released a deep breath, trying to find her center. “I love you. And that you’d even... The fact that you were going to go fight for your soul at all is just...too big for my brain right now, but that’s what I want to stop. With both of us.”

“Not sure I follow you there,” he said, though he looked lighter than before. Lighter than he had since she’d started talking.

“This.” She gestured between them. “I got us here by not talking. Because this part scares me. Because *all* things relationshipy scare me. I made you think... Well, you know what I made you think. And I’m not saying I’m going to be great at being talky girl because I’m so not, but...things that are worth it are worth the hard. We’re worth it.”

Then his mouth was on her mouth, and all thought flitted right out of her head, stealing her wind and her brain and her heart, stealing everything that wasn’t nailed down, and that was okay. She tasted it in his kiss, in the hunger and relief, the love that none of her crazy or her cruel seemed capable of chasing off completely. There was more to say—lots more—and things to define, but maybe for now they had said enough, done enough, that the foundation of what they would leave with would be made of the sort of stuff that lasted.

And then she was on her back again, on the bed, and he was over her, and all that *more* became *later*, and she thought of the glitter on the floor, between the strands of carpet, thought about the screams she’d let tear through her throat, about Spike venturing downstairs in next-to-nothing to bring her cookies and juice, and the impossible way that he loved her. The torture he’d suffer, the lengths he’d go to in order to prove himself, and how even now, even after everything she’d thrown at him, every reason she’d given him to do what everyone else had done

and walk out, he was kissing her with love, stroking her with love, looking down at her with love and more than love, with an intensity that she had never experienced until him.

And hey, look at that. They were both naked again.

"This all right?" he asked, bracing himself on one hand, the other teasing his cock along the seam of her pussy. "You feeling—"

Buffy locked her legs around his waist and pulled him down, into her, a part of her, and swallowed his groan with her mouth, tangled her arms around him, and told him she loved him.

More than that, she knew he loved her.

And that he was just getting started showing her exactly what that meant.

SHE'S IN LOVE WITH ME AND I  
FEEL FINE

"WHO ATE MY OREOS?"

Spike smirked and threw a pointed look at the Slayer, whose cheeks pinked in that way he found extremely fetching. "Sorry, pet," he told Cordelia, who, in contrast, was frowning a storm and glaring at the lot of them in turn—him and Buffy, and the witches who had finally stumbled all bag-eyed down the stairs to be seen off all proper like—as though she could sniff out the biscuit thief. "Didn't know those were yours."

"What, and you thought they were Angel's?" Cordelia huffed and crossed her arms. "He doesn't eat solid foods."

"Because he's a wanker."

"I'm not touching that one, and not only because I'm not sure what that means." She huffed again, though there wasn't much bite behind her bark. Some, sure—Spike wasn't daft enough to think she was anything near a wallflower—but not the kind that had real teeth to it. "Am I to understand you plundered my snack drawer? Why do you eat real food?"

He lifted a shoulder. "Tastes good, doesn't it?"

"So good you had to eat the entire package? Who are you, Gunn?"

"It was me," Buffy blurted at last, shifting in place of a proper

squirm. "Well, Spike decimated about half, so not entirely me, but he got them for me because I, umm, there was blood. My blood. In that I lost it. Or not lost like *whoops, where'd it go*, but it was gone and because he's a weirdo, he knew to get me stuff with sugar in it."

"Uh huh." Cordelia arched an eyebrow, her shrewd gaze trailing down Buffy's neck. "This is some weird vampire sex thing, huh?"

"Don't ask questions you don't want the answer to," Buffy replied, her face redder still.

Willow cleared her throat. "Considering that I should've been dead to the world last night but didn't get any rest because of the noise someone was making, I...second Buffy's suggestion of not asking. Ignorance is bliss."

Cordelia snorted and took a look around the otherwise empty lobby. "Well, that explains why Mr. Broodypants called me over here to see you off. You'd think being a monarch even for a few days would have some lingering benefits, but nope. Back to being beck-and-call girl."

"He called you?" Buffy asked, her tone neutral.

"Said something about how it'd be better if you two weren't in the same room for a while. I thought he was being a drama queen as per usual, but if you and Mr. Soulless really were with the loud, bitey sex, I'm guessing it has more to do with that." Cordelia flicked her gaze to Spike, not long enough to linger but enough for him to read what she wasn't saying. To suss out that there might be more to how far she was willing to go for the git than was usually present within the parameters of a friendship. Enough concern to be more than concern. "Whatever," she said a moment later, waving a hand. "Gives me a chance to thank you guys again for helping us get our friend back before you head out."

"Anytime," Willow replied, taking Tara's hand. "Except, well, the immediate future. I need time to recover."

"I think our hands are gonna be full for a while, anyway, getting Fred all used to being in the real world again," Cordelia replied, shrugging. "But same goes. I'm all for tag-teaming in the name of saving the world. Or fighting evil. Might be good to remember we're not alone in this."

Spike glanced at Buffy again, warming in spite of himself at the

look on her face. Knowing how much that meant, and damn more than Cordelia could understand. It wasn't something they talked about, but also something that didn't really need saying for him to get it—the weight she carried, how alone she felt, right or wrong. Even with all her mates and the like ready to join the fight, the world was still a big, ugly place and the whole of it often rested on her shoulders. The reminder that there were others outside of the bubble that was Sunnyhell might seem like a small thing, but it was everything to her. And therefore to him, because he was a smitten, sentimental sort of sap whom she had slain, if not in whole then where it counted.

"Thanks, Cordy," Willow said with an edge in her voice that hinted at her fading patience. "But we're gonna run. No offense, I just really want to get home before anyone here finds something else for us to do."

"Are you just gonna ride all the way back to Sunnydale under a blanket or...?" Cordelia arched an eyebrow, looking pointedly at Spike.

"Big one in the backseat," Buffy confirmed, grinning wryly. "Extra roomy for stretching."

"And nothing else," Willow said sternly. "Seriously, you two got enough nookie last night. You can keep your hands off for a few hours. Right, baby?"

This last she directed to Tara, who hadn't said a word since they all had come down. Who was, point of fact, focusing intently on the floor that Lorne bloke had been so bloody fond of when they'd come back in through the portal, though Spike was certain he caught the ghost of a smirk on her lips.

"Right, baby?" Willow asked again, less patient this time.

Tara raised her head at that as though snapping back to herself and nodded, mock-stern. "Right. No fooling around." She paused, then added in a lower voice, "Sorry, she's extra cranky."

"Well, you would be too if your first night back in a real bed had been ruined because of what you mistakenly thought was an earthquake but ended up being people having way more fun than you one room over."

"Could've done a bit of quaking yourself," Spike felt obligated to point out. "Don't blame us if you missed the opportunity to uncork."

“Spike!”

Willow made a slightly scandalized face but didn’t back down. “I did mention the exhausted part, right? No amount of earthquaking made that any less true.”

“Seriously, an earthquake?” Cordelia looked Spike up and down at that, then shifted her attention to Buffy. “Good for you. No wonder you’re so much less uptight now. I was wondering.”

“Thanks,” Buffy muttered, her face now so red Spike couldn’t help but buss her cheek. Nice and innocent but full of feeling.

“Though the more you tell me, the clearer this vision gets,” Cordelia added a moment later. “Not a vision from the Powers or whatever likes to send me visions, but one that’s probably going to come with just as much headache. And if Angel is in a funk that lasts for days or—god forbid—turns him into asshole Angel again, I will demand compensation.”

“Can you tell the difference?” Spike asked, all innocence, and was ready when Buffy smacked his shoulder.

“Stop,” she muttered harshly. Then, turning to Cordelia, said, “If he *is* in a bad mood, I don’t think it’s because of...anything earthquakey. After you all cleared out, Angel and I talked. Or...yelled, to be more accurate. Voices were raised and lines were drawn, and I think we understand each other now, but I also think he might need some time to adjust.”

At that, Cordelia sighed. Hard. “Hurricane Buffy couldn’t help but make landfall, could it? And we were so close, too.”

“Hurricane Buffy?”

“That’s what happens when you come to town, screw with Angel’s head, and I get stuck with the vampire funk cleanup.” She spoke plainly, somehow not accusatory despite the words themselves, and sighed again. “Yeah, it might be better if you guys don’t put us on your Christmas card list. We’ll save the team-ups for real emergencies.”

“Screw with his head?” Buffy echoed, her own voice not nearly as neutral. “*I* screw with *his* head?”

“Are you telling me you don’t?” Cordelia shot back.

“Danger, Will Robinson,” Willow muttered, then hurried forward and snatched Buffy by the wrist. “Let’s not get into a blame game. I’d

rather leave here as friends who have each other on apocalypse speed-dial.”

Spike scoffed and rolled his eyes. “Well, you’re no bloody fun, are you?”

“If you really love her, you’ll get her out of here without rendering all IOUs null and void,” the witch shot back.

“No, I get it,” Cordelia said, bringing her hands up. “Breakups are messy. And Buffy and Angel have never been not messy.” She paused and favored Spike with an appraising look. “Good luck.”

“And on that note,” Buffy said, jerking her arm free of Willow and plastering on a bright, phony smile. “You’re right, we should get going before things get...*extra* messy.” She paused, and the smile grew wider and much more genuine. “Apologize to Angel for us, will you, Cor? Hurricane Buffy got a little extra windy last night, and a few things didn’t survive. Sorry about the glitter.”

Cordelia didn’t bother hiding her confusion. “Glitter? What the hell?”

“Just tell Angel. He’ll figure out what it means.”



THE DRAMATIC EXIT was tempered slightly by the fact that the second they stepped outside, Spike was sun-stranded and had to wait for the witches to pull the car around. Fortunately, that didn’t take but a few uncomfortable moments. Then he was safely sequestered in the shadows of the backseat, the Slayer at his side, and they were heading out of sodding LA and back to the Hellmouth, the space that was his and Buffy’s, where they would start something new and brilliant and *theirs* most of all. Away from the stink of the past and heading toward a future that he’d never thought he’d have.

Spike spent the first stint of the drive entirely under the blanket, as there were a few twists and turns through traffic that kept ping-ponging streams of daylight to all sides of the vehicle. Once they were on the highway, though, the sun was firmly on the car’s right, giving him the freedom to tuck the blanket into that window and create a cozy nest in the back. It’d require adjusting as the road changed, of

course, but for the moment, he had the pleasure of sitting with his lady like any other bloke, hand in hers, thinking about the Spike who had come on this trip and the Spike he was now. The Spike who had thought it likely he was staring down inevitable heartbreak replaced by this new version who knew Buffy loved him. Who had her smiles and her strength alike, not to mention her whispered promise that she'd vent her all her daily frustrations on him tonight, and the next night, and all the nights to follow.

This woman for whom he'd earn himself a soul if she hadn't assured him that she believed wholeheartedly that he didn't need one.

This woman who owned it anyway. His soul, his heart, his fealty, his life, and anything else she decided to claim.

This woman who was positioning a bit of the blanket so that it draped across his lap, giving him a wicked grin that had him tumbling head-first into love as though for the first time, then diving a hand under the blanket to show him that as much of her good as had rubbed off on him, she'd also claimed some of his evil.

"Everything okay back there?" Tara asked over her shoulder. "I can turn the air up if you want."

"Air's good but the music?" Buffy suggested, pulling his cock out of his jeans and giving it a squeeze. "Could turn that up a bit. Unless Willow's planning to doze."

"I very much am," Willow said, patting Tara on the shoulder. "But I also live on campus and am very much accustomed to tuning out music and stuff."

"Not fucking, though," Spike muttered. "More's the pity."

"Yeah, they're not going to let that go for a while," Buffy agreed.

"Or," Tara said, flicking her gaze to the rearview mirror, "you two were just that loud."

Spike smirked, even knowing she couldn't see it—bird was too conscientious about not taking her eyes off the road while she drove—but he liked to think she felt it nonetheless. At least he wouldn't have to worry about either one of them catching wise on what was going on back here, provided he didn't growl too loudly over the next few minutes.



The music volume went up. "That good?" Willow asked. "I can doze through this, no problem."

"Try not to doze through it," Buffy murmured in his ear a moment later.

Yeah, he was a lucky bloke.

Luckiest in the whole sodding world.

