

NEEDLEWORK



HOLLY DENISE





ONCE UPON A MIDNIGHT DREARY

BUFFY HADN'T TRULY THOUGHT it possible for her night to get any more bizarre. From beginning to end, she had been transported into some upside-down play the likes of which only Andrew Lloyd Webber could compose. Not that this particular vampire made a convincing Phantom of the Opera with his playboy looks and rich accent, but her reality was nonetheless shaken.

It didn't help that when she opened her eyes, he was there.

Until tonight, she'd thought most vampire folklore was baloney. Sure, vamps had to be invited in and they had no reflection, but the other stuff? Turning into bats? Sleeping in coffins? Killing the daddy vamp to kill the fledglings? Inability to enter a church? Lies, lies, and more lies. And if all of that stuff inspired by a hack writer's wet dream was false, then Count Dracula had to be fakest of the fake.

That was until he'd *poofed* right in front of her. Parlor tricks, Giles had said. Any vampire could master them. Xander had punned on the Count's accent, Anya had appraised his sexual prowess, and all Buffy could do was slobber over the fact that a famous vampire had heard of her. Buffy Summers, Vampire Slayer, apparently had an international fanbase. And Dracula was in it.

Which was kind of awesome. Wiggy, but awesome.

Not awesome? The fact that Dracula, Vlad the Impaler, was in her room. Right now. Looking at her.

"I don't remember inviting you in," she said, trying to suppress a shiver. There was something potent about the vampire's eyes. Hypnotic and addictive. The fact that the pull was stronger than the Master's had been should have had her warning bells chiming at full volume. For some stupid reason, though, the damn things remained quiet.

The Master had pulled her in with power alone. Dracula had charm. And he was sexy.

Vampires were not supposed to be sexy. Unless they were Angel. Or, loathe as she was to admit it, Spike. Spike's sexiness was a begrudging acknowledgment—she had eyes and they worked just fine. And Angel's sexiness was becoming more and more distant as she'd finally started to put him behind her.

Except she hadn't really. She'd thrown herself at Parker, raced off to Los Angeles—twice—been hurt more times than she could count, and now found herself with a replacement Angel who, unlike the original model, seemed to actually want something with her.

Riley. Her human Angel.

"I required no invitation," Dracula replied coolly, something in his eyes betrayed the lie. Her mother, most likely, had rolled out the welcome mat. This tall-dark-and-handsome thing was kryptonite for the Summers women. That the men who fit that description tended to be selfish assholes seemed to be par for the course. "Merely a desire to bask in the presence of death." He reached out to brush tendrils of fallen hair from her face. "A desire to taste..."

She blinked and jerked back at that. "There will be no tasting of me tonight, pal," she barked, straightening as the haze around her world dissipated. "Now get out before I—"

"Stake me, yes. That is what the vampire murderer does." Dracula's eyes flickered. "She kills without prejudice because it is all she knows." He reached out again, fingering her hair. "But the marks on her throat are telling, no? She has been tasted."

Angel's bite suddenly itched as it hadn't in over a year.

"He was—"

“Unworthy,” Dracula said. “He let you go.”

Buffy inhaled again, the fog settling once more. There were certain things every vampire slayer knew, and never to be without a stake was one. Granted, she had never suspected a non-Angel or Spike-shaped vampire would enter her bedroom unannounced, but her lack of an immediate weapon sent a sharp pang of fear down her spine.

“You need to leave,” she said. Her mind was no longer her own. “My mother doesn’t like me to have vampires in my bedroom.”

“I only want a taste,” Dracula countered, a slow smirk drawing across his lips. “My slayer will allow me a taste, won’t she?”

“I am not your slayer. I am not your anything.”

“You are the Vampire Slayer. You belong to vampires. I am a vampire, no? Tonight you belong to me.”

The fear in her chest intensified. Fear was foreign to her now, especially where vampires were concerned. Her body wasn’t following her commands. Her arms were heavy and immobile, her heart pounding so hard it almost hurt. If he did something, she couldn’t fight him. He had her under some sort of enchantment. Had her will trapped beneath something too weighty for even her strength to move.

Belong to him? God, what did that mean?

“I...I think you should leave,” Buffy said.

“Yes,” Dracula agreed, skimming the length of her arm until he had her hand clasped in his. “We should be leaving.”

“We?”

“Yes. You will come with me, won’t you?”

No! shrieked her mind. That strong part of her that was kicking and screaming, pounding invisible fists against the walls of her will. *No! Don’t even think about touching me, you piece of—*

“Yes,” said her treacherous mouth. “Where are we going?”

“Away,” the vampire replied, tugging her from the bed.

And then her room was not there. Her body separated from her will. She didn’t know how he moved them, or to where. She couldn’t see anything but a blur of color, couldn’t feel anything but the cold touch of the vampire who was holding her hand. She was with him. That was all she knew, all she recognized. Dracula was leading her away from herself.

And he wasn't letting go.



THERE WERE MANY UNUSUAL DWELLINGS IN SUNNYDALE, AND AT one point or another, Buffy had been to them all. After all, her job took her to every corner of the miserable town. Every time a new demon mobster hit the Hellmouth, a new strange residence sprang from the soil as though it had been there for generations. With Spike, it had been the factory. With Angelus, it had been the mansion. With Adam, it had been the Initiative itself.

Granted the Initiative hadn't sprung from the ground as much as it had buried itself beneath it.

With Dracula, though, it was a castle.

A castle erected in the outer reaches of Sunnydale. Buffy saw it without seeing. The bad feeling in her gut grew stronger with every step. Her inner voice kept screaming in protest, begging for her to rally and allow the Slayer to take over. The shadows lurking in her mind were far too potent, the screaming woman inside trembling at the sight of the walls that would seal her fate. She knew that something bad was about to happen. She knew that stepping over that threshold while holding Dracula's hand would be the means to her end.

If she walked into the castle, it would not be Buffy that walked out.

Oh god. I can't stop him. I can't...

"There is no reason to fear," Dracula said over his shoulder, calm and collected. "I would not have harm befall one as lovely as you."

Strange how those words inspired more fear than comfort.

"I will immortalize you."

No. No!

"No," Buffy broke through, commanding her feet to a halt—there was some of that control—and managing to pull her hand free. "I won't. You can't make me. I—"

"Why this resistance?" the Count asked, frowning. "I will give you everything your former vampire could not."

His voice dripped sexual promise, but the thought of him touching her had her skin crawling. She had to get out. She had to get out *now*.

"No thanks. I have a boyfriend."

Yeah. My name is Buffy the Lame-O, have we met?

Like Dracula cared if she had a boyfriend. Or, you know, free-will and a mind of her own, including wishes that were not of the please-vamp-me nature. Her thoughts were still a bit fuzzy from whatever he'd done to her, blurring the lines right and wrong. She knew she needed to escape. He was no longer touching her, and while that was a step in the right direction, it did little to ease her nerves.

His eyes were still on her. And they held the most power.

Dracula was not going to let her do anything he didn't want her to do.

"He is unworthy of you," the vampire replied smoothly. "No mortal man could hope to touch the Slayer and feel her greatness. Not like those that she hunts." A pause. "Those that she kills."

"Slays," Buffy said automatically.

"You are the killer of my kind, yes?"

"I don't kill. I slay. I have a calling."

"I have a calling as well." He glanced toward the castle. "Now we go inside."

"No."

This he would not take from her. The free-will of Buffy was not for sale.

"You will follow me inside."

Of course, vampires mostly stole what was not handed to them.

The words were a compulsion, one Buffy had no means of denying. She heard herself agree to his command and the inner screaming started again, for all the good it did. Her feet carried her forward and she found herself offering her hand to Dracula grasp once more.

And then she was inside, and Sunnydale was a lifetime away.

"My home," Dracula said, turning to her. "You approve?"

It was perfectly clear that he didn't give a damn what she said, but at the same time, something told her that it was likely a good thing to be an accommodating guest to a master, legendary vampire. Even though she wasn't so much a guest as she was a kidnapped slayer.

Besides, she'd only say no to be contrary. What was there not to like about a castle?

“Yes.”

“I think you will like it here.”

Buffy’s eyes went wide. *Free-will...now would be a good time to come back from the dead!*

This could not be happening. Not now. Not to her.

“For now, you should rest,” Dracula continued, stepping forward. “I will satisfy my hunger for you with a taste. Nothing more.”

Hunger? Me? Taste?

There was just no part of that sentence that Buffy liked.

Oh god. This is real. This isn’t a dream. It’s real.

Dracula’s fangs descended smoothly and his eyes went yellow. But that was all. There were no bumpies. There was no growling. He was the antithesis of every vampire she had encountered. And despite the paralyzing fear rushing through her body, she found herself...turned on. This was not her. Not really. It was a façade. Something was blocking her. An invisible wall crested between hysterics and serenity.

He had immobilized her. He had robbed her of her night. He had taken her away.

And now his fangs would find her throat.

And she would know nothing else.



THE ROOM WAS UNFAMILIAR BUT COMFORTABLE. SHE FELT miles away.

Her throat throbbed, and she didn’t know why. A foreign thirst tore through her body, a need she felt down to the bone. It was so intense, so consuming that it was hard to focus on anything else. And beyond the thirst was fear—fear of what would happen if she didn’t quench it. If this was the way it would be forever.

Buffy’s eyes fluttered open. She was bathed in lavender. The night was quiet, and she couldn’t see stars through the windows. But it was dark and she knew it would be for hours. The sun was a world away.

How she had come to this room, she didn’t know. Nor did she have the strength to get up.

With this hunger gnawing her insides, she didn't have the strength for much of anything.

Exhaustion and worry began to pull her under, and she was glad. At least in her dreams, the hunger wouldn't follow. She hoped.

The last thing she saw was her reflection in the hanging mirror across the room. It was fading quietly; struggling for existence. Not gone but not there, either. Caught somewhere in the middle. Caught in the area in between.

What a strange dream, she mused, her eyes falling shut once more. And she slept.

CAPTIVE

BUFFY WAS GONE.

Riley had thrown open the door to her bedroom and found it empty. The bed was unmade, the window was open, and she was gone.

Buffy Summers was one of the least conventional slayers in history, and everyone that knew her knew that. Her methods were innovative but often reckless—she worked with friends, had survived because of it, but was also incredibly isolated. No one could predict when she'd run off on her own. Buffy did as Buffy thought she should. Her absence that morning was strange but didn't really surprise anyone.

Only today was different because there was a vampire that had inspired generations of folklore, novels, films, and ghost stories. A vampire that actually existed—something that the Slayer herself hadn't known until the night before.

When Riley learned that Joyce Summers had mistakenly invited a pale foreigner into her home, the penny had dropped and he'd skyrocketed from mildly annoyed to downright terrified. Buffy was gone and Dracula had an all-access pass to her house.

Seemed like Spike had been right after all.

He hated it when Spike was right.

"I had no idea," Joyce was saying. "I...oh god, where would he have taken her?"

"I don't know," Riley replied, trying to keep from lashing out at his girlfriend's mother. Trying to keep his dark thoughts at bay—the ones he knew weren't true, except they might be. That Buffy, star-struck as she'd been the night before, might not be in trouble at all. At least not the conventional kind. "But I'll find her, Joyce. I promise."

He had to go to Giles. He had to get on this.

Every time he closed his eyes, he saw her entangled with the vampire. It wasn't so far off—she had a history with them, after all.

And that thought bothered him more than any alternative.



"WELL, I THINK WE HAVE DRACULA FACTOIDS," WILLOW SAID, glancing up. She wasn't accustomed to seeing Giles's house so vacant, but after last night, and the way Buffy had propositioned Riley, it wasn't exactly a mystery as to where they were.

Sometimes, Willow thought Buffy might have more in common with Faith than she'd ever let on.

"Like any of that's enough to fight the dark master," Xander retorted before munching on a donut.

Willow frowned. Giles did too.

"...bator," Xander finished.

The Watcher's eyes shifted to her, and he looked more than a little irritated. She merely grinned. "A lot of it we already knew," Willow went on. "Turn-offs: wood, fire, crosses, garlic. Turn-ons: nice duds, minions, long, slow bites that last for days..." She cleared her throat. "If you...you know...like that sort've thing. Which I don't."

"Because you're into girls now," Xander said.

"Yes."

Giles flushed and removed his glasses. "Right."

The quiet of the room crashed with the erratic swing of the front door, and Willow knew instantly she'd been wrong—there had been no happies for Buffy the night before. The look on Riley's face was down-right mutinous. And Buffy wasn't with him.

Something was wrong.

"Oh," Giles said in greeting. "Hello."

"Buffy's gone."

The room froze.

"What?" Willow demanded. "What do you mean, Buffy's gone?"

"Joyce invited Dracula into the house last night, and now Buffy's gone." Riley shook his head. "He took her somewhere, I know it."

Giles frowned, paling. "Are you...how can you be sure?"

"Joyce invited him into the house! He's a vampire, she's a slayer. She was all...gushing for him last night, wasn't she? In that..." He released a deep breath. "Buffy...after she saw him, she was different. I can't even..."

"Buffy would never have just gone with Dracula," Willow protested, frowning. "That's ridiculous!"

"Well, if Dracula's objective was to kill her, he could've done it last night and just left her in her bed. He didn't. She's gone. She didn't tell anyone here, did she?" Silence was his answer. "I didn't think so. She's with him...and we don't know...what he's doing to her..."

Giles's frown deepened. "I don't believe Dracula is the sort to do anything to any of his victims, aside turn them into..." He didn't finish the thought, but he didn't need to. "But everything we have on him suggests that he prefers the more traditional turnings. If that's true, then she might not be in any actual danger right now."

Nothing about that sounded good. "Traditional turnings?" Willow echoed.

He nodded. "Well, your own research says as much," he replied, indicating the open book in her lap.

Willow glanced down, her eyes wide. "Oh right. Ummm, yeah, Dracula's objective is different from other vampires. He'll kill just to feed, but he'd rather have a connection with his victims...especially victims he sees as high-profile. Victims like...well, Buffy, in this case. He even has mental powers to draw them in."

"So he might've thrall'd Buffy into going with him?" Riley demanded.

"Yeah. If she...yeah. He also has mental powers, so he could've put some cosmic whammy on her to make her more compliant." Yeah, the

more she talked, the more worried she became. "Giles, this isn't good. The ending result is always the same. He seduces his victims, but it's always to make them a vampire. With Buffy's case..."

"He wants her," Riley said.

Xander shook his head. "That's ridiculous. I think you're drawing a lot of crazy conclusions about the unholy prince."

Everyone paused again and stared.

"...bator."

Giles's eyes narrowed. "Xander...is there something you're not telling us?"

Xander drew in a sharp breath and shook his head. "Nope. Nothing. Nothing that I can think of. Certainly nothing concerning the supremely spooky dark master."

Willow released a long sigh. "He's under Dracula's thrall, isn't he?"

"I'm afraid so."

Her best friend and once-great unrequited love recoiled at that. "No! That—that's ridiculous, is what that is. The evil lord could've used anyone! Why would he, in his infinite wisdom, select me?" He sputtered a forced laugh. "That's just silly...that is."

Riley's eyes darkened and he stalked forward. "Where did he take her?" he demanded. "What do you know? Talk."

Xander's hands came up neutrally. "I know nothing!"

"You're under Dracula's thrall and you don't know anything? Right."

"Not what you're talking about, no!" Xander retorted. "His Excellent Creepiness told me he wanted me to take Buffy to him!" He blinked as though the words spewing from his mouth suddenly made sense, his gaze clearing. "I-I...I didn't take Buffy to him. I really didn't."

Giles's expression grew even more troubled. "Dracula placed you under his power for the purpose of obtaining Buffy, but why... Perhaps his intention was to set us apart. He came to Sunnydale for the Slayer. According to what she said last night, he had heard enough of her to call her by name. He said she was a legend among the undead. It's very possible that he knows about us. That he is employing the same technique that Adam attempted last year in separating us so that we're too jumbled to find her before—"

“He turns her,” Willow concluded, horrified. “Oh god, we have to do something.”

“Something,” Riley muttered. “Yeah, something.”

Giles’s eyes narrowed. “What?”

“I went to see Spike last night. Gather up some information on Sunnydale’s newest resident.” He paused. “Last time a Big Bad decided to split you guys up, Spike was involved, right?”

Giles and Willow nodded.

“Then it’s feasible that Spike’s in on it, right?”

“In on it?” Giles repeated. “What is there, exactly, to be ‘in on?’”

“If Dracula’s *modus operandi* is ultimately siring his victims, then—”

“Spike wouldn’t help with that,” Giles said. The finality in his voice was solid.

Riley stared at him. “How do you know?”

“Because he’s fought slayers before and not once has he attempted to sire them. The two he killed were *killed*, not turned. Spike’s likely one of the few vampires that know about slayers.”

“What do you mean?” Willow asked.

“Sired slayers retain their souls,” Giles replied. “You might call it a practical joke on part of the Powers That Be. As any vampire will boast, being a sire establishes a certain measure of power and control over their, err, offspring. Being the sire of a slayer would make the vampire nearly invincible. It also would guarantee that every slayer called would not strike fear into the world of the undead—instead of running from her, they would run for her...hoping to lay claim to her throat and obtain that power. But slayers retain their souls, and being as strong and assuredly angry as they are when they awaken, will usually not only destroy her sire but every vampire in her path until she is stopped. If slayers remained soulless, you can be sure that Spike would have taken advantage of that by now. Buffy sired wouldn’t be good news for any vampire in Sunnydale.”

Well, that sounded nice and...nice. Also explained why the vampire version of Buffy that had spawned as a result of Lucky Nineteen a few years back hadn’t made with the neck wounds. Still... Willow worried a lip between her teeth. “Doesn’t Dracula know that?”

"One would think. Perhaps he doesn't care. If we're correct, and Buffy is with Dracula, we can assume it's due to a mind control similar to the thrall that Xander is under."

"I resemble that remark," Xander muttered.

"Or," Giles continued, "it might be that Dracula hopes his influence as a sire will be too great for Buffy to resist."

"That happens?" Riley asked.

"Not in recorded history, no...but Dracula is a master of mind control."

That was just not right. "Buffy's the Slayer!" Willow shouted. "I mean...shouldn't she come with some...anti-mind control tags or something? Especially where vamps are concerned? It just doesn't seem... how could this happen?"

"Erm, Buffy's also one of the slayers in history whose close personal relationship with vampires has been problematic for the Council," Giles replied, avoiding Riley's eyes. "She dated Angel and she's allowed Spike not only to continue existing but has been almost...protective of him in the past few months."

"Protective?" Willow, Xander, and Riley replied together.

"Well, she hasn't staked him, has she? Furthermore, she's saved his life on a number of occasions. Granted, he's done the same for us, but details like that don't matter to the Council."

"Don't matter to me, either," Riley murmured.

"Regardless," Giles said, "Buffy finds him valuable, and until he outright refuses to help us, it's best to have a somewhat-ally that has an ear to the workings of the underworld. Besides..." He paused. "It might prove beneficial to pay Spike a visit with this. If Dracula does indeed have Buffy, Spike could well be the best way to get to her."

Riley glowered at that. "The best? You think bringing in a vampire to track down a vampire is going to do us any good? A vampire that, by the way, happens to hate Buffy and everything she stands for? I have experience in slaying vampires. Maybe not a sacred calling, but I never knew that was a prerequisite."

"You can't honestly believe that asking Spike to help us is any more damaging than not," Giles shot back. "He might not want to, but he'll do it."

“How do you know?”

Giles’s expression turned grim. “I can be...persuasive.”



PEOPLE ALWAYS WENT A LITTLE BIT CRAZY WHEN A CELEBRITY CAME to town.

For the past three months, the Slayer and her pals had done little to even acknowledge the existence of their resident vampire, much less pop by at all sorts of odd hours. Now, two nights running, the door to his crypt burst open, sending Spike to his feet in nearly record speed. It was a scent he wouldn’t have associated with a nocturnal visit, but the presence of Buffy’s watcher only went to validate his theory.

He couldn’t deny he was a bit disappointed. Dracula had been in town for nearly twenty-four hours and there had not yet been word from the Slayer. Was Buffy suddenly too good to go to him directly, or had she finally wised up and realized she was virtually a dictator with a staff of loyal lackeys?

Spike rolled his eyes and lit a cigarette. “Welcome to the bloody jungle,” he muttered, more to himself. “Lemme guess, you need information. Bloke’s a little taller than me, paler, Romanian accent, and—”

“Shut up.”

“Oi there, mate. You’re in my home—uninvited, I might add. Might be surprised where a little civility can get you.”

“I need help.”

“Well, I coulda told you that years ago.” He grinned. “I’m right, though. This is about good ole Vlad.”

“Yes, Spike, your perception is truly extraordinary.” Giles glanced down. “It’s Buffy.”

He exhaled a puff of smoke. “Yeah? What about her?”

“She’s missing.”

Spike’s brows perked. He knew the point had to be coming.

Giles said nothing. Just looked at him.

Point was evidently lacking.

“Yeah, and?” he demanded. “This is the Slayer, remember? Pullin’

disappearing acts is what she does best. Need I remind you about that time last October when—”

“This is different, Spike. Dracula’s involved.” A pause. “He has her.”

Spike froze, cigarette burning between his fingers. If asked to explain it, he wouldn’t have been able to, but fuck all if that didn’t just piss him off. Buffy was too good for the likes of Drac. That mind-controlling git had put the whammy on her, and mortal enemy or not, that was bad form.

More than that, the Slayer was his. Spike’s.

“Spike?”

Spike blinked back to himself, surprised at the look on Giles’s face—even more so at the realization that he was seconds away from vamping.

But bloody hell, he couldn’t help himself. No vampire touched Buffy. If anyone was going to off the bitch, it was definitely going to be him. Chip or not. No one got to kill her before he did. And if she did kick it before he got the chance, it wouldn’t be to a vamp or a demon—it’d be to the sodding apocalypse. That. Was. That.

“I told Soldier Boy when he came here last night,” Spike said slowly, blowing out another stream of smoke. “Told him Vlad wouldn’t back off till he had what he wanted. I also told him to bugger off and watch over his honey. Once the Count sets his all-knowin’ mind on somethin’, he doesn’t give up.” He paused. “He nabbed her last night, didn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“Was Wonder Bread there?” His kept his tone purposefully neutral. If he betrayed just how unnerved he was at Buffy’s disappearance, Rupert might suspect he had something to do with it.

But Giles looked only frustrated, not suspicious. “Spike, we don’t have time to play around with semantics. Dracula has Buffy—who knows what he’s doing to her. Is your alliance up for sale today?” He took a breath. “And let me remind you, if it’s not, I can make it for sale.”

Spike didn’t see a sliver of wood in the old man’s hands, but he knew his slayer had to have learned that ‘stake up the ass’ trick somewhere. “When was she last seen?”

"She was at my flat last night discussing her encounter with Dracula."

"And that's the end of it?"

"As much as I know." Giles eyed him warily. Spike knew well that he was waiting for a price. Which begged the question—rescuing the Slayer...how much was that worth in dollars?

A few seconds passed, and Giles heaved a long, aggravated sigh. "I don't have time to wait for you to make up your mind," he said. "Buffy is in danger, and we need to act now."

Split-second decision. No more time for considering that line dividing what he should do and what he wanted to do. It was all left to instinct. A realization down to the core—he couldn't stand by right now. It had nothing to do with money and everything to do with the fact that Buffy was his. No vampire was going to take her from him.

"Don't get all testy," Spike retorted, flicking his cigarette to the ground and stamping it out. "I'm in."

Giles blinked his surprise. "How much—"

"We'll talk about that later, yeah? You're a man of principle. I don't imagine you'll cheat me out of a fee based on a sudden lack of desperation."

He earned a frown, then a nod. "Right. Well, Riley will be here to coordinate the next steps."

Spike's eyes widened. There was absolutely no way he was going to do anything or go anywhere with that stuck up wanker or any of the sodding the Scoobies. They could search their way; fine. He would search his way and he would find her first. And there was no fucking way Riley Finn was going to be any part of that. "No," he growled. "I work alone."

"We can't—"

"I work alone or you're on your bloody own, got it? I'm not sharin' anythin' with Captain Cardboard. If he's so sodding sure he's the man for the job, you wouldn't've come here. Besides, I told him everythin' he'd need to know to find Vlad last night. Kinda stings, doesn't it?" He sneered. "Had the enormous ponce listened to me, your girl would be snuggling up in her beddy-bye tonight instead of enjoyin' the company of vamps. I'm not goin' out there with the wanker who'll be respon-

sible for her death if we can't get to her in time." But that sounded too heroic, or like he cared, so he went on. "The sod will just slow me down and get the kiddies riled up. I'm not about to save the bitch just to have her stake me 'cause her human boy toy got himself chewed on durin' the rescue. Drac'll be there with the sort've vamp birds that can drive a bloke to distraction. They get one whiff of him and it's good-bye, Iowa. I do this my way or not at all."

Giles held his eyes for a long moment. "All right."

"What?"

"All right. You're right. Pairing you up with Riley for this would only incite more chaos than resolution." He paused. "If you do find Buffy...if you bring her back to us..."

His voice trailed off, taking the rest of the sentence with it.

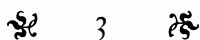
Imagining being indebted to a vampire wasn't easy for those trained to hate them.

"I'll bring her back, Rupert," Spike replied. "Save the rest for then."

Giles looked surprisingly grateful at that, and the Spike couldn't blame him. It gave them both time to contemplate the invisible line that had been crossed. Their private Rubicon.

But he wouldn't think about that now. He couldn't. All he could think about was the Slayer. His slayer.

And how to get her back.



TO CONQUER DEATH

THERE HAD NEVER BEEN hunger like this.

It had begun before she'd awakened—clawing at her insides and forcing her out of her sleep. The blackness of the room offered nothing to quench her terrible thirst. Her surroundings were foreign—stark and cold in the midst of a lonely rouse. Every inch of her ached with newness coupled with new, strange strength.

Everything hurt. Her lungs rejected the air she gasped. Her eyes were blinded with a barrage of color. She was deafened by every crick and creak that pierced the silence. And through it all, there was the hunger. The yearning. A need so inherent she wondered if she had ever known anything else—wondered if this terrible craving had been there all along.

Somewhere, though, the darkest part of her knew the truth.

There was nothing to grasp as she fell. A twist of bed sheets locked her legs and left her dangling over the side of her cushioned prison. The jerk of movement deepened the alien sensation spreading through her body until she was swallowed by the clutch of her worst fears realized. There was nothing but this awful emptiness inside.

I'm dying.

Buffy choked a sob, wrestling her limbs free until she fell to the

floor. The impact sent sharp shards of foreign pain through her tender skin, but she bit her tongue before she could cry out.

I'm dying.

Then it was okay because he was there. A rush of calm suffocated the inner chaos. All was well. He was there, and he wasn't going to let anything happen to her.

No. That's not right.

"This is no dream," Buffy murmured, her voice sounding like dead leaves rubbing together. "This is really happening."

"You have just awoken," came the answer. The presence at the door was soothing and repulsive at the same time. Something within her rejoiced at the sight of him. Something that hadn't been there before. Something she didn't understand, and desperately needed to grasp. The dark power that commanded him helped quell some of her inner turmoil, but the look in his eyes terrified her. There was power there. Power that hadn't been there before.

Power that went beyond the thrall.

Buffy struggled to her feet. "What...have you...you done to me?"

"You are feeling disoriented," Dracula said, running his eyes down the length of her scantily clad body. She doubted she could have felt more naked if she decided to strip out of the negligee that someone had dressed her in.

That *he* had likely dressed her in.

She didn't care to examine that possibility. She just needed to get out.

Preferably now.

"What did you do to me?" The room was spinning again. "You... Did you drug me?" She didn't realize she was holding onto the dresser until the wood beneath her fingers cracked and crumpled into a handful of splinters. "Oh my god."

"It is frightening at first," the Count acknowledged. "Most newly risen vampires overcome the disorientation quickly. Most have to claw through the soil toward the night." He gestured to the window. "I brought the night to you, my lovely. Calm yourself. The worst will be over soon."

Buffy stared, then drew in a hard, deep breath that somehow made

her feel like she was drowning. Then she realized she hadn't breathed at all until now. That she hadn't had the need or the inclination.

It hadn't been instinct.

"Newly...risen?" Tears welled in her eyes. "Newly... What did you do to me?"

"I made you as I am. I gave you new life."

"You...you...you turned me?" A strangled cry tore through her lips. She shot a hand flying to her chest, desperate for the reassuring thump of her heart. The heart that had beat for nineteen years.

But it wasn't there.

She was dead. She was really dead.

"Oh my god." Buffy collapsed again, clutching at her throat, her body rejecting the air she tried desperately to give it. "Oh my god..."

"I gave you life," Dracula repeated, his voice a mimic of a petulant child. "I immortalized you."

"You bastard! You've killed me! You've killed me!"

"I made you the way I am. I made you into a huntress in form as well as title." He cocked his head. "This is different. Why do you resist me?"

"You made me a vampire!"

"I made you into what you are destined to be. You are mine now. For now and always." Dracula smiled and moved forward. "A rare stream of sunshine in my world of darkness. You are mine."

No. If there was anything worse than being a vampire, it was being his.

"I am not yours," Buffy all but growled. She felt the bones in her muscles shift, a sharp shard of pain shooting through her body as her fangs descended and her bumpies emerged for the first time. "You've killed me. You understand that? I am anything but yours. I will never be yours. I hate you." Her eyes fell to the discarded shafts of wood that she had broken from the dresser, her hands aching for the familiarity of a wooden stake. "I'll kill you if you try to touch me."

Kill you.

She flexed her wrist. The air was deafening with the sound of her unbeating heart.

Her heart that would never beat again.

Then myself.

If he was moved by her threat, the Count didn't make it known. Rather, he smiled diplomatically and spread his hands. "I am your maker, my darling. I made you into what you are. You are mine. For now and for all eternity. Resisting me is fruitless. You are mine." He stepped forward. "You need me."

"You are the last thing I need."

Dracula paused, his eyes narrowing. "It was not supposed to be this way. You are unchanged."

"No, I think I'm pretty well changed."

"Your conscience...it remains." He paused. "Your soul still lives within you. The demon should have killed it by now."

"I think the demon's probably more worried about the fact that I plan to kill it before it kills anything." Buffy forced out a deep breath, biting back a cry at how it hurt to use her lungs. She couldn't live like this. She wouldn't. Soul or no soul, she wouldn't allow herself to exist in this state of nonliving.

He had killed her body. She would do the rest.

Right after she saw his dust.

"You are confused," Dracula said, holding out a hand. "You need to feed."

Buffy was quite sure she felt her stomach turn. She'd been the Slayer for too long to mistake his meaning. The thought of blood was too nauseating for words—the way her body reacted, though, disgusted her the most. "If you even try to make me...feed...I will end you."

The monster smiled. "Such a vibrant woman. Give it time. You will come to love it here."

"Here?"

"With me."

The lengthy silence that settled between them made her skin crawl. With him. Did he honestly believe she was going to bow to his every whim? Sit back and let him have her?

"Perhaps I spoke too soon," Dracula said a minute later. "We will not be staying here. The Hellmouth... It is too crowded with demons

that would not appreciate you. What you are.” He was within inches of her now, seemingly unconcerned that she was staring at the makeshift stakes at her feet. “We will return to my home, yes? I will lavish you with everything a woman of your nature could ever want.”

Buffy recoiled. “No.”

“Why do you resist me?”

“Gee, let’s think!”

“You want this,” he replied, unbothered.

“No, I really, really don’t. I don’t want anything from you.” Rivers were streaking down her face. “You’ve killed me.”

“*Mia cara*,” he cooed. “It will get better, yes? You are a vision of perfection. A creature of the night. You could grow to love me just a little, don’t you think?” He palmed her cheek almost reverently, thumb flickering at her tears. “I will show you things no other man has ever dreamed of. Not even...” His fingers skimmed down her throat, resting over Angel’s bite mark. “...him.”

God, it was happening again. That slipping sense of self. His commanding power over her shook her foundation. Even now, her body trembling with rage and devastating grief, he slipped effortlessly into her psyche, defusing her with nothing more than the draw of his eyes.

“I don’t...” she heard herself saying. As though she was watching a picture show, unable to do anything but stand aside and say the things that her sire wanted her to say. He had something over her—she knew that from last night. Knew that was the way he had lured her to him.

He said he wanted her. He didn’t.

He wanted the puppet his powers made her.

Buffy wanted so badly to shove a stake through his heart. There were plenty scattered on the floor. All she had to do was draw herself away from his eyes, enact her slayer agility, and be done with it.

Please god, give me strength.

She released a long breath. Her chest ached at the exertion. Everything ached.

Please.

“You won’t do it.”

He was still staring at her, and she was still staring back. And he saw what she was thinking.

"That just goes to show how much you really don't know me," she replied.

Dracula offered a curious smile. "I know you, my queen. What I don't know, I will." He ran a hand down her arm. "I will know you. I will know every inch of you."

God no. Please no.

She would never give him that.

The stake would find *her* chest first.

"For this," her sire said, fingers finding the strap of her negligee. "We will wait. Yes, I think you should love me just a little before I take you."

"You're in for quite a wait."

This did not seem to bother him. "All we have is time, my love."

Grab a stake. Have it over with.

Her arms remained immobile. She was seconds away from breaking all over again.

"You can't do this," she said, her voice filled with all the conviction her body wasn't conveying. For everything she couldn't do with actions and everything she could with words. "You can't keep me prisoner and force me to love you."

"I am quite confident that force will not be necessary."

I'm going to see you in all kinds of pain before this is over.

Something dark flared within her. Something that would have terrified her were she not standing before an adversary that had brought her deepest nightmare to life. Something squirmed within her, clawed at the shattered remains of everything she had been just hours ago. Something that demanded release so that it might rain destruction.

"We will not worry about such things right now," Dracula decided. "Now, you must feed."

Another surge of anger—she seized it. "Funny, this sounds just like something you said a few minutes ago. Maybe you didn't understand... you try to feed me, and I'll castrate you. I'll gut you. I'll gouge your eyes and shove a stake through your chest, just centimeters above your

heart so that every time you move, you know the true meaning of *a brush with death*.”

The Count merely maintained his odd little smile and leaned forward, brushing a repugnant kiss across her forehead. “Such fury,” he murmured with reverence. “Such dark beauty. Oh yes. I will love you well.”

Buffy flexed her hands, screaming orders that went ignored. Her body wasn’t listening to her. Her words were strong but there was a tremble of uncertainty that she couldn’t help but betray. She was in far over her head, and they both knew it.

She was in a world she didn’t understand, and she wasn’t waking up.

“My friends will find me,” she said. “They won’t stop looking.”

“You are beyond them now, my sweet.”

“They will find me.”

“There will be nothing to find,” he replied. “We’ll be gone before they even think to come here.”

Buffy drew in another breath, nearly unaware of the tears that were spilling over her eyes. There was nothing else. She was really here. This was all really happening. Dracula had her at his mercy. He had done something to her that she had feared every day since she’d learned that nightmares were real.

“Please,” she heard herself whisper. “God, please. Don’t do this to me. Please.”

He frowned. “You will come to love me.”

“No, I really won’t.”

“I will wait until you do. And until then, there is so much to teach you.” He smiled and moved back. “I will bring you something warm to dine upon, yes? Your first kill should be the sweetest. An initiation into your new life.”

“I’m not killing anyone.”

Still, he appeared smug and unworried. “We will see,” he retorted. “Once the hunger strikes you, you will not be able to resist.”

A muffled sob scratched at her throat.

Oh please. Let me die before I hurt anyone. Please.

“My friends...” she heard herself saying. “They will come for me.”

Dracula paused at last, cocking his head as though considering this for the first time.

Then, "There is no one capable enough of penetrating this fortress. Your friends are human. My people are not. If any should try, they would be killed." Another meaningful pause. "You should hope, then, that they don't come for you, yes? That would be most...unfortunate."

The door closed with a definitive click, and Buffy fell to her knees.

Oh god oh god oh god.

She had to get out. There was nothing but that. She had to get out.

Because he was right. There were more vampires in his residence than just the two of them. She could feel them by simply being. Sitting where she was, doing nothing but existing.

She felt the power in this place. Any attempt by her friends to recover her would be met with messy death.

There was no one.

Her nightmare had only begun.



SPIKE HAD BEEN STARING AT THE CASTLE FOR THE BETTER OF AN hour. Contemplating. Considering. Doing his best to contain himself from declaring an all-out war on his former nemesis. The vampire that had dared storm into his town and take his Slayer away. The vampire that had her now.

Buffy was in there. He felt her. Smelled her blood. Sensed her fear.

Felt her through means that terrified him.

He had to get her out. He didn't know how or why, only that she was in there and he was her only ticket to freedom. If the Scoobies got involved, they would get her killed—and likely themselves in the process. Right now, she was alive. Torn in that gray area that tugged her between life and death.

An area he knew all too well.

Spike drew in a sharp breath, flicking his cigarette to the ground and stomping it out beneath his heavy foot.

It couldn't mean what he thought it meant. It bloody well couldn't.

With as much as he thought he hated Buffy, he would never wish

his lonely existence upon her. She was light and warmth, beauty and glory. To rob her of sunlight would be a worse crime than any of the bloodbaths coloring endless red across his past.

He felt her, though. Caught in the stage between life and death.

It couldn't mean the worst, though. He wouldn't let it.

He would get her out.

And Dracula would taste dust for having touched her.



HOME COMING

THE CASTLE LOOKED as though it had enjoyed five centuries of aging. It sat bathed in the soft glow of moonlight. Spike had been staring at the moon for about a half-hour, blowing pillars of smoke into the sky as he considered the decades that didn't seem so long ago. Those short years when the huge space rock had been the subject of a pissing contest between good ole US of A and Mother Russia. And back even further, to the few poems he'd penned about the moon when he'd been a scrawny, hopeless teenager. He recalled staring at the thing, wondering what it'd be like to walk across it. Explore it proper. See the world from its horizon.

That was a good hundred years before Neil Armstrong uttered the famous words and became immortalized among American heroes.

Spike didn't know when Buffy had become the moon for him. Beautiful and untouchable, capable of seeing things in ways few could imagine. The Slayer was one of thousands in a long line of succession, and there would be thousands more after she was gone. Thousands more like the two he'd snuffed, and brilliantly, he might add. But there would only ever be one Buffy.

He didn't know when his loathing for Buffy changed into something else. Not that he didn't hate the bitch, because he did, but there

was more to it than that. He hadn't hated either of the slayers he'd killed before—he'd killed them because they were the bloody slayers, and he'd been determined to really be good at something. Not just scribbled verses of something bloody awful, but the *crème de la crème* of his new self. Slaying the Slayer out of *choice*, *desire* and not *necessity* had been his true calling.

But neither of the previous girls had been Buffy. Of all the Chosen birds he'd hunted—and there had been a few between the two who snuffed it before he'd had a chance to make his mark—she was his match. In every sodding respect. Sure, that made the thought of killing her all the bloody richer, but he'd be damned all over again before he let Dracula be the one to do it. She was so much better than him—she deserved a worthy death.

A death only he could provide.

Spike huffed and tossed his fag to the ground, stamping its light out beneath his boot. The grass was littered with discarded ciggies, which let him know how long he had been waiting outside the castle, waiting for a brilliant plan to strike. Sad fact was, there was none. Dracula never traveled alone. Charging in without an idea of how to get to her would get them both killed, and there was no fun to be had in that.

Still, the longer he waited, the slimmer his window of opportunity became.

But fuck, waiting went against his every instinct. Buffy was out of his reach. He had to get to her now before all was lost. Before she was lost forever.

Spike released a long sigh. *Turn around. You're not doin' her any good here.*

Walking away from Dracula's castle that night was one of the hardest things he'd ever done. But there was no other option. Not right now.

Spike had never been much for plans. Sitting down and thinking out something was not his forte. When others were involved, others he cared about, he tended to get in over his head and forfeit the high ground. He recalled vividly the last time he'd visited Los Angeles. Angel had had something he wanted, and he'd sworn to himself that he would take back what was rightfully his. Just as he'd sworn that going

to Buffy during the reign of Angelus was the only sure way to attract Drusilla away from her Daddy. Just as he'd thought coming back to Sunnydale to kill the Slayer so many times would actually get anything accomplished. Every plan he'd ever concocted had been foiled—sometimes by the Slayer and her Slayerettes, more often by himself—or abandoned. This time, though, it counted. He had to think of something and something good. He had to be bloody *patient*.

Perhaps he could find Harmony and send her in to distract the ego-stricken master vampire, though knowing his luck, she'd become star-struck and switch sides.

Spike couldn't be sure of anything anymore.

Only that he had so much time to figure out what he was going to do. He heaved a sigh and plucked out another cigarette, striding long, heavy steps in the familiar direction of his crypt.

An hour. He would be back in an hour.

And he hoped to whatever was out there that brilliance had struck by then.



THE LAST THING SPIKE NEEDED WAS TO SEE RILEY FINN. BUT THERE he was, waiting outside his crypt, his face pulled into such a mean scowl the bloke look constipated. More than that, he was brassed. As though Spike had done something wrong—which was typical—but bloody hell, the sod had been here the night before. He'd warned him about Drac.

And fucking yet.

"You know, mate," Spike drawled, "this might be the first time you've respected my privacy enough to wait outside my home for an invitation."

"I was about to kick the door open and I heard you coming up."

"Ah, well there goes that, then."

"I want to know what the hell you're playing at."

He blinked. "I'm sorry, me?"

"Yeah, that's right. Giles says that you're not in on this, but me... I'm not so sure."

Spike snickered, huffing out another cloud of smoke. "Well, that's because you're a wanker and you need to learn that there's not always a conspiracy theory to blame everything on. Especially things that make much more sense when they're blamed on you."

"You have something to say to me?"

"Many, many things."

"Well, I don't—"

"The bloody number of things you don't would be enough to run a sodding Dateline special," he growled. "Lemme guess...you're here to express your dissatisfaction with the fact that Rupert came to me instead of you to find your girl."

"My girl. Let's remember that."

"Yeah, I'm sure the Slayer'd love to learn that when the chips were down, you were more worked up about who did the rescuin' rather than makin' sure the rescuin' got done." Spike shook his head and barked a laugh. "How you ever managed to dupe the poor girl into sharin' your bed is bloody well beyond me. You let her see this side of you when no one else is lookin'? She know how you get your rocks off by bullyin' around others, even those who can't fight back? Fuck me. I never thought her taste in men could get worse after Angel. Guess it's nice to be proven wrong every now and then."

"Angel has nothing to do with this."

Spike chuckled. "Ooh, does someone have an inferiority complex?"

"Shut up."

"I'll say this for Captain Forehead—he has stones. He's been at both ends of an apocalypse more times than you've gotten laid and he makes it worthwhile."

"I'm sure you'd know this personally."

A small smile crossed Spike's face. "Like to know, wouldn't you? I do have an in with pretty much every bird the enormous ponce has ever shagged. Darla stuck with him for two centuries; Dru carried a torch for him for a soddin' generation. And as someone who had to witness the star-crossed lovers and their endless soap opera a couple years back, I can tell you, your girl doesn't work herself up nearly as much over you as she did for him."

Spike saw the blow coming but somehow still didn't manage to

duck out of the way. The sod's meaty fist smashed into his cheek, sending him into the nearest headstone with an admittedly surprising amount of force. The impact tore his skin and sent a trickle of cold blood down his face, but the pain was minimal compared to the satisfaction of ruffling Finn's feathers.

"Yeah," Spike drawled, wiping away blood. "You're the poster boy for family values."

"So says he who doesn't know the meaning of the term."

"Watch how you speak to your elders, boy."

"No, I don't think I will."

Spike laughed again, shaking his head. "You're bloody unbelievable."

"Well, thanks, I try."

"Problem is, mate, you're makin' this personal. All I'm tryin' to do is get the Slayer back in one piece instead of fifty."

"You're not a person. It can't be personal."

"Right. I don't come with a conscience. What's your bloody excuse?"

Riley stepped forward, glowering. "What exactly are you implying?"

Spike's eyes flared and he cast his half-smoked cigarette to the ground in a flash of fury. "I bloody well gave you everythin' you needed to avoid this, White Bread."

"You told me nothing! I asked you if I should check out mansions and—"

"I told you to go home to your girl. Somethin' you obviously had a problem with. And as much as you're hoping, pointin' fingers at me's not gonna get her back." He shook his head again. "She's gone and it's your fault."

"You had something to do with it, I know it."

"Do you listen to yourself when you talk or do you drift in and out?"

"I swear—"

"What in god's name would I have to gain for helpin' Drac?" Spike spread his arms. "Do you know what the wanker does to the girlies he pursues? You don't fuck with sired slayers. No one wins from that."

"And you honestly expect me to believe that Dracula doesn't know about slayers?"

"You gotta understand the thing about him—tall, dark, and deadly...not too much with the smarts. Buffy's the first slayer he's ever had the gall to go after. His usual bird is small and frail and easy to control." He quirked a brow. "That sound like the Slayer to you? Sound like this bloke did his research?"

"Oh, and I suppose you did?"

"You're damn right I did. I didn't meet a slayer for fifteen years after I first heard of them. The first one I killed came three years later. You're for bloody sure I did my homework." He barked a condescending chuckle. "Slayers are the only things in this bloody world that demons have left to fear, besides each other. You honestly think a newbie vamp would go after her without knowin' exactly what he's gettin' into? You're off your bird."

"Then why wouldn't Dracula?"

"Because he's not a newbie vamp. He thinks he's learned everything there is to learn." Spike expelled a deep breath and cast a hand through his hair. "I'm not nearly as stupid as you'd like me to be, boy. You wanna learn yourself about slayers, you come to me. I've done nothin' but follow the sacred line since I first heard tale. There's no one who knows it better."

"No."

"No? You really wanna argue with me about this?"

"No. I mean, you're just as stupid as I'd like you to be." A pause. "Just not in this."

It wasn't an apology or even an acknowledgment, but it was something. And it was as far, Spike wagered, as he and Captain Cardboard would ever get. Either way, time was running out, and he had yet to conjure a suitable plan that did not involve storming a castle and becoming a pile of dust.

"You better toddle off," he said. "Slayer's still out there. I'm sure she won't be too pleased when she learns her super honey decided to talk up all the reasons he thinks he's better than me instead of comin' to her rescue."

That seemed to strike a nerve, and for a minute he thought the

soldier was going to waste more time by scolding him on more rot that didn't matter. Had to be the sod's way of coping. After all, it couldn't be simple, knowing you were the reason your girlfriend was in the clutches of the world's most notorious vampire.

"Yeah, well...yeah." Riley started past him at that, not meeting his eyes. "I still have the north side of town to hit. I just...I wanted to know if you knew anything."

"Accordin' to you, that's impossible."

"Just let us know if you get word, okay?"

You're the last person I'm goin' to when I get her out.

"Yeah," Spike agreed. It was easier than the other. "Right."

And then the door to his crypt was between them, and that was that.

He was left to darkness.

Only...he wasn't alone.

It came slowly at first, the knowledge that something was different here. Something had changed. It was a presence he knew painfully well—a presence that struck both a terrible fear and the most overwhelming sense of relief through his worn body. There was blood. That unmistakable scent of the essence of the undead. She was here, stretched between thin lines of life and death. She was here.

But she was dead.

"Bloody hell," Spike gasped, freezing at the entry.

No. Please no.

She was standing in the middle of the room, her back to him. And she was as still as death.

"Slayer."



TOOTH AND CLAW

EVERY TIME she opened her eyes, he was still there.

She prayed, too. Prayed to a god that had stopped answering her prayers years ago. A god she had never truly allowed herself to believe in. As always, though, her pleas went unanswered, and she was left staring down at a dead man.

She could smell his blood from across the room. She knew exactly how warm it was, how rich. How good it would taste if she only gave in.

The smell was intoxicating. And he had no broken skin.

A dead man Dracula had brought her. A nameless nobody who'd lived in Sunnydale and had been alive only a while ago. He had been killed because of her. Because she needed to feed. Because she was a vampire.

She was so cold. Her veins were frozen. Her heart didn't beat. Her lungs didn't breathe. And she was so hungry.

She needed warmth.

The dead man was losing warmth. Every second that she remained still, the colder he became.

Soon, he would be just as dead as her, only better off for it.

She recalled the way her slayees would often gaze at her throat with

longing. At the time, she'd found it disgusting. Just another example of their inhumanity—how they looked at her and saw food. Not a person, just a meal waiting to be consumed. Then there had been the day she had taunted Spike while he was chained in Giles's tub, running her fingers up and down the column of her neck to showcase exactly what he needed and would never have.

She hated herself for that. For ever mocking this hunger.

The man across the room was dead. The thrum of his pulse was not even there to tempt her, only the smell of his chilling blood. Blood that was just beneath his pale skin, waiting for her taste.

This hunger that would not leave her.

This hunger that scratched at her insides, demanding to be quenched.

Tears raked her cheeks. She had no conception of how much time had passed. How long Dracula had kept her here. Distantly, she was more than aware that she had the strength to break free, but for reasons beyond understanding, her muscles felt newborn and feeble.

She had the terrible suspicion that that was something easily remedied by giving in. By succumbing to her darker nature, and drinking the dead man while his blood was still fresh.

She had seen vampires crawl out of their graves, surging with new strength.

She had the strength. It just wasn't working for her now.

The dead man was still staring at her. And her hunger wasn't going anywhere.

Buffy released a choked sob, tossing the mirror a glance. Nothing stared back.

I am not the Slayer anymore.

She felt the bones in her face shift. Felt the change spread through her. Felt the stab of hunger intensify. Every inch of her ached. Her fangs craved flesh. Her body craved the life that had been denied her. She thought of all the times she had complained about her growling stomach, how her mouth used to water at the idea of chicken parmesan and slices of greasy pizza. How the thought of warm food made her feel sick yet amplified the hunger gnawing her insides at the same time.

Buffy crawled to her feet and approached the dead man.

She had to get past him and into the hallway. She had to break free.

If Dracula tried to stop her, she would force him to kill her. She would not become a thing. A creature of the night. She would not.

The dead man was staring.

It was like falling very fast and knowing what waited at the bottom. She saw herself from a distance and could do nothing. A foreign roar tore through her throat, and the next minute, pure ambrosia flooded her mouth. It was mild—not warm, but not cold. Sticky. And delicious. She slurped everything his neck would give, fangs ripping through dead flesh, fingers clawing at him to draw more of his precious essence to the surface.

It was only when she caught herself licking the fingers of one hand while the other dug into the dead man's belly that she recoiled in horror. Blood covered the floor around her. Her skin was smeared with red. There was a moist sensation painted around her mouth and her tongue still tingled with his taste.

"Oh god," she gasped, tearing away from him. "Oh my god."

The dead man's eyes had turned accusatory, the frozen look of horror on his face now crying out in pain.

"Oh god..."

Dracula had known this would happen. He had put the dead man right in front of the door because he had known she would try to leave, and that she wouldn't be able to.

He had made her drink.

The pain twisting her insides hardened into something more familiar, more comforting. Anger. Oh, thank god for anger. Anger had her senses honing, extending beyond the perimeters of the room so she felt, for the first time since she'd awakened, the world that lived outside these walls. Felt Dracula himself, like he was a pulsing heartbeat, and there were others. Cronies. Undead women pleasuring undead men, whole orgies of fun happening just down the hall.

And there was something else. Someone was outside. Someone was here.

And she knew who.

Moreover, Dracula knew he was there, too. The connection she

had with her sire was powerful. Angel had always said so but she'd never appreciated that until now. Couldn't understand and, if she was being entirely honest, had never wanted to. Not beyond what it had meant to him to stake Darla in front of her—a decision she had never been brave enough to ask if he regretted. Except she had the answer now, because hate him though she did, part of her rebelled at the very thought of dusting her maker.

But she would. She had to. She had to get the hell out of here before he did anything else to her. Something worse.

Maybe the visitor could help. Hell, she thought that might be the reason she felt Dracula's outrage. Another vampire was encroaching on his territory—an old vampire who might actually pose a threat if he wanted to start a turf war. Dracula was old and strong, yes, but the interloper was too. Though it had been easy to forget over the last year, especially with him chipped, Buffy knew firsthand just how strong Spike actually was.

That was who was here. She knew it on a bone-deep level that terrified her. And he felt her too, she was certain—it was why he'd come. Maybe to gloat, which would be like him, but maybe... Just maybe for something else. One thing Spike had never been was predictable.

And now, he just might be her only way out.

Buffy sprang to her feet and shot for the door, all but ripping it from its hinges in the heat of her anguished fury. The metallic chime of nuts and bolts hitting the floor rang through the still air. A chunk of wood found its way into her hand, and she bolted down the hallway with hell on her heels.

Spike was old and powerful, and that was a threat to the Count. As long as her maker was distracted, she could gain the upper hand.

With fresh blood coursing through her dead body, she would see him dust now. Now or never.

He would know the fury of a sired Slayer.

And die begging her for her forgiveness.



THE CASTLE WAS DEAD.

Every vampire in the building had been distracted by Spike's presence. By the time she'd unleashed her rage, it was too late to stop her. She'd watched herself from far away—a torn, tattered girl who wore a familiar face and a blood-stained negligee, fighting her way through those who were now her kinsmen. She'd moved with a speed that seemed unreal, thrown punches that sent bodies through walls. The stake she'd fashioned from her destroyed door had ended up doing little more than slowing her down once she'd gotten going. At some point, she'd launched it away, then watched as it carved its way through four different chests before clattering to the ground. The others had screamed and rushed, some for her and some for the exits, and she remembered thinking she needed to be everywhere at once...and then she had been. Bouncing off walls, twisting and sometimes kicking heads off necks, carving a dusty path through those separating her from Dracula.

None had made it out. Every time they came close, she'd beat them. The raw power surging through her muscles wasn't entirely foreign—she remembered the struggle of containing this strength before. Back during her brief stint as a vampire, thanks to Lucky Nineteen, how unleashed she'd felt. It wasn't normal for slayers to kick off heads, after all, but here she had. And it had been so easy.

In the end, Dracula hadn't even tried to escape. He'd seemed to know it was futile. Instead, he'd cowered in a corner, watching as she laid waste to the place he'd built. When at last she'd turned her eyes on him, he'd given her a trembling smile and told her she was beautiful. That they could make a new family together. That nothing would give him greater joy.

Buffy had roared and launched herself at him. He'd twisted to stake her, having apparently claimed her fallen weapon, and she'd punched a hole into his chest before he could so much as graze her skin. She'd grabbed his heart in much the same way she'd grabbed Adam's power core, and conducted a little experiment of her own.

What happened if she squeezed a vampire's heart? Apparently, there was a fourth way to dust. And Buffy watched as it happened—as

Drac's eyes had gone wide with shock then horror. As he'd faded into nothing.

And now she was on the floor in a sea of her maker's dust. He had killed her, but it was only now she was dying.

Her sire was gone.

I have to get out of here.

There was no one stopping her anymore. She was free. Her own bloodbath had seen to that.

But there was nowhere to run. She couldn't go home. She couldn't go to Giles's, or turn to her friends. Not like this. The thirst was already coming back, and if her experience upstairs had taught her anything, it was that she had little-to-no willpower around fresh blood. A man who was already dead was one thing—living beings with live blood... Her fangs itched just at the thought.

But it was more than the hunger—it was fear. Not necessarily what they would do to her, but the way they would look at her. Giles's horror and disappointment. Xander's disgust. Riley's outright hatred. Her mom and Willow might understand, but there was no guarantee. All of them had learned the hard way that there was no such thing as a good vampire. Even ones with souls.

She couldn't turn to them.

There is someone.

And there was. Another option. The *only* option.

Spike was a vampire. Spike was *her* vampire. Spike would understand. Or maybe he'd dust her. Either way, she had nothing to lose.

She had to get to Spike.

And pray that if he didn't help her, he'd at least make it quick.



A STRANGE SENSE OF CALM CAME OVER HER THE MINUTE SHE crawled through the ground and into the sanctuary of Spike's crypt. And it was Spike's crypt—even though she had never taken the grand tour or seen the lower quarters, she knew the place was his. Just as she knew his scent—something she'd never inhaled as a vampire but felt all the same. There was no question, only knowledge. This was right.

Buffy took a moment to look around, absorbing her surroundings in this surprisingly homey place that should be anything but. There was a bed in the corner, a few random belongings scattered along the floor, and the scent of cigarettes polluted the air. The space was lived-in. Lived-in even though the occupant didn't have a heartbeat or a pulse. And this, too, was comforting. Buffy had never considered what domesticity might look like for vampires, but perhaps it was this. A different kind of normal.

She and Spike were not friends, of course—they had never been that—and just a few days ago, they had been enemies. Granted, the sort of enemies who occasionally helped each other out, but enemies nonetheless. Now she was in his home, and for the first time since she'd opened her eyes in Dracula's castle, she felt...

Well, *okay*.

Though she didn't know why. She'd just gone from one unreality to the next. Maybe it was because she was in a graveyard and part of her knew it was where she belonged now. More so than anywhere she might otherwise call home.

It didn't take long to locate the hatch that led to the upper level—the part of the crypt she did know. This space was empty, too, but she didn't care. It was okay here.

Except there was someone outside. Someone who was not Spike.

Riley.

Buffy fought back the temptation to draw in a deep breath. She could smell his blood from here. The hunger burning her insides roared its need. The energy she'd stolen from the dead man at Dracula's castle had fueled her rampage to freedom, but with that behind her, she found she was hungry again. Not just hungry, actually, ravenous. And Riley smelled better to her now than he had since she'd first met him.

If he came in here she might not be able to control herself.

Fresh blood. Warm blood. Live blood.

No, no, no. God no.

But then there was another presence. The same one she'd felt so intensely at the castle, and part of her calmed. Then worried again. While Spike might be strong enough to stop her, or at least keep her

from doing something like ripping off Riley's head, there was no guarantee that he *would*. Even by normal people's standards, the two weren't exactly the best of friends. Hell, Riley had asked her more than once why she allowed Spike to live and more than once she'd not had an answer, except she didn't kill helpless things.

Though Spike was far from helpless.

And, from the sound of things, he was angry.

Time seemed to stand still. Voices were raised—Riley and Spike fired shots back and forth, though Buffy couldn't bring herself to listen to what was said, rather just waited for the storm to pass. Waited, and relaxed when the thrum of Riley's heart grew distant. When she knew he was walking away. At the moment, at least, safe from her fangs and Spike's indifference.

She felt the door open more than she heard it. Her future lived on what happened in these next few seconds.

Still, she wasn't prepared when it arrived.

"Bloody hell," Spike gasped. "Slayer."

Tears pricked her eyes. She wasn't the Slayer, though. Not anymore.

"I'm sorry," she said, nearly startling herself with the sound of her own voice. She turned to face him, crossing her arms when she remembered she was still wearing the negligee. "I...didn't know where else to go. I didn't think..."

"Buffy, I..." He swallowed, raking his eyes up and down her body. "Fuck."

She pressed her lips together and her tears burned hotter. Except no, they didn't. That was her imagination. These tears were cold. "You can kill me now if you want. I won't fight you. Just tell the others—"

"Kill you?" He reeled as though slapped, his nostrils flaring.

"I mean...you can now. I'm not human anymore." She barked a laugh as though what she'd said was funny. "You can kill me."

He stared at her in that Spike way of his. Seeing too much, seeing her straight to the bone. He always had.

"Not gonna kill you, love." Though the surprise hadn't melted off his face, something behind his eyes had hardened. "Prefer a challenge if I'm gonna do in my third slayer. Sorry to disappoint, but if you're aching for death, you gotta put up a fight."

“Trust me when I say you really don’t want to fight me now.” Buffy clenched and unclenched her fists, tearing her gaze from his. “There’s nothing left at the castle. I’m the last of his... Well, I’m the last. So, again, if you want—”

“Slayer—”

“Don’t call me that,” she snapped, and that was it. All she could hold in. Whatever had gotten her this far chose that moment to go on vacation, and the next thing she knew, she was on the ground, an awful sound peeling through her lips as her body folded in on itself.

She heard him swear and move forward, and was certain these were her last seconds. Of all the ways she’d imagined dying over the years, crying at Spike’s feet had not made the list. Not even the honorable mention category. But the part of her dead-set on self-preservation had taken a hike, and she didn’t care anymore. Not about pride or her legacy, or even the story Spike would undoubtedly weave when telling others how he’d bagged his third slayer. This one, one he’d once said was not the begging kind, literally at his mercy, giving him permission.

It didn’t matter how he told her story. She’d be dust.

But the blow she expected never came. Instead, his scent enveloped her and then she was in his arms. And not the way one would hold an enemy. Spike carried her to his couch and sank into the cushions, squeezing her to his chest in a way that was almost...

“That’s it, pet, let it out,” he murmured into her hair. “I was there, you know. At the castle. Rupes asked for my help and I... Well, no one does in my slayer except me. And especially not a tosser like Drac.” A pause. “Would have gotten you out. I bloody swear it.”

She nodded, believing him. Feeling how much he meant it, and for some reason, not once thinking to question it. Because he had been there, and she knew him well enough to trust he would’ve knocked down all the walls to get inside if that was what it took. He was persistent like that. “Dracula felt you. The house felt you. I felt you, too. You were there, and he was going to kill you if you didn’t leave.”

“I didn’t... Didn’t meant to leave. Just needed to suss out a plan, is all.”

“He would have killed you,” Buffy reiterated. “But I killed him first.” The words chased away her fatigue. Suddenly, it was all real. It

was all too real. The dead man. The dust of her sire. The others of her line that she had slain without prejudice. Something inside her broke. "I killed him. I killed him and ran. I ran here."

Her voice was raw, nearly torn, and the tears wouldn't stop coming.

Her dead sire. The thing that lived inside her screamed its outrage. She needed something so desperately—a hug, punch, a stake to the chest, anything, and Spike was the only one around. Before she could stop herself, she threw her arms around his neck and buried her face in his shoulder, and unleashed.

Now, she thought as she shook. *Now he'll dust me. Now.*

But he didn't. Instead, he let her cling to him and cry. And after a few seconds, she felt him running his hands through her hair, felt his lips at her throat, dropping kisses. Soft, soothing kisses accompanied by soft, soothing words. It was so completely the opposite of what she'd expected, she began to wonder if she'd dusted for real and this was some *Last Temptation of Christ*-like fantasy death sequence.

Then she remembered Dru—that when she'd met Spike, his life had revolved around caring for a woman in poor health. Maybe she'd shocked him into falling back on an old habit. And any second, he'd snap back to himself, remember that he hated her and give her the death he'd always promised.

But that didn't happen, either. When at last her cries subsided, he brushed a tender kiss across her forehead. "Hush, little love," he murmured. "Spike's got you. It's okay, now."

His voice was so soothing. She could almost believe him.

When he carried her downstairs, she didn't know. Time and space moved, and she was on his bed in a blink. Spike was beside her, watching her with a guarded expression she did not understand. He was quiet for a long minute, then placed a gentle hand on her belly.

"Have you fed?" he asked softly.

The word chilled her, and she thought of the dead man.

"Yes."

Spike froze for a minute but nodded. His eyes dropped to her negligee. "Did he...dress you in this?" he demanded, fingering the flimsy strap.

Buffy shifted and wrapped her arms around her middle. "Yes."

A twisted curse tumbled from his mouth, and he leaned back to retrieve a blanket that was bunched at the headboard. "Here," he said, draping the fabric over her shoulders. "Buffy, he didn't...did he?"

Part of her felt like laughing at the question. No, Dracula hadn't raped her in the traditional sense, but every inch of her was tainted now. Violated. He might as well have. "No."

His shoulders relaxed. "Guess we count our blessings where we find 'em, eh?"

"Blessings?" The word tasted foul. "Blessings? I'm hurting all over. I've drunk blood. He killed someone and I drank. And then I felt you were there, and they were distracted." She paused at this, still uncertain how or why it was true but at the same time very sure that it was. And if nothing else, she needed to tell him. "You're the way I got out."

"Much as I'd love to take the credit, seems a bit gracious for you, Slayer."

"I told you not to call me that. I'm not a slayer anymore."

"You'll always be the Slayer," Spike replied. "The wanker can't take that away from you."

"But he did." She choked back a sob. "He wanted me to love him. Be his queen. He said he would...he was going to make me..."

"He's gone now."

"Then why do I hurt so much?"

Spike pursed his lips. "Because he made you. He's your sire. He was part of you. Killing him meant..." He trailed off with a sigh. "The connection between vamps and their makers is one of the strongest in our world. Newly risen vamps rely on that connection, even if they never see their sire again. Your demon's in mourning."

Buffy nodded numbly. She'd known that, of course. Already thought as much herself, but there was some comfort in hearing someone else say it—made it something that was true rather than just something that someone had told her once upon a time. "You're not going to kill me?"

The corner of Spike's mouth kicked upward. "Not today."

"Why?"

"Cause this isn't how I do things, love. Never has been. Not much fun in kicking a bird who can't kick back."

"I can kick back."

"Right, but you won't. And there's the difference. Day ever comes when I kill you proper, we do it right. Warrior's death and all that. You deserve it."

Buffy trembled again, though this time she thought it might have been with laughter. "You really, really don't want to take me on now."

"Sweetheart, you're just gonna get me hot with that talk." He smirked and kissed her temple again. "Never backed down from a challenge. Bloody hell, that's why I came back to good ole Sunnyhell in the first place. Had unfinished business."

"And you don't want to finish it?"

"Like I said, pet, not today. But ask again some other time."

Buffy nodded. She shouldn't find this comforting, but she did. Shouldn't feel like smiling, but miraculously, she did. Her instincts had guided her to Spike for a reason; perhaps this was it. "I have nowhere to go."

"So stay here."

"I feel so..."

"I know."

"You'll help me?"

He nodded. "Whatever you need, love."

"Even though you... You might not want to kill me today, but you've wanted me dead forever. Not killing me doesn't mean taking care of me." She wrinkled her nose and glanced around. "Doesn't mean...bringing me to your bedroom and being all weirdly nice."

"I'm an odd bloke. What can I say?"

That was an understatement.

"The oddest."

Something in Spike's eyes changed, then. Warmed. And then he smiled—a true smile, like the one he'd given her forever ago when they'd been under Willow's spell. Beautiful and radiant and genuine. If she had any tears left, she might have started bawling again, because that smile did what nothing else could.

It made her feel like maybe things would be all right.

"That's what it means to be a rebel, right? Go against the grain. So yeah, Slayer, I'll help you. Whatever you need. It'll be fine. You have

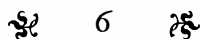
my bloody word.” He paused and glanced to the head of the bed. “You need rest now. Go ahead and tuck in. I’ll take the floor, yeah?”

“Thank you.”

“Anythin’ you need, you just ask.” He nodded to the space beside the bed. “I’ll be right there.”

She didn’t examine the disappointment that chased away her peace when he moved away. Opening that door seemed dangerous, and though she was stronger than she’d ever been, exploring anything regarding Spike right now too closely might just be the thing that killed her.

So she curled up in the sheets that smelled like him, closed her eyes, and prayed for a dreamless sleep.



SOUND AND FURY

THE NIGHT WAS CLOSING in on her, and there was nowhere to run. No air to breathe. No water to drink. No food to satisfy her hunger. She saw it all from far away, watching herself tear down empty corridors and scream for help that would never come. The walls were alight with torches, but she didn't need them to see. Her eyes were made for darkness. It was what she was now. What she had become through the nothing that surrounded her.

A flash. He stood at the end of the corridor, his eyes heavy with sorrow.

"You have killed me."

"I didn't mean to," she gasped, vision blurring with tears. "I needed out. You wouldn't let me out!"

A curious smile spread across his lips.

"You only needed to love me a little. I would have given you the world."

Something inside her screamed for release. Clawing at her insides, ripping her apart. Yarn by yarn. She felt she had reached the lowest form of herself. Standing there in the empty hallway, gazing at her dead sire. The voice inside her demanded her own blood for his. That she turned the stake that had landed in her hands to her chest and end her suffering before it consumed her.

This is not right. This is not the way of things.

Dracula had known dust because she willed it so. It was what she'd wanted. What she'd needed to escape. The things he'd told her had filled her with rage and disgust. And she'd killed him because that was what she did.

She killed vampires.

It did not matter that she was one.

The force within her screamed its outrage.

"You ended me. Now you know pain."

She was bleeding from the inside, and she couldn't stop it. The walls were closing in and there was no one. Even her sire had abandoned her. Dracula's visage from the far end of the corridor disappeared. Dissolved into dust and the torches were going out.

She would be left in darkness.

She would be left alone.



BUFFY AWOKE WITH A MUFFLED SCREAM, CHOKING ON TEARS.

The room around her was unfamiliar but comforting, all except the piercing, guttural wail that pained her ears. She couldn't think. Her chest ached from the weight of the air her brain told her she needed. It was a lie, she knew, but it felt like a fact. She was breaking from the inside, and no one could help her. No one could take this pain away. It was all she was.

"Buffy. Buffy!"

Buffy whipped her head back and forth. Someone was on the bed with her. Someone who had not been there before. Strong, soothing hands grasped her flailing wrists and coaxed her battling body from the mattress. She was suddenly pressed against someone, a man who had an unbeating heart just like hers. And though it shouldn't have, the knowledge calmed her.

She wrapped her arms around him, buried her face in his shoulder, and sobbed.

"Shhhh," Spike murmured, running a hand through her hair. "S'okay, sweetheart. You're safe here."

"It hurts," she gasped against him. Her eyes were sore from crying. "It hurts so much. I can't make it stop."

"You had no choice. If you hadn't killed him, you wouldn't've gotten out."

She didn't even have to tell him what hurt. He knew. Somehow, he knew. And he was rocking her back and forth, keeping her tight within the security of his arms. She had no idea how Spike had become her comforter, but he had. He gave her peace even if she could not use it. The thing living inside her was in agony. Wretched, ugly agony and she felt the weight of its anger. It made her bleed. Wounds that time had healed were open again.

"I can't make the hurt stop," she whimpered. "It's eating me up. I can't breathe."

Spike brushed a kiss across her forehead. "You don't need to breathe, baby," he murmured. "It makes the hurt worse."

Baby. Had he ever called her that? She wasn't sure, but if he had, she hadn't enjoyed it. Hell, she'd probably hated it like she'd hated each name he'd ever called her. Especially after the spell that nearly ended in an emergency demonic annulment. But what she remembered more right now was how she'd felt before the spell had ended—how she'd been bubbly and happy. How she'd known, scary as the future was, she'd have a partner she could count on. One who understood her, appreciated her strength, and wouldn't expect her to be normal. Wouldn't even *want* her to be normal.

Why did she keep thinking about that stupid spell?

"You breathe," she replied, forcing herself out of the past and back to the now as her sobs began to quiet.

"Mmm," he murmured in agreement. "I've also been a vampire a lot longer than you, and my body knows it." He was still rocking her; somehow, her legs had found their way around his waist, and she was in his lap. Her breasts were pressed flat against his chest. Something hard was pressed against the apex of her thighs, but she refused to allow her mind to wander again.

Of course he would be aroused. She was in his lap. He was a guy. Case closed.

She wouldn't think of how her body responded. She was emotion-

ally imbalanced and she wouldn't allow her grief to overwhelm her control. She wouldn't ask him to comfort her with sex, though she found it strange that the idea had even manifested.

He felt familiar, still. Again, she recalled their ill-fated engagement. How he had felt then. How he had given her bliss for just a few hours before the spell waned and she'd been herself again.

But she wouldn't think about that, either.

"What does that mean?" she asked instead, her voice hoarse. "Your body knows it but mine doesn't?"

Spike was still for a moment. "It's the soul, I'd wager," he replied. "Sired slayers keep their souls. The human soul isn't supposed to know what this feels like. Why on bloody earth do you think Angel spent the better part of the last century in the sodding gutter?"

"I always thought it was the guilt."

"Mighta been part of it," he admitted. "Not the whole."

"I feel cold." She shivered. "God, it hurts so much."

"I know, kitten." He brushed another kiss across her forehead. "I'd do anythin' to make it better."

"I still don't understand."

"Understand what?"

"Why you're here. Why you let me stay." Buffy was trembling when she glanced up, meeting his eyes. He burned her with his gaze, melting away the cold. "Why you came after me. Was it...did Giles... He give you money?"

A beat before he answered. "He came by here. Told me you were gone and that Dracula was the one that had you. Asked me to find you and bring you home."

"So you came after me because Giles wanted you to."

"No."

"Spike—"

"I came after you because I wanted to. Rupert offered me money, but I..." He released a breath and shuddered. "I didn't get you out. You did that yourself."

"I got out because you were there."

"Buffy—"

"You gave me what I needed to get out. I don't know what it was,

but it wouldn't have happened if you hadn't been there." She pressed her brow to his. It was so strange. She remembered hating him. She remembered it so clearly. She remembered wanting to stake him half a dozen times. She had bruised his body with her fists more times than she could imagine. She had done nothing to deserve his kindness, or want it when offered. She thought of herself, the shade of a girl that had been alive just two days before. The girl that had hated Spike with the prejudice of a slayer.

There was no place right now that she would feel safer. Spike's arms were around her. She was dressed in a skimpy negligee that showed more than it concealed, she was in the bed of her former enemy, and she was sitting on his erection. And it didn't bother her.

Not at all.

"You came for me and you don't want the money?"

He snickered. "Never said I don't want the money. I'm just not takin' it."

"Why?"

"But I didn't do the job, did I?" A pause. "Course, it's dosh and a bloke can always use spare change. So I might filch it. More fun that way anyway, yeah?"

"You could say you did. Got me out. I'd tell Giles to—"

"I don't want money for savin' you, Slayer. I never even..." Spike expelled a deep breath, and she envied him the ability. "I went after you because I wanted to get you out. Because somethin' happened to me when he told me that you were gone."

"What happened?"

He was still for a moment. "I about lost my head."

"Why?"

"Buffy—"

"You're calling me by my name. You're telling me that you came after me because you wanted to, and not for the money." She drew back again. "You're different. I'm not the only one here who's different. You came after me. You hate me, Spike."

A smile crossed his lips. "Thought as much, myself. Earlier tonight, in fact. But turns out I don't anymore."

"What happened?"

“Dracula took you away.”

“And?”

His eyes flooded with that emotion that had crippled her when she had turned around upstairs. When their gazes had met, and he had known what happened. That she was a vampire. That she had come to him. He had known it all, and he hadn't said a word.

He had just looked at her and broken her heart.

She didn't know it was possible for people she didn't love to break her heart.

“And my world about ended,” he said, then glanced away with a heavy sigh. “Didn't know that was what was happenin' at the time. Still a mite confused about it, but when I saw you upstairs...somethin' went off. Clicked for me. But you don't need this right now.”

“I want to know.”

“You won't like me anymore.”

“What makes you think I like you now?”

There was something in his eyes that made the cold melt completely. And then there was only heat. Then he thrust his hips forward just a little so that his erection prodded the swollen wetness between her legs. And *oh my god* she was turned on. She hadn't realized it until that moment, but she was extremely turned on. A low mewl tumbled between her lips before she could stop it.

“Oh, I don't know,” he replied, his voice thick. “Call it a hunch.”

“Spike...”

“Yeah. I think you might like me just a little.”

“I...” She tore her eyes away from his, though there was nowhere to look that didn't lead back to him. “I just...I...”

It felt good when he chuckled. He was still pressed against her, and she felt the movement rumble through her skin. Rattle her insides. It fed the heat he gave her with softer warmth.

“It's okay,” he said softly. “Don't be embarrassed. Vampires feel it more fiercely than humans.”

“Feel it?”

“Your sex drive is amplified. You feel more.” He paused and cocked his head. “Are you blushing?”

“Spike—”

"I didn't think vampires could blush, but I'd swear—"

"I'm not blushing."

Spike smiled. "Not gonna ask you for anythin', so don't stake a bloke for tryin' to make a point. Didn't expect to feel like this, either. Just can't stand to see you cry."

"You can't?"

"Turns out that's right. Don't reckon I've seen you cry before tonight and I couldn't stand it."

Buffy drew in a breath and winced at the pain it brought. His arms tightened. "Feel...like this?" she asked when the ache subsided. "What's *like this*?"

A sigh tore through his lips. "It's nothin', love."

"No, it's not nothing. You would've told me if it was just nothing."

"I just did tell you it's nothing. You won't believe me and that's frankly not my problem."

"Spike, please."

His eyes softened, but his resolution didn't waver. Instead, he coaxed her back to the mattress, disentangling her legs from around his waist. A small murmur of complaint rumbled through his throat as her weight shifted off his cock, but he didn't grab her back. Not even when she was lying before him in the scrap of a thing Dracula had dressed her in.

"You should get some sleep," he said gently, placing a hand on her stomach.

"I'm hurting."

"I know, pet."

Before she could stop herself, she arched her back into his touch. "It felt better when... I can't do this."

He released a sigh and edged up beside her, lying down and taking her hand in his. "It'll get better. I promise you." He paused. "You're strong. You're the strongest person I've ever met. The strongest bloody slayer I've ever fought. You'll get through this."

"Does it matter that I'm not so sure?"

"Well, I am." He held her eyes for a minute, then looked away. "If that means anything."

"It means something, Spike. It means a lot."

Spike studied her for a moment. "Right then," he replied, then sat up. "You should get some rest. Body's been through a bit of a shock. Dunno what it's like to kill a sire, but I know what it's like to leave one. Imagine you could use more kip now."

"Will you stay?" Buffy jerked upward. Just the thought of the empty mattress beside her had her trembling with dread. "Please?"

"Stay?"

Buffy tugged on his hand until the length of his arm splayed across her abdomen. "Stay with me."

"Slayer..."

"I mean...here. In the bed." She turned away shyly when his eyes went wide. God, she'd have expected him to smirk and say something stake-worthy. To gloat that all it had taken to get her in a place where she felt like she needed him was a bit of cold comfort. But he didn't. Instead, the look he gave her was somewhere between wonder and awe. "It doesn't hurt...as much," she continued. "When you were holding me, it didn't hurt as much."

Spike licked his lips and smiled at her, spreading his arms. She snuggled against him without hesitation. Curled in his embrace. Pressed against his unbeating heart. Wrapped in his scent.

Safe in the arms of the enemy. She'd never thought it possible.

She didn't know what had changed between them. If he was helping her now because she was no longer the Slayer, or because she was Buffy.

She hoped it was the latter.

THE FIRST DAY

A SOFT BREATH fanned the skin behind her ear and tickled her scalp, and the arm around her middle tightened as Spike shifted behind her. His body molded hers flawlessly, the persistent state of his arousal nestled into the curve of her ass. Buffy lay awake in his embrace for a long while before she dared herself to open her eyes. Before she allowed the peace that had guarded her through the night to face the chance of sabotage.

She had been so terrified that she would awake and be in the castle. Be in the room Dracula had locked her in. The place that had been her prison for hours that had felt like years. That everything that had happened last night would turn out to have been a dream.

Spike's arms tightened around her once more, and he murmured something unintelligible into her hair.

Four days ago, the possibility that she would sleep the night in Spike's arms would have been met with both amusement and disgust. That had changed somewhere between waking up under Dracula's thrall and making the conscious decision to seek her former enemy for sanctuary. Last night, something had changed. Something she wanted to change. She had seen something in Spike's eyes. She had come to him for help, and he had opened his arms for her.

She could have gone anywhere. She could have gone to Angel, but every time she pictured him, she saw the disappointment in his eyes. The judgment. It might have been all in her head, but she didn't know. Just as she didn't know how her friends would react. Sure, she was still Buffy, but she also wasn't. Not the Buffy they loved. That Buffy had died in Dracula's castle.

The Buffy that had awakened had gone to Spike.

And Spike had helped. Spike's arms were around her. His erection was pressed into her backside. He was rumbling incoherent nothings into her ear. He was the way she had gotten out. He was holding her in his arms now, and she felt...good.

Then Spike began to move, and she felt even better. It was subtle at first—a flex of his hips, a caress of his hand. Little things that told her, even in his sleep, how aware of her he was. That the things he'd said last night hadn't been empty words—that he did, on some level, want her here with him.

A throaty moan rumbled through his throat, and she felt every part of her body respond.

“Mmm.” His hand slid over her like it had a life of its own before settling at her belly. “Buffy...”

She froze. He didn't sound awake, but a girl couldn't be too sure. “Spike?”

There was no intelligible response. He mumbled something and nuzzled her throat, hand inching northward until he was palming her breast, playing with her nipple through the material of her negligee.

Oh god.

Buffy drew in a deep breath and winced at the sharp pain that struck in retaliation. She honestly didn't know what to do. Spike had not been coy with the fact that he wanted her the night before. He hadn't done anything about it, but he hadn't tried to hide his erection. He hadn't seemed particularly embarrassed, either.

He was asleep now. He was caressing her. He had murmured her name.

“Buffy,” he gasped again, thrusting his hips into her backside. “Fuck, Buffy...”

Vampires feel it more fiercely than humans, he'd said. There was absolutely no chance that Spike had gone to bed with a woman in the past century without it being sexual. The fact that she was in his arms now, that he smelled her, that she had slept in his bed had his body feeling things stronger than a human would.

He was dreaming of her. He had murmured her name.

Something pooled in the bottom of her stomach. A fire she barely recognized. Her skin was blazing. She felt a warm rush of fluid between her legs and nearly gasped aloud. She had not thought to feel anything like this ever again—even with the way her body had betrayed her the night before. That had seemed like something out of a dream or someone else's life—a fluke brought on by circumstance. Not real heat. But damn, she couldn't ignore it now. The pulsing between her legs was impossible to ignore, and it was for him.

Spike.

And now Spike's hand was sliding down her abdomen, slipping under her nightie. She parted instinctively to welcome his touch and had to bite down on the inside of her cheek when she felt his fingers against her sex. Soft at first, tentative, but then he growled in her ear and began rubbing her in earnest. Buffy stifled a small sob of pleasure, lifting her leg to curl around his. She didn't want to think right now. Didn't want to allow the reality that surrounded her a chance to break through. She needed this. She needed *escape*.

Spike.

His name rushed through her mind. It was Spike that was touching her. Spike whose cock was grinding against her backside. Spike whose caresses her body invited. She needed this. She needed to know that. She had died. She hadn't lost her humanity. Hadn't lost herself. Could still feel and have and want. And right now, she wanted this.

"Buffy," Spike moaned again, fingers slipping inside her. "So hot. So soft. My slayer."

Her vision blurred with tears, and she thrust her hips into his touch. God, if he was this good at this when he was asleep, just how good was he awake? Would he give her a chance to find out? Because with his fingers pumping in and out of her, with his cock against her

ass, she wanted to know. *Needed* to know. Needed to feel him and this and a whole lot more. His thumb settled over her clit and she thought she might cry. Hot pinpricks of pleasure stabbed at her insides, filling her with warmth that she thought never to have again. The cold gone now for the fire he was stirring.

I should wake him up.

Yeah, she *should* a lot of things. But she wouldn't. Her skin was warm for the first time in days. Heat began to spread through her cold body, a foreign pressure commanding her as he stroked her closer to the edge.

"Buffy..."

A muted cry tumbled through her lips as Spike jerked to wakefulness, and she felt him tense behind her.

"Fuck, Buffy..." He was panting hard, his erection still pressed against her ass. His thumb poised over her clit, touching her but not caressing. Everything had come to a standstill.

Buffy gasped again and buried her face in the pillow she had cradled all night, lost somewhere beyond mortification. She didn't know what was worse: not finishing or begging him to continue. Risking the chance that he wouldn't. She needed this so desperately, but through it all, she remembered that the one she trusted and cared about had no reason to feel the same for her. He had taken her in; that didn't mean anything. She thought it did, but it might not.

"Gonna have to help a bloke out," he said a moment later, his voice deeper than she'd ever heard it. "Your scent's killin' me but I don't really fancy turnin' to dust."

"Oh my god..."

"Slayer, you gonna stake me?"

She shook her head and thrust back against him, hoping her body would do the talking for her.

Apparently, it did. "Buffy...oh fuck." He began pumping his fingers into her again, soft at first but with growing desperation, as though he needed her release as badly as she did. But then he stopped again and pulled his fingers out of her before rolling onto his back. "Bloody hell, must be outta my mind."

“Spike!” she mewled before she could help herself. “God, please!”

He released a shuddering, barely controlled breath. “Please?”

Buffy welded her eyes shut. For the first time in days, she ached with something that wasn't pain. Something that was as wonderful as it was terrifying. Her chest heaved with breaths that didn't hurt.

She was as aroused as she had ever been. And god, she needed it.

“Please... Touch me.”

If he denied her, she would stake herself. Better to face death than his mocking sneer. The guy who had teased her less than a year ago about how easy a lay she was—that guy was due to make an appearance at any time.

But there was no mockery when he spoke. His voice was filled with passion, clouded with arousal, and was easily the sexiest thing she had ever heard.

Her name rolled on his tongue like that...

“Buffy...” A gentle hand prodded her shoulder until she rolled onto her back and looked at him for the first time since opening her eyes. When he found whatever it was he was looking for, he drowned her in that look of raw astonishment and pressed a tender kiss to her forehead.

Then his hands were on her again, one at her breast, caressing her through the lace of her negligee as the other dropped to her center. “It's okay, baby,” he assured her, sliding two fingers inside her. “Daddy'll take care of it.”

“Oh god.”

He brushed his lips against the corner of her mouth, then at the pulse of her throat, hesitated, and then tongued her nipple through the thin fabric separating them. “Fuck my hand, love,” he said, eyes glued on her face. “Take it.”

She didn't know she was crying until he raised his head to kiss away a tear. He slid his thumb over her clit once more, pressing down with just the right amount of pressure.

It was all too much. His proximity. The way he looked at her. The feel of his lips against her skin...she tumbled into a space she'd never touched before. Somewhere between bliss and the other. The emotion

she was too unfamiliar with to name. Too lost to explore. She just knew she felt it. There were tears running down her cheeks, some for feeling, some for this distant emotion that was arising within her. Pained with something other than hurt. Twisted with the need for something she could not see.

“God,” Spike growled, pulling his fingers out of her pussy. “You smell so sweet.” He drew his digits into his mouth, his eyes rolling up inside his head. “And, bloody hell, you taste like heaven.” His gaze met hers again and froze. “Oh god, Buffy, don’t cry. Please. I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

She launched herself into his arms before he could say another word, hugging him in an attempt to convey the mess that was in her head, even as her body wracked with sobs. “Thank you,” she whispered. “Thank you.”

Spike went still. “Buffy—”

She didn’t allow herself to think. Not about what he was going to say next.

Not now.

So instead, she pulled back, searched his torn eyes, and pressed her lips to his.

The rest slid into place when she tasted him. This was home.

And if it wasn’t, it certainly provided a good imitation.

“Buffy,” he moaned, pulling away. His eyes were storming with passion.

And she lost herself all over again.



HE COULDN’T HAVE BEEN MORE SURPRISED IF SHE HAD SLAPPED HIM across the face.

The entire morning felt like a dream. Buffy had come to him. She had told him that he was the reason she’d been able to escape. To do what she needed. That he had helped her without helping her at all.

And he had spent the night in her arms. Dreaming of her as though they did not have the invisible gorge between them, mucking with the

brain that had been so keen to hate her just twenty-four hours ago. But he'd known the second he'd stepped into his crypt, the instant he'd seen her, that the days of hating this girl were over. Whatever else he'd told himself, the rubbish rationalization to run to the Slayer's aid, why it had felt so bloody imperative that he get her out—all of that had been window dressing. He'd stepped into his crypt and everything had fallen into place. Things he'd known for months—years, even—but hadn't had the stones to confront.

Dru had been right all along, the crazy bitch. He just hadn't understood what she'd been trying to tell him.

And now Buffy was here, in his bed. And he was swimming in the scent of the orgasm he'd given her. Even if he'd just cottoned on to the fact that he was lost for the girl, that didn't mean she'd ever be lost for him. Or let him touch her. Yet here she was, by some bloody miracle, looking at him as she only had in his deepest fantasies. Kissing him, touching him...rolling over until she was nearly astride him and cupping him through his jeans.

That Buffy would go from hating him to this at the same bloody time he accepted the truth he'd tried to dodge for years was beyond comprehension. So much so he wasn't sure he could trust this wasn't all happening in his head.

"Buffy," he whimpered when she lowered the zipper, then growled when his cock sprang into her hand. "W-we shouldn't—"

Bloody fuck, did he even listen when he spoke?

"I just...I want to..." But she didn't finish the thought—just started pulling on his dick with that bloody glorious hand of hers, and fuck, he wasn't going to last. He could barely grasp that this was actually happening and he was too wound up. Too desperate for her.

"Buffy." He mewled and bucked his hips. "Fuck, that feels so good."

He didn't know what did it for him. He honestly had no clue. He wanted to say it was her hand, her scent, knowing he'd made her come and having her taste in his mouth, but it was her eyes that owned him. The way she looked at him as she stroked his cock—the Slayer, watching him, her expression hungry.

And all his.

That knowledge sweetened his orgasm all the more. He came like a schoolboy, felt the familiar splatter hit his belly, some dribbling down to her fingers, and fuck if that sight didn't have him hard and ready to go all over again. Buffy kept stroking him long after the waves receded, so much so he thought she might just keep at it until his cock was spent for the rest of the sodding century.

But she didn't. Too soon, her grip on him relaxed and then withdrew completely. He tried not to whimper.

"B-Buffy. I...fuck, that was..."

There were no words for what that was.

Only she was no longer with him. Not where it counted. She was staring hard at the inches of mattress separating them, and her eyes were far away. Somewhere where he could not follow.

And that much was enough to drive home just how real this was. Even when his fantasies about her had revolved around grudge-fucks, she'd never pulled away like this. She'd ridden him until they were both useless heaps of limbs.

Spike's throat tightened as he sought to suss out what had changed in those seconds she'd shown him heaven. How had he managed to bugger this up already? "Buffy?"

She jerked her head up and looked at him, but he had no sodding clue what he saw in her eyes. Not regret. Not disgust. Not apathy; none of the things he would have expected with the Buffy he knew.

But that Buffy was not this Buffy. This Buffy was wounded and terrified. And she was clinging to him out of something neither could name. She was burned with scars he could not see.

Fuck, he should have bolted from her the second he'd opened his eyes. The instant he'd realized his dream wasn't a dream. But she'd been so wet and asked so sweetly, and feeling her cunt around his fingers had been as close to living again as he waghered he'd ever get.

"Buffy...love, I—"

She rolled off the bed then and straightened her negligee. Her back to him, she trembled as though she was seconds away from breaking again. "I'm so sorry," she said.

"Sorry?"

He would give her anything if she looked at him, but she did not.

This wasn't rejection. It was something else.

She was up the ladder that led to the first floor before he could ask her again.

Spike expelled a deep breath and flopped back on the bed.

"Wanker."

NAVIGATING THE NEW

FOR THE PAST THIRTY MINUTES, Buffy had been curled on the worn sofa that Spike had set in front of his television set. The darkness surrounding her acted as a warm blanket of protection, keeping her from the world that waited on the other side of the crypt.

The silence, however, was driving her out of her mind.

Spike had still not come upstairs, and she didn't blame him. She didn't know where she would even begin to explain her earlier behavior. How she would find it within herself to look at him after showing up unannounced, taking his bed, making him pleasure her, then molesting him like she had. This was the guy who had hated just yesterday her, and for good reason. It was a miracle he hadn't tossed her out on her ass, laughing as he did.

The pain crippling her body was a disease. She couldn't move without it stabbing at her, reminding her of the life she'd taken. She could barely stand it, this longing for the sire she hated. She summoned images of his ghostly touch and but shivered and recoiled from it all the same. Needing it and loathing it.

She felt like she had been living the past two decades in a dream. That waking as a vampire had been her first step into the world while not wearing her rose-colored glasses. That every pain she had ever

endured had prepared her for this. Everything seemed so insignificant now. Death at the hand of the Master. Losing Angel—twice. The confusing mess that had been last year.

She didn't care anymore. Not about the life she had been living. The things that were once important. The false perfection she had been striving for, ignoring the fact that life was never perfect and that a slayer's life could never be normal. She'd craved normal for so long.

There were certain things she knew now. Riley. God, what a mistake he'd been. Almost as much as the years she'd spent mourning Angel—a guy she'd loved so much she'd taken his advice about normal to the extreme. Even though Riley was a mistake, he was a mistake she'd made thinking about Angel. A mistake she'd almost dumped the second she'd discovered he had a foot in her world. As though anyone who was with her could ever be normal.

And Angel was hardly following his own advice. Now he was living the good life in Los Angeles, working with Cordelia and Wesley, of all things, who apparently didn't need normal the way Buffy did. Two people who'd actually had a chance to do what Buffy never could, but their lives were just fine to weird up with the paranormal.

It seemed she had aged centuries in just a few days. No longer the mourning sixteen-year-old in a nineteen-year old's body. She was a woman now. A woman who knew life only because she was experiencing death.

Nothing in her life would ever be Angel's version of normal, and *how dare he*? How *dare* he use the thing she'd always wanted but could never have as an excuse to dump her? Just because he couldn't get off anymore? Was that all she'd ever been to him? Or had he known that normal would never be enough and had just hoped that she'd never figure it out? That she'd waste away what few years she had the Slayer chasing something that didn't exist?

Giles had told her a long time ago that it wasn't uncommon for slayers and vampires to pair up, despite whatever the Watchers Council said. The diaries from those watchers who had actually been on the ground with their slayers contained coded language when documenting such instances, mostly for their slayers' safety. Giles had told her this had been in response to Angel, of course. In the early days

before she and her vampire boyfriend had had sex, when she'd been yo-yoing on whether or not she thought Angel was hunky or stalkerish. The soul thing had been the stickler and something of a comfort to Giles. At least his slayer wasn't being romanced by a true monster.

A monster like the one who had taken care of her all last night.

As if hearing her thoughts, the silence was rent by a loud slam. She could've sworn her heart jumped, but she knew better. And then his scent flooded the air, and he came into view.

Spike didn't look at her, though she could tell he was hyperaware of her. She tracked his movements without looking at him. Felt him shift around the crypt. He popped a bottle of something and settled next to the refrigerator. And watched her as though expecting her to run.

The last thing she wanted to do was run.

Buffy expelled a deep breath without thinking, winced and waited for the pain to pass. Then she rose to her feet, wrapping her arms around her middle.

Their eyes met. The confusion behind his tore her apart.

At length, he released a sigh and glanced down. "If you're plannin' on staying, we should get you some clothes."

"I...I'll stay if you want me to stay."

"What I want..." He met her eyes again, an emotion burning there that sent shivers through her body. There was a heavy silence, his words hanging in the air, before he looked away, sighed again, and turned back to the refrigerator. "I don't have a microwave."

"What? You want a microwave?"

"Well, I wouldn't object," Spike said. "No, Slayer, I mean it's gonna be cold."

"What's going to be cold?"

He paused meaningfully. "Buffy, you have to eat."

The word stilled the air, and she flashed back to the dead man.

"I don't think—"

"No. You need to eat." His eyes were stern. "I'm not gonna see you wither away. Not while you're here, you hear me? You want someone to lie to you, you can bugger right off. You need blood to survive. It's what you are now."

Buffy licked her lips. His tone was defensive, and she deserved it.

“Okay.”

He opened his mouth, then balked. “Oh. Good, then.”

“You were about to argue with me, weren’t you?”

“As long as it took, yeah.”

“Sorry to spoil things by agreeing early.”

That earned a grin. “I’ll manage.” A heavy pause. “It’s gonna be cold. The blood.”

“Does that make a big difference?” She glanced down, ashamed of her ignorance. “I remember...last night, I felt I had to drink the...the dead man before it went cold.”

But she hadn’t. She hadn’t just consumed the blood; she had torn him to bits. She had dug into his stomach and licked up whatever trickled down her hand. She had seen lions show zebras more courtesy than she’d had for the dead man last night.

“It’s a matter of preference, I suppose,” Spike retorted with an airy shrug. “Like pizza. As I understand it, some people like it better cold, others warm. Doesn’t rightly matter. It has the same bloody effect.”

“Pun intended?”

He offered a half-hearted smile and crossed the room. “Eat up,” he said, handing her a glass full of blood. “We’ll find out if you like it warm or cold.”

“Don’t you need to eat?”

“Yeah, and I will. But you need it more now.”

Before she could respond, he turned, flicked on the television, and settled on the sofa beside her.

At the other end of the sofa. Intentionally putting that space between them. A matter of inches that seemed like miles.

Something snapped inside her at that, and nothing else mattered.

Spike was her safe place. She was confused, she was broken, but he was the only thing keeping her sanity intact. He was the only thing that wasn’t broken. Wasn’t confused. The only thing she was sure of, and that was what made him so dangerous. So terrifying.

Buffy drew in a deep breath and glanced to Spike. His eyes were focused on the screen, though his body was tense and terribly aware of hers.

She glanced to the glass in her hand, braced herself, and downed its

entirety in one long drink. Which meant she didn't get the chance to sputter and spit it back out when the flavor—flatter and somehow dirtier—hit her tongue. Definitely a step down from the blood she'd had last night. Still, once she got past the taste, she had to admit that it took the edge off. Some of the pain from earlier faded.

Spike still hadn't looked at her, though the corners of his mouth were tugging in an almost reluctant grin.

"Always told you pig swill tastes like shit. Believe me now, eh?"

"It's not good," she agreed, pulling a face. "And not just because it's blood. The guy last night..."

"Human blood always hits the spot." Spike paused before nodding at her empty, red-stained glass. "Can fancy it up, though. Loads of ways I've found over the past year. Some spices to make it savory or, if you prefer sweet, a pinch of cinnamon. Spoonful of sugar. Chocolate, if you like. It'll add flavor."

"Weetabix?"

A soft smile crossed his face. "That too. Usually keep some on hand, but you caught me on an off week."

Buffy set the glass on the floor behind the sofa. Then she glanced back to the man at her left and edged down the cushion until she was under his arm. Until her head was against his shoulder, and her body curled into his.

Spike shuddered and closed his arm around her. And just like that, the tension was gone. "There now," he murmured, snuggling her into him. "Isn't this better?"

"Oh yes."

"So you a girl who likes it hot or cold?"

"What?"

"The blood, pet. Cold stuff do it for you?"

Oh. "No."

"Right then. We'll have to get a microwave, eh?" He brushed some loose strands of hair over her shoulder. "I've been tryin' to think of a way to lift Rupert's from his flat for bloody ages. Old sod never uses it."

Buffy barked a short laugh. "We can get some money from my room." Then something occurred to her and she tensed all over again.

"I'm not... I don't have an invitation, but you could get in there... Get some stuff for me." She paused. "Tell my...my mother..."

Spike was quiet for a minute. "What do you want me to tell her?"

"She must be so worried."

"Yeah. I'd imagine." He turned to look at her, his eyes wide and vulnerable. "Your mum's gonna love you no matter what. Mums are like that. Won't bloody matter to her if you've been turned or...or what happens. If you wanna go home—"

"I don't."

He smiled slightly but shook his head. "You can't really wanna stay here, love," he said. "You don't—"

"I do. I want to stay here, Spike. I can't be around people."

A brief silence. The television blared loudly in the absence of his voice.

"Is that the only reason you wanna stay?" he asked, and unless her ears were lying to her, his voice was trembling. "Because you can't be around people?"

Maybe it would have been better to lie, but she didn't want to.

"No," she replied. "It's not the only reason. It's not even...the main reason, I think. I don't know. I'm all over the place."

He looked at her and smiled. "It's fine, baby," he told her and kissed her forehead. "You don't have to say anythin'. Forget I asked."

"I feel like I should. Say something. I'm so sorry about what happened downstairs. I—I feel like I just barreled into your life and started messing things up."

Spike snickered. "You did at that, love, but not downstairs. Been a few years now."

"In my defense, I think you did the barreling there first."

"No one bloody warned me."

"And you'd have ignored them if they had."

He grinned then. "Course. What do those sods know?" A beat. "Slayer, I dunno what you've been tellin' yourself up here about what happened, but if it helps, it was brilliant on my end. Every bloody second. Touching you, feeling you come, and then your hand..."

Buffy looked away quickly, missing the skip in her chest.

"But if it never happens again... Well, sod all, I want it to happen again. I want loads more than that, too."

Those words lent her pause. She glanced back, swallowing past the lump in her throat. "You do?"

"Yeah," he said, then dropped his gaze to her lips, and for a second she thought he might kiss her. Was disappointed when he didn't. "Can think of a lot of uses for that mouth of yours," he murmured, "and got quite a few places on you I'd like to explore with mine."

That was definitely a punch-in-the-nose cue if she'd ever heard one, but Buffy just trembled and pressed her legs together.

"But you gotta want it too, is the thing. Don't really fancy you runnin' off on me every time you make me come."

This was where her cheeks should have gone hot. Would have, if she'd still had a heartbeat. "I thought you'd be mad," she mumbled. "Or at the least, of the wigged and disgusted. I mean, you hated me this time yesterday."

Spike stared at her mouth a moment longer before dragging his gaze back up to hers, grinning. "Hate's a funny thing. Here I've spent the past few years hating you so much I about bloody exploded with it. Different kinda hate, too, than what I've felt before. Hotter. More passionate." He dipped his head and tugged on her ear with his teeth. "Never been a time I haven't wanted to fuck you into the ground, though. Thought that was hate at first, because what else would it be?"

Oh god, his voice. Those words. Her already topsy-turvy world went even topsy-turvier. "Spike..."

The grin faded at that, and he offered a clipped nod. "But just so everything's on the table," he said.

"I...I don't think there's a way to be more on the table." She couldn't bring herself to meet his eyes. "Something has changed with me too. More than the vampire thing. More than...I'm not the girl I was. But I don't know how much. Still trying to figure that out, I think."

He released a deep breath. "Figured as much."

"And I don't know how you fit into this, except I want to be here. You've treated me like Buffy, only with this thing. This slightly undead thing."

"You don't know that the Scoobies wouldn't."

She gave him a look.

"Okay, so you do. And Soldier Boy—"

"Riley would kill me."

Something dark stormed his eyes, and his arms tightened around her. "I won't let him touch you," he growled. "Don't bloody care how much it'd hurt. He won't come near you."

"Spike—"

"I'm serious."

"I know you are. But that's...really new."

He caressed her temple gently, fingers weaved through her hair.

"Guess so. Just feels right."

Buffy licked her lips. "It does?"

"Should be used to you turnin' my life on my head, Summers."

There was more there that he wasn't saying. More she knew she wasn't ready to hear. So she forced out another sigh and decided to let it go, relax. She slid further down his body until her head was resting against his stomach, her arms wrapped around his waist.

"This feels nice," she said.

"Yeah," he agreed, his voice tight.

Her hand brushed against his crotch and he drew in a sharp breath. Buffy bit her lip and pulled away as though burned.

"Sorry."

Spike glanced down at her heatedly. "Never be sorry for that," he said, wrapping his fingers around her wrist to guide her hand back to the pronounced bulge there. "Never."

Buffy considered him, studying her own hand for a minute before she shifted and cupped his erection fully. He bit out a small moan and his arm came around her.

"Christ," he gasped, arching into her touch. "Gonna drive me outta my mind."

"I'll stop."

"Don't you dare." He growled into her hair and arched into her touch. "Never stop touching me, Buffy."

And for a moment, she was content to just sit here like this—giving him something he wanted even if her own feelings on the matter were

a bit confused at the moment. But her mind couldn't help but drag her back to the place she'd been before he'd joined her, the mess of thoughts she'd had, and the pain. The pain that pierced every time her mind summoned the image of her dusted sire. "When...will the hurt go away?" she asked a few minutes later. "Just...sitting with you makes it better, but it's always there. I feel him still. The place where he should be, and it hurts so much. It won't...I feel so..."

A sigh tumbled through his lips. "Sweetheart...it doesn't go away."

"What?"

"Not entirely. You get used to it, I suppose. Angel did after he offed Darla. He mourned, but he didn't make a big show of it till he went soulless. Then, when he wasn't shaggin' Dru or plotting world domination, it was all he could bloody talk about." Spike made a small sound of discontent. "Maybe you should've gone to him after all. You two have that much in common, plus the whole—"

"No."

"No?"

"I didn't want Angel. I don't."

There was a small beat. "You don't. But you came here." He paused again, moaning when she pulled her hand away from his cock. "Buffy... I...you can't tell me that and expect me to not...do you..."

"I don't know anything right now," Buffy said a minute later. "But this feels right."

"What feels right?"

She tightened her arms around his middle. "This. And that's all I understand right now. Everything else is so...messed up."

Spike smiled. "That's somethin', then." He broke off again. "There's one thing that's stronger than a sire's hold on the vamps he makes."

"What?"

"A claim."

"A what?"

"Vampires...when they...they claim each other. Form a bloody unbreakable bond." He exhaled deeply. "Mated vampires are rare today."

"Why?"

"Because it's...it's forever. Once a claim is complete, it's forever. And it's as powerful as anythin' else."

"Stronger than a sire bond?"

"Oh yeah. You can't choose your sire, but every vamp can choose their mate. Mates are designed to feel each other. There is nothin' stronger than that."

"Are... Did you claim Dru?"

He was quiet for a minute. "I tried once."

"Tried?"

"She didn't accept me." Spike drew her hair away from her face. "Bloody blessing in disguise, really."

"You don't mean that."

"Well, I won't lie. It wasn't any fun at the time."

The bitterness in his voice made her chest twist with pain. She waited for a beat for him to continue but didn't.

"I'm glad," she said a minute later. "I know it's...kinda a crappy thing to be glad about, but I'm glad. I'm so glad you're here, Spike."

"Me, too."

They said nothing more on sires or claims. Rather, simply sat there in the non-threatening silence of his crypt, curled in each other's arms, pretending to watch the television.

Her body was warring with change and fighting off pain, but her mind was calm.

There was simply nothing like this.

Nothing like feeling loved.

Which she did. Lying in his arms, she felt loved.

And she didn't want the feeling to go away.

TRUTH BE TOLD

THE LAST THING he wanted to do was leave, but Buffy was adamant that she couldn't be near people. It wasn't as though he didn't understand; unlike the great souled wanker in Los Angeles, his slayer didn't have the luxury of experience in being around people. There weren't such things as second tries with her. If she killed, it would gut her. And he wouldn't let that happen.

"I won't be long," he said, finishing off a cigarette. "I need to pick up some blood, and I'll get your mum to pack you some stuff."

Buffy shook her head. "I changed my mind. I know I told you to tell her something, but...don't say anything to her yet. I'm not ready."

Spike cocked his head and considered her, stepping forward. "Your mates'll come after me soon enough, pet," he said. "As dense as the lot of them are, they'll find Drac's castle and likely be able to piece two and two together. Then they'll barge in here, guns a'blazin'. You might find yourself around people a bloody lot sooner than you want."

She went silent at that, her eyes fixed on something he could not see.

"I know you don't wanna think about it," he continued softly. "But you know your pals. You really think they'll just stop lookin' for you if you never turn up?"

Buffy shook her head. "They won't. They'll try to take me back. If they come here, they'll try to take me back. To them. They don't trust you."

"Neither did you a few days ago."

"That's changed." A beat. "Everything has changed."

"You trust me now?"

He watched her struggle with the question and tried not to show his disappointment. It was a big thing, really. Going from one extreme to the next. Hell, he was still recovering from whiplash, himself. The things he knew today that he hadn't known yesterday, like the fact that Dru'd had it right all along and there was a reason he couldn't do in the Slayer. A reason he hadn't wanted to face, had done everything he could to bury, but could no longer ignore.

But then she spoke and about knocked him over.

"Yes," Buffy said a minute later. "I trust you, Spike."

He exhaled a deep breath and just stared at her.

How was it he hadn't known this about himself when her watcher had come by? That the real reason he'd needed to be the one to get her out of that bloody castle had been because he couldn't stomach the thought of the git touching her? How now, when he looked at Buffy, everything left him but his desire to relieve her of her personal hell. Replace her pain with pleasure. Fill her sadness with joy.

Whatever had kept him from seeing that he was arse over tits in love with the girl had vanished the instant he'd seen her standing in his crypt. Not even a day had passed, and he knew he was lost. Lost more than he ever had been.

She broke her gaze from his at last, seeming to come back to herself. "What will you say? If you talk to my mother."

"I won't talk to her if you don't want me to."

"But if you did—"

"I'd let her know I was takin' care of you. And that she shouldn't worry. You're still you." Spike inhaled again and stepped forward until she was just a breath away. He studied her for a minute and raised a hand to her cheek. "No matter what happens to your body, sweet," he said heatedly, "you're still you where it counts. Here..." He gently

drummed his fingers against her temple, then dragged them down until they rested above her nonbeating heart. "And here."

Buffy's eyes were large with some emotion he didn't feel safe labeling. She leaned forward until her brow was touching his, her mouth so bloody near his own. He wanted so desperately to say sod all to the rest and kiss her until she remembered she didn't need to breathe. Taste the sweetness of her skin. Memorize every inch of her with his tongue. Lose himself in her body. Bring her over the edge again and again, until he drowned in her pleasure.

Bugger, he was hard just thinking about it. This wouldn't do.

"Spike..." she murmured.

"Mmm?"

She pulled back just slightly at that but didn't respond. There was something else in her gaze. Knowledge that hadn't been there a minute ago. She knew how much he wanted her without having to be told; she just didn't know he loved her, and that was where she was confused.

He couldn't tell her yet. He didn't know if he ever could. If she'd ever want to hear it.

"I should go," Spike said, releasing her with great reluctance. "Sooner I'm gone, sooner I can come back, yeah?"

"It's daylight still."

"It's never stopped me before, and I don't really fancy you bein' here after dark on your own." He paused, shook his head, anticipating an argument. "And don't get huffy about it—I know you're the Slayer and all and you have all kinds of other strength goin' for you now, but—"

"No. No, I understand. I don't want to be here alone after dark, either." She wrapped her arms around herself, a new tick of hers that only served to drive home just how *not* okay she was. "I don't want to be here alone *period*."

"You could come with me," he offered. "Learn some new tricks about gettin' around in the daytime."

"I know. I just...I can't..." Buffy shook her head. "I can't, Spike. I know I should. I really know I should. I hate myself for being so...*weak*, but I just can't do it."

Spike stepped forward again. "Weak? Is that what you think?"

Bleeding hell, Slayer, do you have any idea how sodding remarkable it is that you didn't lose it right off? There's a reason vamps lose their souls and it's not just because the demon likes to horde space. You're a fighter. You're the strongest person I know and I'm not talkin' about brawn. Anyone who asks you to do anythin' you're not ready to can sod off." He paused, trying to calm himself. "Long as you're here, Slayer, I will never ask anythin' of you that I don't think you're ready for."

"And what if I don't think I'm ready for...whatever, and you do?"

He smiled. "Then we'll wait until you are," he replied, unable to resist the temptation of her lips. It was a soft kiss—too short to be passionate, too passionate to be chaste. A sweep of her mouth, the slightest hint of her tongue, and though she gripped him by the arms, trembling, she didn't fight when he pulled away and put a space between them.

"I'll be back soon," he promised.

"Please," Buffy agreed, her voice hoarse. "I don't want to be alone for long."

"You won't be."

Spike forced his eyes to stay ahead of him as he made his way back to the lower level of the crypt, toward the sewers and the spider web of underground tunnels that spiraled under Sunnydale. He knew he could get to Buffy's house in his sleep if he needed, and if she didn't want him to talk with her mother, he wouldn't—not unless it became necessary.

He didn't think it would be.

A sigh rolled off his shoulders as his feet sloshed into the shallow river that flowed against the cold concrete of the underground. He loathed leaving her, though he knew he wouldn't be gone long.

But Joyce wasn't his only stop. The Desoto was parked in an underground garage not too far from the crypt, though he felt it safer to go to the Summers' residence first, rather than burst in through the front door. From there, he could retreat to his car and drive to his final stop. The place where stealth wasn't needed.

Spike intended to make sure that no one came after Buffy. No one.

Not until she was ready.



Spike didn't take the time to knock at Giles's flat, rather came in as he always did—smoking, cursing, and hurrying to beat the sun while under his blanket.

This was usually at least enough to earn a sound scolding, but the Watcher had other things on his mind.

"It's about bloody time," Giles all but growled. "What the hell have you been up to? Do you have any idea—"

"Sod off, Rupert." Spike rolled his eyes and kicked the blanket to the ground. "I'm here for one reason. You're gonna shut your gob and listen, you get me?"

"Why, you righteous little—"

"I have the Slayer."

A combination of horror, outrage, and shock flooded Giles's gaze—his face slack with numb astonishment. "She's...she... My god, where is she?" A pause. "What have you done with her?"

"I've done nothin' to her, you pompous, self-righteous sod. She came to me after she escaped. She had nowhere else."

"What do you mean—"

"He turned her." That shut the old man up. "Drac turned her. He kept her there until last night, trying to make her his queen or some rot. She's a vampire, Rupert."

Giles was pale. His eyes had gone blank—the rest of him contorted with anguish. He released a trembling breath and shook his head, stepping back until his legs met the cushion of the nearest chair, where he collapsed.

"Dear lord."

Spike waited for a beat before pressing on. "She sensed me there at the castle. The whole bloody house did. Says it got them all right distracted and she managed to get the drop on them, killed everythin' that moved, then came to me." He swallowed hard. This next bit was the important part. "And she's not goin' anywhere unless she wants to. You understand?"

"What?" Giles jerked his head up, his eyes flashing. "I don't—"

"Buffy. She's stayin' with me."

There was a long pause during which Giles seemed to process the words, but then outrage replaced grief, and he jumped to his feet in a fury. "Like hell she is!" he thundered. "You despicable little wanker. If you think I'm going to let you near her while she—"

"It's what she wants, mate," Spike replied, doing his best to remain calm. "She came to me 'cause she can't be around people right now."

"Why the hell not?"

The calm broke cleanly in half.

"Why do you bloody think?" he snapped. "She's a vampire. Understand? The lot've you'll smell like dinner. She's already terrified she's gonna hurt someone and you start crowdin' her, she might lose control."

"Like that matters to you."

"Add to the fact," Spike continued, speaking over him, "she has a soul. Sired slayers don't last, Rupert. You know it as well as I do. And they don't last because they can't bloody well cope with what they've become. There's a reason vamps don't come with consciences." He released a steady breath, attempting to maintain his growing fury. "We need blood to survive. We're drawn to blood. The hunger's a bitch. It drives you to the edge of insanity and back again. She couldn't resist a dead bloke after Dracula shoved him under her nose. How do you think she'd feel if you made her be around people before she knows how to control the hunger? What happens if her demon bests her and she tries to kill one of you? What happens if she succeeds?"

"Buffy's stronger than that."

"Yeah, but not without bein' taught how."

"Even so, the last thing she needs is a remorseless killer teaching her how to be a vampire. If what you're saying is true, Angel is—"

"She doesn't want Angel." This much came out as a snarl.

"You bloody fool, do you really think I'll believe—"

Spike held up a hand, commanding his baser instincts inward. He was seconds from busting out his fangs. Seconds from lunging for the old man's throat. Seconds from mind-numbing pain he'd feel for a blip before a piece of wood plunged through his chest. "She doesn't want Angel," he growled. "And if you try to come after her, I'll know it. I'll

sense it well before you even get to the cemetery. If you try to go against her wishes, I'll take her away. We'll be long gone by the time you get to the crypt. You won't find us, and I'll take care of her until she's ready to come back on her terms, not yours."

"You wouldn't dare."

"All right. Believe that, if you like. Go ahead and try it. It'll be the last you see of either of us for a long, long time."

There was a pause. "Even if she's ready to come back?"

"Something tells me that she won't wanna be around blokes that don't honor her wishes. Who knows? You might be in the ground before she feels up to lookin' at you again." Spike held his eyes for a long minute. Held them until he knew the Watcher understood he was serious. Then, slowly, he reached for the discarded blanket and moved back toward the door.

"She loves you," he said, opening the door. "She loves all of you. It's why she came to me. She knows she won't hurt me. She's in no danger of losin' control. If she hurt one of you, it'd kill her. I'll take care of her, Rupert."

Giles didn't say anything.

"Right, well, I'll be in touch."

It wasn't until he turned to retreat into the sunlight that the Watcher broke his silence.

"Do take care of her, Spike."

"Don't worry."

"I do." He paused. "If you hurt her in any way, I will personally introduce you to a new definition of pain and suffering."

Spike had to bite down the instinctual smile that tickled his lips. He knew the man was serious. He knew Giles would kill him over and over before he had his fill of justice if anything went wrong.

Giles didn't know, though. Didn't know that if anything went wrong, if he hurt Buffy, retaliation would be useless. Whatever happened to the Slayer happened to him, now.

Thus, he merely nodded his understanding, and let the Watcher have his play.

"Understood."



SOMETHING WAS WRONG.

The air inside the crypt was thick with the acrid scent of burned meat. Spike froze, scouring the lower level for some sign of her, but there was nothing. The smell was coming from upstairs.

Something *burning* upstairs.

God no.

He was halfway upstairs before the bag of clothes he'd brought from Revello Drive hit the floor.

No, no, no, no, no.

If something had happened to her while he was gone...while he wasn't here to stop it...

"Buffy!" He exploded into the upper level, panting. The scent was stronger here. "Buffy! God, where..."

Then he saw her. And his heart broke.

"Oh god."

She was sitting beside the door, cradling her left hand. Her charred left hand. She didn't look at him—rather seemed to crowd in even more around herself. Though her face was a mask of control now, the saltiness in the air told him she'd been crying.

And fuck, he didn't like how close to the door she was. How close to daylight.

"Buffy," he said, unable to keep his voice from trembling.

"I...forgot," she replied hoarsely. "It's so dumb but I forgot."

"Slayer, what were you—"

"I don't know." Her voice cracked at that, and the scent of fresh tears hit the air. "I'm not even sure what I was trying to do. Just...get some air or... I dunno. But I forgot for that moment and..."

He couldn't take it anymore. Fuck the rest—he needed to feel her in his arms.

She didn't object when he scooped her off the floor, rather seemed to melt into him. Spike buried his face in her hair as he carried her back to the couch, trying to calm himself before he did something completely barmy like tell her he loved her. It was what he most wanted to hear when he was hurting, the only words that could make

anything better. The urge was almost impossible to resist, but somehow he managed. Didn't seem like the right time, anyway.

"Should never have left," he muttered instead as he sank onto the sofa. "Right idiot thing to do."

Buffy shook her head. "No. I was stupid. I didn't think."

"Never had to before, have you? Might be a vamp on the inside, Slayer, but you're as human as they come. Don't have the instincts to warn you off yet." Spike barked a laugh, though he doubted he'd found anything less funny in his life. "You coulda worn my stuff for a while. As long as you wanted. Didn't need to leave at all."

"It's not your fault I was dumb. Hell, if it weren't for you, I'm pretty sure I'd be dust by now. Still kinda surprised I'm not." She paused and offered a small smile. "Unless you've decided today's the day."

Spike stared at her for a moment, the beast in his chest calming a tic. When he saw the light in her eyes, he managed a snort. "If you haven't cottoned on, I have no bloody intention of dusting you."

"Well, yesterday you said—"

"Bugger what I said yesterday. Was just talk anyhow. Seems that's all it's ever been with you."

She seemed to consider this for a moment, her expression unreadable. Then she looked down and he followed her gaze, watching as her flesh knitted itself back together. This time tomorrow, no one who saw her would be any the wiser.

He'd never seen a vampire heal like that. The power she contained now must be bloody brilliant. And though it was a rotten, selfish thought, he couldn't help but wonder just when he could see her in action. See how she moved now.

"I think it's the same with me," she said at last. "All talk." A pause. "Well, maybe not at first."

"Should hope not."

"But for a long time now."

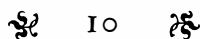
Spike looked at her again and nearly burned when he saw how serious she was. How much she meant it.

Maybe whatever this was hadn't been one-sided all the way. Maybe she'd discovered something at the same time he had.

Fuck, a bloke could hope.

And even if she hadn't, even if this much between them was new for her, the fact was she was here now. She was here and she wasn't going anywhere.

"For me too, pet." He sighed and pressed a kiss to her temple. "For me too."



SURE TO FALL

HE MADE her stay awake all night so that she would fall asleep at daybreak. Even as a slayer, who kept graveyard hours out of necessity, Buffy's baser habits were still human. Something she hadn't been willing to admit until she'd started nodding off around two in the morning, well past her normal slayer-bedtime.

"Are you staying with me tonight?" she asked as dawn approached, her body begging her for sleep.

Spike's eyes twinkled. "This mornin', you mean?"

"You know you're a dictator."

"Well, not exactly, but I came close to eating one once." He smiled and motioned for her to join him. "Come here, Slayer. Gonna get you ready for bed."

Buffy just looked at him.

"Not gonna undress you," he said, raising his hands. Then his eyes darkened. "Less you want me to, of course."

The truth was yes. Very much yes, she wanted with the undressing. And the nakedness. And more of what they'd shared that morning. But the hours that had waned between then and now had been enough for doubt to set in. Not specific doubt about him or her or wherever their relationship was going, but doubt about everything. Life as she knew

it. Spike just happened to be tied to that and she wasn't sure it was wise to throw sex into the mix.

But damn, she didn't remember the last time she'd felt like this. It had never happened with Riley, though maybe that was because part of her had always held back. Part of her had always felt like it needed to be strong or was too self-conscious about appearing weak. Nice and normal. Emphasis on normal. Just like Angel had wanted.

And then there was Angel. For the first time since he had walked out of her life, she no longer felt him shadowing her thoughts, weighing in on her decisions, haunting her every stupid step.

God, had she really been living her life based on what her ex thought was best?

She really, really had.

Screw Angel, a mutinous voice whispered. *Better yet*, it added a moment later. *Screw Spike*.

"I..." She glanced down. If she hadn't known just how impossible it was, she would have sworn her skin was blazing.

"Buffy, I'm kidding." A pause. "Well, mostly. Nothin' I'd love more, in fact, than to peel your clothes off you. But I mean sleep. Even figurin' in your slayer superpowers, a bit of kip'll help make sure your hand heals properly. You need it."

"I'll sleep better if you're with me." This she didn't say so much as blurt, afraid her nerve would catch up with her voice. But it didn't. Then the words were out there and she was still staring at the floor, feeling more naked than she could ever remember being. Even the night she'd stripped bare for Angel, made herself completely vulnerable.

Maybe it was the memory of what had come after that made this so difficult. Being that vulnerable meant opening yourself up to being rejected, and she wasn't sure she could handle that.

But when she finally mustered the courage to drag up her gaze, she saw she needn't have worried at all.

Spike wasn't about to laugh at her. Sneer or brag or make her feel small. Hell, he looked...awed.

And more than a little turned on. Which, yes, weakened her resolve to keep things above the covers in a big old way.

"Then I'll be with you," he said, his voice thick. "Nowhere else I'd rather be. Let's doctor that hand up though first, yeah?"

She glanced down at the hand in question. The open wound had closed entirely, leaving behind angry red sores, but even those were fading fast. "It's barely anything anymore."

"Well, every little bit helps." He gave her a look, crooking a finger. "Come on, love. I don't bite."

Buffy laughed at that and stepped forward. "Yeah."

"Well, okay, so I do."

"I've been told."

"Won't bite you, though." He paused. "Unless you want me to."

"Is there a list of things you'll do 'if I want you to'?"

"Edited and alphabetized in my back pocket. Now come here." Spike reached out when she was close enough, took her hand, and raised it to caress her healing skin with his lips.

Her stomach twisted. This thing she felt, whatever it was, was already heavier and more complex and somehow *better* than the relationships she'd left behind in her old life. All of them.

"Let's wrap this up," he murmured. "Then we'll go to bed."

It wasn't until they were downstairs and he was settling beside her on the bed that she was struck by how freaking normal this seemed, despite everything. Like this could be the way of things for the rest of her life, and she was more than okay with that.

The thought of falling asleep in Spike's arms every night filled her with something that she had never before experienced. Something she was terrified might not be real, no matter what he'd told her. Because *real* in her world was being redefined and she didn't know the rules yet.

But then Spike held his arms open for her, and when she settled against his chest, the fear faded.

Maybe she did know the rules. At least where he was concerned.

Buffy released a shaky breath—those hurt less and less—before deciding to be brave and slip a leg over his. He responded with a low growl but nothing else, gently running his fingers over the skin at her shoulder.

"Goodnight," she murmured.

"Night, Slayer."



"PATROLLING?"

He nodded. "We're goin' out tonight."

"Why?"

"Cause it's one of the things you need to do."

Buffy drew in a breath. "But...what if—"

"We run into your mates?"

She nodded.

"We'll deal. I won't let you hurt them, and you're off your bird if you think I'll let them hurt you." Spike grinned, looking just a bit too excited as he threw open the crypt door. "Come on, Slayer. Time's a-wastin'. Won't want the Hellmouth to grow into a bleedin' tourist attraction for the undead, right?"

"I thought it already was one."

He shrugged. "Well, I'm not in the market for noisy neighbors so let's off the lot of them, shall we?"

"You know," she said as they stepped into the night, "I remember a time not too long ago that you were angry at me for...what, 'killing your friends?'"

Spike smirked and gestured for her to proceed him. They walked at a leisurely pace—at least one that seemed leisurely to her, like they were taking a stroll rather than hunting. "First of all," he said, "the only time I used those words was when we were under a spell, and that was, what, a year ago?"

"Not quite a year."

"Still..."

"Hey." She scowled. "You remembered, too."

"Yeah, well..." He stopped, frowned, and looked away. Like a little boy who'd been caught gazing at his crush. "Okay, second of all, I don't have any vamp friends. A few demons I hang around and play cards with while swigging beers and what all. Harmless blokes. Think you'd like one of 'em."

"Like him?"

"Well, hopefully not like you like certain others. He's not exactly easy on the eyes."

She smiled in spite of herself. "What makes you think I like certain others?"

"You dated one."

"So three years ago."

He arched a brow. "You're practically livin' with another."

"It's the digs. He scored the best crypt in town."

Spike smirked. "Like the place, do you?"

"It's...surprisingly comfortable. You know, for being a hole in the ground." Buffy paused, swallowed. "And I can't complain about the company."

"There's a first."

"Well, when things change, they really change."

That seemed hollow, especially considering the things that had been running through her mind as of late. Whatever else, Spike had been nothing but forthright with her since she'd invited herself into his crypt—he deserved more than fortune-cookie wisdom. So, summoning her courage, Buffy pulled him to a stop beside her and turned so that they were eye-to-eye. "Look...I know I didn't treat you right in the past. I mean, you kinda deserved some of it, evil and all, but...these past couple of days... I think if you weren't here, I would have fallen apart. And I'm so grateful, Spike. For everything."

He looked at her for a minute in that intense, inscrutable way of his, then neared and brushed a kiss across her forehead. "Couldn't do anything but. Bloody sucker when it comes to you, Slayer."

"That...is weird to me. Granted, not much isn't right now, but it's a bit weird, isn't it? How we got here?"

"Bit, yeah," he murmured. "Feels right, though. And we have forever, don't we? Reckon it'll feel less weird as we go."

"Forever?" Was he saying what she thought he was saying?

Spike froze and looked away quickly. "I...well...obviously, we're both gonna be around forever," he explained. "I'd imagine over the centuries, we'll run into each other every now and then, right? The world's not as bloody big as some people like to think. Made a song about it and everything, if memory serves."

At that, Buffy fought a grin. If she wasn't mistaken, the Big Bad was flustered.

"Yeah," she agreed. "The song."

He nodded. "Yeah. Well, forever's another reason we're out here," he said. "If you're gonna make it forever...so we can run into each other every now and then...you'll have to make sure you satisfy your demon's need for the three essentials."

"Three essentials?"

"Blood," he said, counting off on one hand.

"That one's obvious. What are the other two?"

Another finger went up. "Violence."

She nodded. That made sense. For the first few weeks after the chip had been implanted, Spike had been downright suicidal over his inability to throw a punch. Discovering the chip didn't work on demons had gotten him through it. It had disgusted her at the time, of course—that death was anyone's reason for living, even if a small part of her had begrudgingly understood. Because, like it or not, she needed her power, too. The habit she'd developed over the summer of leaving Riley snoozing in her bed while she ran out to get some slayage action had probably extended the warranty on their relationship. She couldn't unleash with him between the sheets without ruining his fragile human body and that excess energy had to go somewhere.

"Okay," she said, nodding. "What's the third?"

At that, he looked sheepish. "Sex."

"Sex?"

"Now, Slayer, I know you know about sex." Spike gave her one of those grins that would have earned a nose punch as recently as last week. Now, with the memory of his fingers inside of her so fresh, all she could do was wiggle.

And of course, he noticed.

"Fuck, you're gorgeous."

Buffy went rigid. "I am?"

"God yes. How can you doubt it?"

"I don't..." Score another tally for a conversation she'd never thought she'd have with Spike. She glanced down, shaking her head. "I don't... Even like this?"

"Baby, Drac vamped you—he didn't make you any less than what you are. I've always thought it."

"Always?"

"From that very first moment I saw you." A pause. "You're even cuter when you get flustered."

She shot him a devilish glance. "So are you."

"I don't get flustered."

"Yeah? What was that talk about forever earlier? 'It's a small world?'"

Spike grinned, reached up and ran his fingers through her hair. "That wasn't gettin' flustered," he retorted. "That was wishful thinkin'."

"Wishful?"

"We have patrollin' to do."

"You're just going to keep avoiding this, aren't you?"

"Yeah. 'Til I'm sure I won't get staked."

Buffy frowned and grabbed him by the arm to stop just as he turned to resume their walk. "I won't stake you, Spike. Never."

The grin just broadened. "Never say never."

"I won't."

"Never's a long time, you know."

"Are you trying to talk me into staking you?" She shook her head when he shot her a wry, amused glance. "It won't happen. I don't even know how to describe what you've done for me in just the past couple of days."

"Slayer, much as I appreciate the sentiment, you know I wasn't your only option. Still haven't figured why you didn't toddle on off to merry LA to see Angel."

"Well, I still don't know why you didn't boot me the minute you saw me in your crypt." She held up a hand as his eyes narrowed. "Do you have any idea how annoying it is to not be the person you hate? I'm having to get to know you all over again."

Not that it was much of a chore, but still.

"I do, as a matter of fact." He was grinning like an idiot. "Didn't take you long to rekindle with your sassy self there, did it?"

Buffy parted her lips to object, then replayed everything she'd said and winced. "Yeah, well... Sorry about that."

"Sorry?"

"For being sassy."

Spike rolled his eyes. "Buffy," he said shortly, "be you. Whatever else. You're not yourself if you're not a bit bitchy every now and then."

"So it's bitchy now? What happened to sassy?"

"Case in point." He smirked, though it was somehow a kind smirk. She hadn't known such a thing existed. "I want you to be you. All bloody sides."

"When I'm bitchy, I usually hit you."

"Yeah, but I'm a vampire. We call it foreplay."

"Even the way I hit?"

"Watchin' you move has always gotten me hot, love." Another of those long looks that said more than words ever could. "Missed fightin' with you more than anything when they shoved this chip in my skull. Remember our last one? Out in the sunlight?"

Yeah, she remembered. She remembered him behind her, snarly and in game face, and aroused. The contact had been brief, but she'd felt it—*him*—hard against her ass. And she would have snapped at him then, or any other time she'd felt an erection while fighting him, had he not had the same effect on her. At the time she'd considered it part of the life—*hungry and horny*, as Faith had said forever ago. But now she wasn't so sure.

"Wanted to pound you into the ground," he continued, his voice barely a whisper. "Right there on campus. See if I could make you scream."

"I... Spike, that's—"

"Disgusting and wrong, don't I know it. But it's also the truth and I'm done pretendin' it's not. So yeah, take a swing at me if you like. I know I will."

Disgusting and *wrong* definitely sounded in line with the old Buffy's script. The Buffy who hadn't lived with a demon inside of her. But that Buffy was gone and this one...

This one wanted Spike, whatever else that meant for her. And hell, he was taking a chance. Being honest, even if it scared her. Maybe in

spite of the fact that it scared her. Maybe when he said things like this, it was to give her an out. See if now would be the time she ran away. Toddled off to LA, as he'd suggested, to switch gurus.

Angel had never been forthright with her about anything—especially not sex. That subject had been verboten, never mind that talking about it wasn't the same thing as doing it. And since they hadn't talked about it, it had become the elephant in the room, one that had grown so large it had eventually shoved them both out.

"Spike," she said at last, tripping over herself to find the right words. "I am making a new normal. And...I want you to be a part of it."

"What?"

"Just that. I dunno what it's going to look like—I barely know how I'm going to function...but I want you to be in it. I *need* you to be in it." Buffy took a breath, then pressed on, "I guess what I'm saying is, I'm done pretending too."

There was a beat at that, and rich emotion flooded his eyes. Awe, affection, and tenderness that she was coming to adore. Like he was on the brink of overflowing with this feeling he had for her, and whatever it was, it was glorious.

"I can do that," he said at length, sounding a bit choked.

"Good," she said. Then lifted her mouth to his and kissed him. Not a sexy, passion-filled kiss, but also not chaste—one of new beginnings and trust and...

Maybe something else.

No, definitely something else. Something she wasn't ready to name yet but would be one day. Probably soon.

When he groaned and chased her tongue with his—taking things a notch above *not chaste* and into *sexy* territory—she amended that to *very* soon.

And even though that was a huge step with massive fall potential, she trusted him to catch her.



THE FARTHER ONE TRAVELS

THE BRONZE.

She attempted to recall the reasons she'd given herself when she'd decided to come here tonight, because at the moment? Bad idea. Horrible. The worst. Not only was she surrounded by hormone-addled flesh bags pumping what smelled a lot like dinner, but the band on stage seemed determined to burst her newly super-sensitive ears with their abrasive music.

It had started innocently enough. Spike had taken her along to the butcher's to restock their blood supply. She'd passed a number of people along the way and managed to not only keep from making with the throat rippage but hadn't so much as growled. The fear that she'd become some uncontrollable killing machine had waned, and she'd thought, okay. Maybe she could do this. Maybe being around people wasn't going to be the massive risk that she'd worried it would be.

Turned out passing people on the street one- or two-at-a-time was a bit different than being shut up with a bunch of sweating, gyrating bodies. Who knew?

Well, Spike had. But she'd insisted. Not only that, she'd kinda left without telling him, desperate to prove to herself and him and anyone

else that she could do the human scene. So here she was. Idiot, idiot Buffy.

What made matters worse—her friends were here. She had an eagle-eye view of their table from her place on the balcony. They were laughing about something Xander had said. Tara and Willow were sharing a plate of chicken wings that Anya kept trying to eat off of. Riley was there, too. The only one not laughing. Not having a good time. As though he wanted to be elsewhere.

She thought she would've been angry to see her friends so carefree while she was in pain, but she wasn't. Rather, it was nice knowing that they weren't burdened by what had happened to her. Perhaps Giles had told them about his meeting with Spike. Perhaps they had understood.

Or maybe Giles had just told them that, for whatever reason, she was out of town for a few days. She didn't know.

At the moment, the only thing she *did* know was the demon inside screamed. She wanted blood. And she wanted a lot of it.

She wanted it warm. And she wanted it now.

Her throat tightened and she willed her eyes closed, closing her hands around the railing that guarded the upper gallery. It had been a mistake coming here, but she'd needed to know. She'd needed to feel it for herself. Well, she had. Now she needed to get out.

Then his scent washed over her, and the angered, hungry demon fixated on something else. A sigh of relief rolled off her shoulders, and she allowed her body to relax.

Oh, thank god.

"I wouldn't've argued if you'd said you needed to do this by yourself, sweets." Spike wrapped his arms around her middle, pulling her back against his nice, sturdy chest. "Not like they're *my* mates, after all. Might've followed you—don't really fancy you gettin' yourself into a spot you can't manage—but I wouldn't've argued."

"I'm so glad you're here."

"I can tell," he replied, his mouth finding her throat, and when he began peppering her skin with kisses, her legs about buckled. There was no way she had lived without this voluntarily, she decided, because why would she? The spell Willow had placed them under a year before must have been a hint from the PTB that this was the way things

needed to be between them. Spike with his arms around her, kissing her throat, pressing his erection into the curve of her ass.

"Know how?" he asked before skimming her skin with his blunt teeth.

"H-how what?"

He chuckled against her. "How I can tell you're glad that I'm here."

"How?"

"You haven't thrown me over the balcony yet."

"Those days are so over."

"Keep tellin' you, you're so hot when you're feisty." He tightened his arms around her, and she whimpered slightly when he stopped making with the neck kisses. "You know," he said, hooking his chin over her shoulder, "you can go down there and see them if you want."

"I don't."

"Really?"

There was a pause. "Well...no, I don't. I came here to see if I could...come here, and I can't." She sighed. "I've been wishing you were with me since the minute I stepped out of the crypt."

"Better late than never, I suppose."

"How'd you know where to find me?"

She felt his mouth pull up in a grin. "You mean aside from the bloody obvious? Same way you knew I was here before I said anythin'. And I felt it the minute you shimmied away from me when you woke up tonight."

"I didn't shimmy away. There was no shimmying."

He laughed shortly. "Pity."

"Spike—"

"You sure you don't wanna say anythin' to your mates?"

"I'm sure." Buffy released a sigh. "I'm not ready yet. I don't want to see them when I'm not ready. Plus, I'm letting you do things right now that I'm pretty sure means the next conversation Riley and I have will be a breakup."

"Bout bloody time," he mumbled.

She snickered but shook her head, trembling. "The big reason? I want to eat. The second I came in here, I wanted to bite everyone around me."

“I know, sweetheart.”

“That and I don’t want them to... I’m afraid they’d come after you. Especially if they saw us all cozy, which is a requirement of me seeing them so you can keep me from making them food.” She shuddered. “And I’m afraid of what I’d do to them if they came after you.”

Spike went still. “They’re your friends, sweetheart—”

“Yeah, and I went to you. If they’re really my friends, they’ll understand that. But they won’t. Will, Tara, and Anya...yeah. Xander and Riley?” She shook her head again. “There’s no way they’d understand.”

Then, for no reason whatsoever—other than it was infuriating to have him with this invisible barrier between them—Buffy twisted in his arms, linked her hands behind his neck, and crushed her mouth to his. Spike was still for half a second out of surprise, then he rumbled a growl into her and pulled her tightly against him. It was liberating, kissing him here in front of everyone. Feeling him moan into her, his lips hot and demanding against hers, his tongue in her mouth. If her friends glanced up, they would get an eyeful. But dammit, she wanted Spike, and for the way he was grinding his erection into her, cupping her ass and pulling her against him, he wanted her, too. She was wet and he knew it. There was a familiar burn searing her insides, warming her where she was cold. Spike was kissing her and that was everything.

“Mmmm,” he whimpered, pulling away from her lips as he began kissing her throat again, harder and more desperate than before. Much longer and they’d be in danger of breaking the decency laws. “God, Buffy...”

Since it felt so damn good, she decided to give back. She dropped her mouth to his neck and nibbled.

“Christ!” he gasped. Then froze. “Slayer,” he growled, “you do what you’re aimin’ to do, and your friends are gonna know we’re here right quick.”

That broke through the haze clouding her lust-filled mind. “What?”

“You’re hungry,” he said, edging her mouth away from his throat. “And you’re about three seconds from sinkin’ your fangs into my throat. Something I’m not above explorin’ when we’re home...but it’s too bloody dangerous here.” He dropped his eyes to her lips before kissing her again. “Havin’ said that, wanna go home?”

Buffy grinned, suddenly shy in spite of herself. "Home?"

"Well, my home."

"I kinda think of it as home, too."

A look of pure adoration flooded into his gaze, and he cupped her cheeks. "It's yours, Slayer," he promised against her lips. "As bloody long as you want it to be. As long as you wanna be with me, you have a place."

"You mean it? You didn't exactly sign up for an eternal roommate."

Spike pressed his brow to hers and rolled his hips so his cock nudged her through her clothes. "Wanna be a bit more than that, if you haven't clued in."

"I have. I'm just...nervous."

He arched an eyebrow, pulling back slightly.

"It's you," she explained. "And me. And...it's different."

"Good different, I hope."

"Oh...very, very good. But also...once that bridge is crossed, can't really go back. It'll change everything. And I've had a lot of life-changiness happen this week."

At her words, the fire in his eyes dimmed a bit to cooler understanding. "Right. Of course."

"But I want it. I—"

"I do too. Fuck, you have no idea. But just knowing you want it is good enough for me for now." He dropped a kiss on her lips, then at the corner of her mouth. "Not gonna lie—I'm not a patient bloke, love. But for the important things, the things that matter...*you*...I can be." He worked his throat then, with visible effort, put some space between them. "Might be good to patrol before we head back. See if we can work some of this energy out there, yeah?"

Yes, that sounded nice and rational. Even if she wanted to scream. "Right. Because violence is one of the three things, right?"

"Yeah. One of the three." He glanced to her mouth and his eyes flashed. "We better go before your mates see one of the other two."

"Yeah? Which one?"

A devilish smirk crossed his face. He took her hand and brought it to his erection. "Use your imagination."

Buffy would have flushed had she had a pulse—strange the sensa-

tions she missed—but since her skin wasn't going to do the talking for her, she gave him a soft squeeze before releasing him with an affectionate pat. "I can imagine a few things," she replied softly.

"Bleedin' fuck." Spike shook his head and seized her wrist. "Takin' you outta here now."

They left through the back entrance. Away from her friends. Away from the people. Away from warm blood. Away from walking temptation.

The vampire at her side took her hand as they walked, as though claiming her as his for anyone who happened across them.

"Thank you," she whispered after a few minutes of silence.

He glanced to her quizzically. "For what?"

"For coming after me. I...I was losing it before you showed up."

Spike smiled, grazing his thumb over her knuckles. "I'm not so easy to get rid of," he replied. "Especially when it comes to those I care about."

Buffy wet her lips. "You care about me?"

"Pet, if that's not painstakingly obvious by now, we gotta work on our communication skills."

"No...I know. It's just... It's a different thing to hear it."

He nodded. "I know."

A beat. She drew in a deep breath.

"I care about you, too."

Spike's eyes twinkled. "I know, Slayer," he murmured. "I know."



HE KEPT EXPECTING TO AWAKEN AND FIND HER GONE. BUT EVERY night, when he opened his eyes, there she was. Sleeping beside him. The Slayer.

Who was here because she wanted to be. Because she'd chosen him, and continued to choose him every bloody day. That there was the true miracle—not that Buffy had come to him in the first place but that, even after floating alternatives by her, she'd opted to stay. More than that, she wanted him.

Fuck, this thing that was happening between them was more than

he'd ever hoped to touch. And every second with her burned him so good he couldn't help but come back for more. Like he was spiraling out of control and chaos had never tasted sweeter.

Loving Drusilla had eaten away at his insides, consumed him wholly until he was only a shady version himself. Buffy had given him back everything that he'd once thought lost. And amazingly, she'd done so without being any the wiser.

Spike released a trembling breath, sliding a hand up her arm, brushing her hair out of her face. She was in the habit of dressing for bed in the negligee that Dracula had given her, something he found both irritating and strangely uplifting. In his trip to her house, he'd been sure to pack her several pairs of pajamas, the sort that hid more than they revealed. He'd been going for warmth, knowing she'd miss it. And yet Buffy had opted to show off skin every night she spent with him.

He was too hesitant to believe she did this for him, much as he'd like to. Could just as easily be it provided a subconscious link with her sire, helped her deal with his death even more.

But fuck, he didn't like to think about that. He'd never liked thinking about her with anyone, even before he'd known he was in love with her, but especially now. The longer she was with him, *here*, the more she felt like *his*.

A warm, delicious scent hit the air just then—the type that went straight to his cock—and Buffy whimpered in her sleep. Softly, damn near inaudible, but he heard it just fine.

Then she shifted and the scent grew stronger.

Spike released a long groan and scrubbed a hand down his face. He was not made for resisting this sort of temptation.

"Mmmm," Buffy moaned. "Spiiiiike."

His eyes went wide. "Slayer?"

As though spurred on by his voice, she whimpered again. "Gawwwd, Spike."

Oh fuck.

She was dreaming of him. She was *dreaming of him*. Like that. Guess it was fair, after all. She'd caught him doing the same thing a couple of mornings back, but *bloody hell* this was close to torture. How close she

was, the way she smelled, knowing it was him she saw in her dreams. And of course, his cock had taken notice—not that it got much rest around her either way. It strained against his jeans—which he’d worn to bed deliberately, wanting her to be sure he intended to honor whatever pace she set. Because that was what mattered.

Hell, but he needed her.

“Buffy...you’re killing me.”

She mewled but did not awaken. Instead, she snaked her hand down her own body, hiking up the hem of her negligee. “Spike. *Please...*”

Please.

He willed his eyes closed. *Gotta...wake her...*

Buffy whimpered again and twisted in his arms. Her mouth was suddenly, aching close to his. He knew how sweet that mouth tasted. He knew how wet she became when she was aroused. Knew from that first morning how delicious she was.

Goddamn...

Then he couldn’t take it. He needed to alleviate the pressure at least, so he reached down and freed his cock from his jeans, and once it was in his hand, rational thought vacated his body and everything went on autopilot. “Jesus...” he gasped, stroking his shaft in time with her whimpers. Somewhere in the back of his head, he knew that wanking off to her wet dream was wrong—staking offense, maybe—but the demon in him was too much for the man to overpower at the moment, so he didn’t bother to try. “I can’t take much more of this,” he told her, grunting. “Just so you know.”

“Spike...”

He didn’t really know how it happened. The next minute the bones in her face shifted—*so gorgeous like this*—but before he could admire her properly, she slid her fangs into his throat.

Spike roared and came. Like a schoolboy on his first date, only worse. Now her eyes were open. Now she was awake. And he was pumping his cock, ropes of semen spilling between them. He didn’t know whether to be sorry or humiliated or to call her on this mating ritual she’d been teasing him with. But no, *no*, he’d told her he would wait and he’d meant it, dammit. Just had been a mite easier when she

wasn't flooding his senses with her arousal and moaning his name, never mind the fangs.

One look at her face, though, halted anything he was about to say. She looked horrified, staring at his throat. "Oh god," she whispered. "Oh my god. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to...I—"

Spike's eyes went wide.

"Not sorry," he replied hoarsely and seized her lips before she could say another word. "That was bloody amazing. Never felt anything like it."

"Felt?"

"Mmmm..." He was hard again, of course. Permanent state around her. And it was a brutal kind of hard—like he hadn't just gone off like a fucking roman candle. *No rest for the bloody wicked*. "You drive me outta my mind."

"Spike..."

His fingers skimmed her inner thigh, disobeying the *hands-off* edict he issued with his brain. "Want you so much," he growled. "You smell so sweet."

"I...Spike...I..."

"Wanna bury myself inside you. Fuck you till nightfall." He nuzzled her throat. "Taste every inch of you. Christ, Buffy..."

"I..."

She wanted it, too. He could see it. Her eyes shone with uncertainty, but she wanted him in every way he wanted her. The hesitation, though, was the slap in the face he needed to regain control. Difficult as it was, he managed to pull back. This was how he showed her he wasn't more animal than man, that he could bloody well control himself. Be what she needed—whatever she needed.

That was the only way he'd keep her.

"I'm sorry, Slayer," he murmured, looking away. "For all of it. Didn't even mean to... Well, not that it matters."

"It matters," Buffy said, placing a hand to his cheek to turn him back to her. "I do. I want this too. Like...*a lot*. I'm just... I don't know why I'm... Why it scares me."

Spike released a ragged breath and brushed his lips against her cheek. "You don't need to know," he said. "When it happens, I don't

want you doubtin' anything. Least of all me." He dropped his gaze dropped to her mouth and kissed her again, intending for that to be that, but when he smelled that her arousal had intensified, the demon gave one furious roar that he couldn't deny. "But fuck," he said, pulling back, panting. "Lemme taste you at least. Touch you. God, anythin'. Please. Your scent is driving me outta my bloody head."

"Taste? Like...blood or..."

If possible, his cock grew harder. "Yes. To all of it. But right now though? I want your cunt in my mouth. Wanna lick up all your cream. Can I?"

"That..." Her eyes darkened. "That seems like it might be okay."

The words had him exploding into movement. Spike cupped her neck and pulled her mouth to his, groaning when she groaned as their lips and teeth and tongues went to war on each other. He truly loved snogging, being an orally fixated type—loved everything about it. But hell, kissing Buffy remade him completely. She was sweet and shy but eager and so damn perfect he about wanted to weep. And the more he kissed her, the sweeter she tasted, the headier she smelled.

"Baby," he said breathlessly when he pulled back, "I'm gonna make it so much better than *okay*." He coaxed her back to the mattress before kicking off his jeans. He didn't miss the way her eyes widened when she took in the sight of him naked for the first time and he couldn't help the dose of male pride that spread through his body at her silent appraisal.

"Wow," she said.

"Yeah?" He ran his hand up the length of his cock. "All for you, sweet. Whenever you want it."

Buffy breathed out, the sound pained, though he wasn't sure if that was due to him or that breathing wasn't easy for her. "I...I just..."

"Offer's bloody permanent, Slayer. Believe me, I'm going nowhere. Except, right now, down on you." He grinned and waggled his tongue at her. The tongue dying to be inside her. "Gonna take such good care of you."

Buffy stared at his cock a moment longer with such hunger he could barely hold in his whimper. Then she slowly ran her gaze up his

chest, licking her lips as she went, and when their eyes met again what he saw there could make a bloke believe in a higher power.

"Okay," she said thickly. "So get to it."

Spike barked a laugh and seized her mouth in a hot kiss as he climbed over her. He growled when she whimpered, unable to keep from rubbing his cock against her, and hissed when she rolled her hips and he felt the dampness at her center. It took effort, but he managed to pull away before he lost control.

"You fancy this?" he asked, fisting the material of her negligee. "Tell me now."

She looked at him through glassy, passion-filled. "Huh? The kissing? Yes. More of that."

He growled again and nipped at her lips. "Loads more, Slayer, but I meant the nightie." To demonstrate, he tugged on the fabric.

"Oh. No, not really."

"Why wear it?"

"It's sexy. I..." Buffy blinked and glanced away, fidgeting. "I don't have... You didn't bring...my other stuff. And I thought you'd like this more."

Bloody hell, just when he thought she couldn't be more perfect. "Oh, Buffy."

A quick tear and her sire's gift was no more. And he drank her in. Buffy lying before him, bare to him for the first time. Her soft pale skin, her flat stomach, her toned arms, the rosy dewdrops of her nipples, the neat thatch of curls at her pussy, and most of all her eyes—her beautiful green eyes fixed on him, full of need and want and worry, like she feared he'd find something lacking. Like he could.

She was his. If not before, certainly now. He was never letting her go after this. Not after tonight.

"Buffy." His voice was little more than a choked sob. "God, you're gorgeous."

She released a breath, her nipples pebbling. "Spike, please."

He nodded, grateful for the invitation. Had he forced himself to keep his hands off her another second, he was sure he would know death all over again. There were so many places to explore. He started with one of her breasts, feeling the weight against his palm, the

smoothness of her skin before he dipped his head to tease it with his mouth. “Mmm,” he hummed against her. “So sweet.”

“Guhh...”

He tongued her nipple then kissed a wet path to her other breast to do it all over again. She trembled hard beneath him, which humbled the fuck out of him. Like all warriors, Buffy wore her fear like armor, used it to win the day. But he’d never seen her like this—openly skitish, never mind vulnerable. At least not where he was concerned. Not *because* of him ever, even when they had been trying to kill each other.

Somehow, being privy to her nervousness felt more intimate than what he was about to do.

Spike slipped a hand down her stomach, over her pelvis, until he had her pussy pressed against his palm. He left her breast with a playful bite, then glanced up at her. “Gonna taste you now,” he told her. “God, I need to taste you so bloody badly.”

Before she could open her mouth, he slid down her body and nuzzled his face into her sex.

Buffy arched off the bed. “Spike!”

“Screamin’ my name already,” he mused. “Reckon that’s a promisin’ start.” He inhaled deeply, drinking her in, running a finger up and down the seam of her soaked flesh before positioning it at her opening and sinking inside. And goddamn, she gripped him like a glove. Snug and slick and bloody perfect. He’d been mostly asleep and completely overwhelmed when he’d touched her the other day, so much so he’d wondered if he’d imagined how incredible she felt around him. If that had been the dream or reality. Dreams, as it turned out, had nothing on reality. “You’re so wet,” he moaned. “So bloody tight.”

“Uhhh...”

“Feel good?” he asked, pulling back just slightly, then pushing back inside her.

Her response drowned out in a long, encouraging mewl.

Spike grinned, his tongue taking delicate swipes of her flesh—circling her clit, teasing it, but not touching. Enjoying the way she whimpered and wiggled, how her movements became less coy and more demanding. He twisted his wrist so it was face-up and pressed

down against her walls, and by the way she bucked and gasped, he'd think no one had touched her like this before. Explored her like the work of bloody art she was.

And he was an instant addict, watching as she writhed under him. Buffy whimpering. Buffy shaking in hard sobs of pleasure. Buffy shining with light and desire. For him. All for him.

Fuck, he would never tire of this.

"Spike...oh god...please."

"I know what you need, baby," he murmured. Then he drew her clit into his mouth and sucked. Buffy bucked again, her thighs closing around his ears and squeezing him to her so tight he might have suffocated were he human. And damn if that didn't make him even hotter.

His lethal sex kitten.

He swirled his tongue around and over her clit, swimming in her. Losing himself a thousand times over. Everything on overload. Her scent. Her responses. That look in her eyes. He couldn't get enough of her. If leaving this glorious creature behind was in his making, he wanted no part of it. She had his blood in her body now and he had her taste rolled on his tongue. His fingers were inside her, and every time he drew them back, she clenched in ways that had him cross-eyed. She was crying out for him, and there had never been a sweeter sound. His Buffy in his bed. His Buffy in his arms, thrusting into his face, clutching at his head hard enough to hurt. It was perfect.

"You taste amazing," he told her, pulling his fingers out of her.

"Spike!"

"Gonna take care of you, baby," he promised. "Gonna drink you till you can't come anymore."

His hand settled over her pubic bone, fingers dipping into her again, his thumb settling over her clit. He stroked her once, twice, then pressed down hard before plunging his tongue into her pussy.

"Oh god!" she screamed, arching off the bed again. The grip she had on his hair grew damn near painful, and then she was coming, and fuck if that wasn't a bloody revelation. He was overwhelmed with her taste, lost in the sobbing contours of her body. Holding her as she trembled and cried his name, his mouth not leaving her until her tremors subsided. Until she fell back against the mattress, panting

deep breaths that, from the look of things, officially no longer hurt. Her eyes filled with tears, but the shine behind them was happy, so he didn't worry. Instead, he left her clit with a parting kiss, sucked his Buffy-drenched fingers into his mouth, and rested with her as she came down.

Sharing this with her was unlike anything else in his existence. God, if he hadn't known before a thousand times over, he bloody well knew now.

"Spike..."

He met her eyes slowly and melted at what he saw. He thought it might be love.

If it wasn't, it was a damn good imitation.

A bloke could hope.

BLOOM

BUFFY AWOKE in the best mood.

Seriously, the best. So much so that, for a moment, the whole *vampire* part of her new reality didn't tickle her brain until she'd been awake for almost a full three minutes. And it was entirely because of Spike.

Spike had made her come so hard she'd forgotten she was dead. Then he'd crawled up her body and taken her mouth, and they'd made out like teenagers for what felt like hours. It had only been when she'd accidentally yawned mid-kiss that he'd pulled away, chuckling, and told her to go back to sleep. She'd felt like an idiot but he hadn't seemed to care—actually had preened a bit that he'd worn the Slayer out with only his tongue. She'd asked him to stay with her and he'd curled around her, whispered something that had left her a bit shaken, but sleep had come over her before she could think on it too much.

Those words came back to her now.

"Be here until the sun goes out. Or I dust good and proper. Whichever comes first, love."

The truly scary and awesome thing? She was pretty sure he'd meant it.

Spike's head was pillowed at her breast, his right arm curved over

her abdomen. His cock was hard against her leg, and his face was as peaceful as she'd ever seen him. No one had ever made her feel the way he did. Not only for what he did to her, how effortlessly he aroused her with his touch but for everything else. The small things. The way he looked at her when he thought she wasn't paying attention. The way he brushed kisses against her temple or her hand when she was distressed. The way he shared her pain without being asked. The way he showed up.

Yeah, it was scary and awesome. Mostly because she was pretty damn certain she was in love with him. With Spike, the guy who had tried to kill her numerous times. The guy who had been a thorn in her side for as long as she could remember. The guy she'd gone to without thought after escaping hell. Maybe it should bother her that it had come so fast, but it didn't. Maybe it should bother her that he didn't have a soul, as it definitely would have bothered human Buffy. But the lack-of-a-soul thing was something she'd found she kept needing to remind herself because truly, he didn't act like any other vampire she'd known, and hadn't for a long time. She was under no delusions that he wasn't evil, or that he didn't have the potential and capacity for big evil, but he had the potential and capacity for the other thing, too. And, more than that, she was coming to believe he'd do whatever she asked of him. That the chip might be incidental at this point—it had tamed him, caged him, yes, but perhaps it had changed him too. Changed him in ways vampires weren't supposed to change.

Spike could have killed her when she'd come to him, but he hadn't. At the time he'd said it was because he wouldn't stake the helpless, that he needed a fight. Except that hadn't stopped him three years ago when he'd cornered her on Halloween. He might crave the fight but he'd take the easy win in a pinch. But then, just last year, Spike hadn't taken advantage of Giles being killable, even though it would've been a straightforward way to cripple the Slayer, his mortal enemy. He could have gotten away with it, too—said he hadn't realized the big lumbering demon was the Watcher, and Buffy, devastated and furious as she would have been, would have been forced to believe him. Because, hell, she was the only one who had seen the truth.

Now she saw a different truth—that the guy she'd known then

wasn't the guy she knew now. Which meant, despite and perhaps even in spite of his resistance, Spike had transformed into a different kind of vampire.

Her kind of vampire.

The kind she might love.

What a kick in the head. Yes, the future terrified her, but she felt she could bear it as long as he was with her.

If that was what he wanted.

Buffy released a sigh and ran her fingers through his peroxide locks. He moaned a bit, his eyes fluttering open. It took a few seconds, but he found her eyes and gave her a sleepy grin, the light that flickered across his face sending warm tremors through her body.

"Mornin' baby," he purred, teasing her nipple.

"Evening," she corrected. The sun had descended a few minutes ago—she'd felt it. And hey, good for her. She was starting to identify and understand her new biological cues. Not bad for a gal who'd been a vamp less than a week but still had mostly human thoughts.

"Evenin', then." He brushed a kiss across her lips. "Sleep well?"

"Very."

"Good." He kissed her again, then dipped his mouth to her throat. "Never thought I'd wake up like this...with you," he murmured, dragging his lips across her collarbone, then farther south until his mouth engulfed her breast. "You're so gorgeous like this."

"Panting and moaning?"

Spike flashed a wicked grin. "Well, I was talkin' about naked, but I'll take pantin' and moanin'."

"Are you ever not horny?"

"Around you?"

She grinned shyly and glanced away. "I never thought... I dunno, I just never thought I'd wake up like this, either."

"Like this?" He licked her nipple again. "Or..." Suddenly, his hand was at her pussy. He tapped her clit once, then slid two fingers inside her. "This?"

Buffy whimpered and clenched her muscles around him without thinking. "Either or both."

"You're so wet. Been thinkin' naughty thoughts about yours truly?"

“You’re a bad influence.”

He ran his tongue over his teeth and waggled his eyebrows. “The baddest, baby.”

Buffy snaked a hand between them and took hold of his wrist. “But...for now. Let’s put this on hold,” she said, dragging his fingers out of her.

He pouted. “You don’t want to fuck my mouth again?”

God, the things he said... She’d never been with a guy who was so blunt about what he wanted in the bedroom. Not even Parker—even though he’d been using her, he’d gone through sex with his actor’s mask firmly in place.

If you’d asked her a week ago if she’d like a guy who talked dirty, she’d have said no. Probably with a patented Buffy-nose wrinkle. Well, a week ago, she’d been an idiot. Spike’s crudeness, something she’d always found annoying, had become a major turn on.

“I didn’t say that,” Buffy replied, wrapping her legs around him and flipping them over so that he was pinned to the mattress. “But I thought you might want a turn at mine.”

Her answer came first in the form of one of those stares—the sort that stroked her from within. That was another thing about Spike that was miles different from the other men in her life. He really had no poker face. Well, not with her, at least. Hell, he was a walking mood ring and damn if that wasn’t refreshing.

“Fuck yes,” he croaked after a long moment. “Yes, Buffy. Want your mouth around me.”

“I thought you might.” She grinned and pressed a kiss to his chest, catching the widening of his eyes a second before he threw his head back and released a low moan.

That was another thing—no guy she’d been with had ever been so responsive. Trying to read Angel was about as effective as trying to read a blank Halloween mask; Riley did this sort of facial contortion that she’d always associated with constipation, and since that was a fast way to put her out of the mood, she’d gotten in the habit of not looking at him when they were having sex.

But when she scraped her teeth across one of Spike’s nipples, he answered with a throaty whimper and thrust hips up. Told her she

was *so bloody amazing* and whimpered things like, *Oh yeah, like that, Slayer*. And that was empowering. Part of her had wondered, and never been brave enough to ask, if her performance in the bedroom was blah after all. Buffy could easily see Riley being too gosh-darned nice to say anything about it, or maybe he was just bad too and they didn't know how to be good together. After all, he was the only guy she'd been with more than once and her past two experiences hadn't been much to write home about. Though she imagined she and Angel would have found their groove if he hadn't lost his soul—she'd learned, over the years, that few girls had a good time the first time. Angel had made it as good as he could, she knew, but everything that had come afterward had somewhat spoiled the night's existing highlights.

What would that night have been like with Spike? With him babbling how good she felt, how much he wanted her, how he really liked when she did *that thing* with her tongue, and *oh yes*, touched him like that. How good her hand felt around his cock and how he couldn't *bloody wait* to be in her mouth.

It would certainly have taken a lot of the guesswork out of sex. Maybe the soulless thing was a boon in this regard—or maybe she just hadn't known this was what she needed. What she wanted.

Either way, it made exploring him a lot of fun.

She inched her way toward his neck to tease the mark she'd made earlier with her fangs as she pulled harder at his dick. And when she closed her mouth around the small wound, Spike mewled and threw his head back, whispering a litany of curses and thrusting his erection into her fist with such desperation she thought, for a moment, she'd skip the blowjob and just sink onto him. No doubt he'd approve, but...

But if she could make him make those sort of noises by licking his neck, what would he give her when she teased his cock with her tongue?

She had to find out.

"God." He rolled his hips under her again, rubbing his cock along the seam of her sopping pussy, eliciting a shared moan between them. "You're doin' this to torture me, right?"

"Uh huh." Buffy leaned back, then began sliding down the length of him, enjoying the growing tautness of his body until she was face-to-

face with his erection. The head of his cock was beaded with precum, and the rest of him was thick and hard for her.

Spike panted a loud mewl and threaded his fingers through her hair. "Fuck, Slayer, put it in your mouth before I burst."

She grinned and licked a line from the base of his cock to the tip in response.

"Oh, Jesus." He fell against the mattress in surrender and welded his eyes shut. "Bleedin' fuck."

"I...I don't do this often, just so you know."

A tense beat rattled through his body. "Buffy..."

"It's a strength thing," she answered. "Riley likes it every now and then but I've squeezed him too hard before and kinda...well, mood-ruiner. All that to say—"

"Prat."

"Human," she fired back. "Slayer much stronger."

"Slayer bloody well made for me," Spike replied, his eyes rolling shut. "Don't be afraid of makin' it hurt, pet. I'll love it."

She cupped his balls and sucked at the underside of his length. "Yeah, but I'm much, much stronger than you now, too. Even more than I was before."

"Fuck, you're gonna make me come before you really get started, aren't you?" Spike hissed and when he looked at her, some yellow burned behind the blue. "Don't get it, do you? Knowing you could kill me anytime you like? That you could make it hurt? That's half the fun."

"You're bent."

He shrugged. "I am who I am. And you are the sexiest thing I've ever seen." He wiggled his hips, dragging the head of his cock across her mouth. "Now, for the love of—"

Buffy sucked him into her mouth and hummed.

"Fuck yes." Spike flexed and thrust forward, forcing himself deeper inside. Then he froze. "Don't mind if it hurts. In fact, I think I'll fancy it most of the time. Just be you. That's all I want."

Buffy smiled around him, and either the view or the sensation had him whimpering again. Then she drew her mouth back and swirled her tongue around the head of his cock, gently squeezing his sac before fitting her grip around the base of his erection.

“Yes, yes, yes, *fuck* yes.”

Well, might as well try. Buffy squeezed him, stopping just shy of where she typically lost her nerve with Riley. Spike whimpered and tightened his grip on her hair, holding her to him as he moved his hips in time with her mouth. After a few seconds, she realized he was guiding her, showing her how he liked to be sucked, venturing a bit deeper each time he thrust in.

“Fucking nymph,” he panted. “Look so hot. Mouth stuffed full with my cock.”

If the words had been fire, she would have dusted. Buffy struggled to maintain eye-contact—one of the magazines Anya had given her a long time ago had listed this as one of the ways to enhance the experience—but watching him as he watched her was, well, intimate. Really intimate. Riley usually screwed his eyes closed. But Spike’s gaze never left hers.

“Jesus,” he whispered. “Your mouth. Perfect, you are. My hot little slayer.”

She pulled back far enough that he loosened his hold on her hair, his eyes going wide and pleading when he realized she meant to release him entirely. But he didn’t have time to protest—she wrapped a hand around him and squeezed, a bit harder than she’d been brave enough to try in the past, before dipping her head to tongue one of his balls.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!”

The urgency in his voice startled her out of the moment. Buffy let go of his cock and sat back. “I’m sorry. Did that hurt?”

Spike lay there, panting, staring up at her with that lost look on his face. “Hurt? No. God, no. You’re perfect, baby. You hear me? Bloody perfect. Told you.” A beat. “Please take me back in. I—”

She sucked him between her lips again before he could finish the thought, running her tongue along the head before inching him as far into her mouth as she could. The urge to gag came and she rode it out, then took him in deeper. And deeper.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, *Buffy*—”

When she felt him brush against the back of her throat, she did what came natural—started swallowing. And Spike went nuts, practically howling, and damn if that wasn’t a pretty sight. She watched the

muscles in his abdomen flex, saw the tightness in his forearms, and the ecstasy on his face. Yes, ecstasy. There was no other word for it. His mouth was pulled into a somewhat goofy smile, his eyes were screwed shut now, and his brow furrowed as though he were concentrating.

“Buffy. *Buffy*.”

Then he opened his eyes and met her gaze, and that was it. The muscles in his legs tensed and he was coming hard. Hips arching up, eyes rolling back, his fingers in her hair again, holding her to him as he emptied himself down her throat.

The lack of needing oxygen definitely came in handy for one thing. Buffy almost giggled as she drew back, savoring the sensation of his cock sliding along her tongue. He didn’t get much chance to deflate, swelling up again before it left her lips.

Buffy eyed his renewed erection, snickering. “Are you for real with this thing?”

Spike, who was still panting, grunted something that she guessed was supposed to be a response.

“Seriously.” Now she did giggle, amused and touched that she had this effect on him. Okay, elated. It meant that what he’d told her was true—all of it. This was something he’d wanted for a long time, and hell, maybe she had too. She didn’t know. All she knew was she was one-hundred-percent where she wanted to be.

A point she decided to make by kissing the tip of his cock before beginning the crawl back up his body. He stirred when she dropped another kiss on his belly, then growled and hooked his arms under hers to drag her the rest of the way.

“Hope you realize you’re never leaving this sodding crypt again,” he said when they were face-to-face. “I’ve decided to keep you.”

She grinned and wrapped her arms around his neck, then tried not to whimper when he seized her by the hips and tugged so that his cock was pressed between her pussy lips. All she’d have to do to have him inside her would be to lift up and over just a bit, but something held her back. Not second-thoughts, because those had come and gone. She knew she wanted him and knew it would happen soon, but...it was a big step. The last one separating her from her old life, even if only in her head, and she felt it deserved more consideration.

Or none at all. Maybe that was it. She was waiting for the moment to feel right—too right for her to think on too much.

“No objections, then?” Spike asked, running his hand up her spine.

“Objections?”

“To my keeping you.”

He asked with a smirk but there was something underlying in his eyes that he couldn’t quite hide. That insecurity went both ways.

And that was the moment she slipped the rest of the way into love. She felt it happen—teetering on the edge one second and completely gone the next. It was fast and intense and all kinds of terrifying, but there nonetheless. *Real* nonetheless. This accidental thing that had happened overnight but also slowly over the past few years. There was still a ton to consider and conversations she wasn’t looking forward to, namely with Riley, but that was it. Buffy was in love.

It felt nothing like the last time, either. If anything, it felt more like those few blissful hours she’d spent believing she’d be Spike’s wife. Manufactured happiness, she’d told herself then, that was so far out there it could never be real.

Turns out, she’d been an idiot.

“You’re lucky I like it here,” Buffy said at last, then kissed him.

No one else in the world kissed like Spike, she was sure of it. All fire and passion and need and want. Then his hands got involved, wandering, exploring, searching, before he finally cupped her pussy and slid those fingers that knew her well by now inside her, and she melted all over again.

“Evil,” she whispered against his lips, then moaned when his thumb found her clit.

“Evil to do this, then?”

“Kinda think everything you do with your hands is evil.”

“Just my hands?”

“And your mouth. Tongue. And I’m pretty sure your penis is evil too.”

Spike barked a laugh and pressed his brow to hers. Another thing he did a lot—another thing she loved. “Want me to stop being evil, Slayer? I can give it up for you if I try real hard...”

“This...sexy evil is slayer-sanctioned.”

“Just sexy evil?”

“Other evil up for negotiation. Within reason.”

He chuckled and nipped at the mark on her throat, the one given to her by Dracula, and *damn* if that didn’t feel amazing.

“You’re incredible,” Spike murmured, pressing down on her clit as his fingers kept tempo between her legs. “You make me burn. You make me feel things I’ve never... Just never.”

What he’d never, she didn’t know—but somehow did at the same time. It was there in his eyes, the way he watched her as he pushed her over the edge. As her pussy clenched around his fingers and he coaxed her to another explosion.

“Never,” he whispered again.

Buffy didn’t say anything, just kept her brow pressed to his, shaking, but not of fear or uncertainty. Of something else altogether.

Then, without warning, she *did* know. What he was trying to tell her became at once so clear she wanted to cry.

He loved her, too.

And, words or not, that meant everything.



“YOU DON’T MISS HER, DO YOU?”

Spike handed her a glass of warmed blood from his newly acquired microwave. It had taken about an hour to set it up; eventually, they’d settled for hooking it up via extension plugs to the same outlet that powered his television set. It was a cheap appliance but an effective one. Buffy felt strangely like the new girlfriend transforming her man’s bachelor pad into a place where a woman could live.

“Who?”

She narrowed her eyes, leaning against one of his decorative sarcophaguses. “You know who,” she retorted before sipping at her blood.

Definitely better when warm. Still not as good as human. She tried not to think of that last part.

“Drusilla.”

Buffy did her best to ignore the sharp pang of jealousy seized her

stomach. Because yes, barely an hour after being certain Spike was in love with her, the old Buffy insecurities had swooped in, determined to infect her with doubt. Tell her she hadn't seen what she'd thought she'd seen. "Yeah. I just... You were so into her for such a long time. Say Drusilla showed up and was over her Chaos Demon and wanted you back. What would happen?"

"Dru would be outta luck."

"Spike—"

"I don't want Dru. She's my sire, yeah, but that's about that." He shook his head. "I got over Dru. Don't know when, but I'm over her. And I've been over her for a long time."

"Long time?"

He paused, considered. "Well, maybe not so long. A few months after a sodding century together... I thought she was it. But she wasn't." He reached for her then, guiding her chin upward so she could see the sincerity burning his eyes. "She wasn't," he said again. "She was my first...well, pretty much everything, but that doesn't mean she was it."

Buffy swallowed hard, trying not to fidget. "You...sound so certain."

"Cause I am." Spike offered her a flat smile then shifted his attention to a point over her shoulder. After a moment or two, he went on. "Here's the rub, Slayer. She never loved me. I was a toy to her. Someone who'd give her whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted it. Someone who loved her unconditionally and didn't care enough if he was loved back. And yeah, I did. I loved her. I loved her because she gave me freedom. She brought me this far. She also used me. She was never mine." He paused. "You know what you felt for Drac. For me, it was like that too. Reckon it's like that for most vamps. Trouble is I didn't know how to tell the difference between that and love, and Dru was affectionate so it was easy to fool myself. I don't have what you have."

A small grin crossed her face. "A vampire mentor? I thought Angel was that for you."

He pulled a face. "Was a toy to Angelus, too. Wanted to be the biggest and the baddest and he was always there to cut me down. Bloody hell, he'd shag Dru right in front of me, make her come

screamin' his name, just because he could. And I'd forgive her. She'd beg him the chance to suck him off, and I'd forgive her. And it wasn't just Angelus. It was any vampire or demon or randy son of a bitch that thought she was as enchantin' as I did. It wasn't love. She toyed with me to toy with me and she never gave me any reason to think she felt the way I did. That stint with Angelus was a couple of decades before he got stuffed full of soul, and Dru and me had a century to ourselves. Thought that meant something to her. But when all that happened a few years ago, right back to him she went, like what we had meant nothin'. Took me a while to suss it out, but that's just the way it was." Spike swallowed, some of the hurt she'd gotten used to seeing there flashing across his face. "She didn't love me."

A still beat settled between them. Buffy didn't know what to say, feeling a combination of regret for having brought this subject up at all, since it was obviously the source of pain, but also cruelly relieved.

That last thing made her feel bad, which was how she ended up blurting, "Is it bad that I'm not sorry?"

Spike arched an eyebrow. "What's that?"

Great. Now she had to explain herself.

"I mean...if Dru had loved you like you loved her, she probably would've done the claim thing you told me about, right?" She wiggled, wishing she could stuff the words back in her mouth. "Sorry, I'm just being selfish. Because if that had happened, well, you definitely would've dusted me by now. Or more likely wouldn't be here and, for me, that would suck beyond the telling of it."

His expression remained inscrutable for a long minute, long enough for her to worry that she'd finally gone too far and put her foot in it. Then, out of nowhere, he smiled.

Buffy wiggled again. "What?"

"You fancy me."

Well, duh. She rolled her eyes. "Spike, I literally had your dick in my mouth like an hour ago. This isn't exactly breaking news."

His gaze dropped to said mouth and went dark. "Believe me, Slayer, not apt to forget that anytime soon. Guess I didn't know how much of that was you...really wanting me."

"As opposed to...?"

"Told you there were three things. Happy to give you all of them."

Buffy blinked at him, her thoughts tripping over themselves. "Spike, I'm not...using you for sex. That's not what that was about."

He cupped the back of her neck and brought her mouth to his, growling and nipping against her lips. "Didn't think it was," he said when he pulled away. "Not really. Just...bloke's gotta be careful. Not get his hopes up too much, yeah?"

Yeah, that she definitely understood. Buffy nodded, the words bubbling in her throat. Somehow, though, she managed to swallow them. She didn't think she was brave enough to be the one who said them first.

"So," she said, pulling back and looking away. "How...ummm...do you do that claimy thing anyway?"

A somewhat dopey smile stretched across his face. "Claimy thing? Bloody hell, you butcher the language."

"Hey!"

"Well, you do, love."

"No more than you! And answer the question."

He studied her for a second, and again something flared behind his eyes, so vibrant and different than what had been there just a second ago. "It's simple, really. You wouldn't think one of the most powerful, permanent bonds on the bloody planet could come outta somethin' so simple."

"How?"

"Why are you so curious?"

She looked anywhere but him. "If I'm going to be a vampire, I need to...obey the three rules, right? And say I do...meet someone. I'm guessing the claimy thing goes with...sex, and—"

The room rumbled with a hard growl, and he grasped her wrist, yanking her to him. "No," he barked.

"No? It doesn't deal with sex?"

"No, there will be no sex."

Confidence was slowly leaking back. Buffy met his eyes and arched an eyebrow. "At all?"

"With anyone who's not in this room. Fuck yourself all you want,

love. Lord knows I'd love to watch. You'll be fucking me the rest of the time."

A bubble of happiness swelled in her belly. "Why, Mr. The Bloody," she retorted. "Are you trying to tell me something?"

"Told you enough downstairs."

"Did you?"

"If you don't know what my mouth was sayin'..." He growled again and yanked her fully into his arms, their respective glasses of blood shattering on the floor. "Then I'll just have to say it over again. Slower this time."

"Spike!"

He deposited her on the sofa without ceremony and tore her slacks down her legs. "You should really go back to wearin' those skimpy little skirts," he observed. "Think I might've grabbed one or two when I got your stuff."

"Uhhh..."

Her panties joined her slacks. Spike knelt beside the sofa and yanked her to his mouth, positioning her legs over his shoulders. "And as much as I love tastin' your unmentionables, this"—he buried his face in her pussy—"is what makes my mouth water."

"Spike...I was...uhhh...trying to...ask you a question."

"Blood exchange," he replied before sucking her clit into his mouth. "And words."

"What...oh, god!"

Spike grinned up at her, wagging his tongue between her swollen labia. "Mine," he replied. "That and the blood swap. It's easy. See what I mean?"

"That's it?"

"The full it. Now be quiet. I'm eating." He licked up her slit. "Christ, you taste so good."

It was a while before they left the crypt that night.



THEY WERE MAKING THE NORMAL ROUNDS. AND WHILE THERE WAS nothing Buffy would have liked more than to curl up in Spike's arms

and forget the outside world was there, there were several truths to be reckoned with. Eventually, her friends would come for her. Soon she was going to have to face them and the harsh realities of the life she had left behind. Soon she would have to make decisions regarding the future.

A future she didn't want without the vampire at her side. And that was something her friends would not understand.

"Looks like another slow night, pet," Spike said with a sigh. "Sorry. Know you've been itchin' for a fight."

She shrugged. "It's not so bad."

"I really thought we'd've run into your mates by now."

"Well, there's every chance that they took your conversation with Giles seriously." She tossed up her hands at the look that comment earned. "I'm just saying. Anything's possible."

"The day the bloody Scoobies listen to me is the same day that..." He paused, frowning. "Well, no, that already happened."

"What?"

He smirked.

Buffy gaped at him and jabbed him in the side. "Pig."

"Oink bloody oink. There are worse things." His eyes lit up, then slowly raked the length of her. "So good of you to have worn that skirt."

"After, oh, twenty minutes of a certain vampire telling me to 'wear tha bloody skirt,' I'd certainly hope so."

He pouted. "Do not sound like that."

"Right. I was being generous."

"Oh, you're gonna get it, missy."

Before she knew what was happening, the Big Bad attacked.

With tickles.

Buffy shrieked and batted at his hands, likely with more force than the occasion called for, but it had little effect. Spike on a mission could not be deterred.

The only way to fight was to retaliate. So she did. With gusto.

It wasn't long before the tickle attack transformed into something else, and they were sparring in earnest. Just like the good old days, and *god yes*, she felt even more like herself. She had slaughtered a house

of vampires only days before, had offed a few stragglers on patrol, but there was nothing like fighting Spike. Nothing like a challenge, even for she who was now beyond earthly challenges. Her strength was immense, and quite frankly, terrifying.

As though reading her mind, Spike snapped, "Don't hold back. I won't."

"Never do," she retorted, meeting him with a kick. "Just tell me if I get too rough."

In all fairness, it was more what he saw when she kicked her leg up that defeated him, rather than the kick itself. But at that, Spike didn't look too disappointed, even when he went sailing into the nearest headstone. "Naughty Slayer," he drawled as he climbed to his feet, wiping blood off his chin. "No knickers?"

She smirked. "What's the point?"

"That's my girl."

There was absolutely nothing else like this—like fighting him. He knew her every move, but she knew his much better. His eyes gleamed with anticipation every time she rushed him, even if it resulted in another tumble to the ground. There was hunger there that hadn't been there before. Hunger for something more than blood. More than sex. More than anything she had ever experienced. Fighting Spike arose a primal calling from deep inside her, and she wanted to answer it.

The more swings she took, the more she dived to the side, the more she laughed and kicked and clawed, the louder that primal voice became. Until the voice she was used to listening to drowned out entirely and she was left with nothing but the animal.

The animal that saw what belonged to it and wanted to stake its claim.

Buffy didn't recognize the heated growl that tore through her throat, nor did she register the flash of surprise in his eyes when she tackled Spike to the ground.

She straddled him, grinding her pussy into his denim-clad erection, her skirt riding up her thighs. The demon within roared again. There was something about this. Something she recognized. Something innate and celebrated.

Something...

Spike's eyes flashed. "Buffy..."

There might have been a warning in his voice, she didn't know. All she knew at the moment was she'd won the day and he was her prize. The demon urged her forward, guiding her thoughts and action. She wasn't surprised when her fangs broke through her gums, nor when she saw Spike's eyes flash.

"Fuck, Slayer, you're—"

But she tugged him to her before he could finish the thought.

Then bit down. And drank.

PRIMAL

IT FELT LIKE A DREAM, and he was lost.

In dreams, rules didn't apply. In dreams time, patience, and personal vows were immaterial. All he knew was that Buffy's fangs were in his throat and her pussy was pressed against his aching erection. And thanks to her criminally short skirt and no knickers, only his jeans separated them. Everything else was left to instinct.

His demon burst through before he could stop himself. He shoved her back to the ground and settled between her open thighs. Then his zipper was down, his cock in his hand, the head at her opening, her scent filling his nostrils.

She was his. That was all he knew. She belonged to him. And now he would have her.

Spike growled and plunged inside her, and was immediately swallowed by the most blissful sensation he had ever experienced. He watched her eyes go wide, her head snap backward with his blood dribbling down her chin. Her human face melting the demon away, and it was just Buffy again. Buffy looking at him with wide, vulnerable eyes full of something he couldn't name. A strangled moan tore through his throat and his body rejoiced. He was inside her. Her pussy was around his cock, and he needed more. Needed all of it—needed her right

bloody now. Spike growled, swirled his hips, and set about a bruising tempo body. Pounding into her with a roar of triumph, feeling her tremble around him, feeling her cunt grip his cock, her soaked and silken flesh molding around his. And there was no place for him but here. Right here.

It was the explosion of pleasure that ripped through him first.

The second was the realization, as the demon's grip on his mind receded, that this was really happening. He was really balls-deep in Buffy, fucking her hard, and though she was giving it to him good too—and she was, hips rolling, muscles clenching, soft grunts escaping her throat—just a short twenty-four hours had passed since she'd told him she wasn't ready for this. Guilt and horror shoved pleasure aside and Spike gasped, pulling himself out of her before he could do more damage.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck. Slayer, I'm sorry." God, how pathetic those words sounded. He sat back on his legs, his chest aching, cock hard and aimed at her, slick with her juices. But what he'd just done was unforgivable. He knew that, no matter which part of his brain had been in charge. "Demon lost control and I... Fuck, just stake me and get it over with."

Buffy stared at him for a moment, panting, then sat up, seized him by the lapels of his duster, and kissed him hard. Not just hard—biting hard, and hell, he couldn't help but moan at that, even if this was her way of saying goodbye before she turned him to dust.

But then she was pulling him with her, reclining on the grass and settling him between her legs once more.

"Spike," she said against his lips, his name rasping around her fangs. "Fuck me. *Please*."

"Please?" he asked, barely daring to hope. She rolled her hips and notched the head of his cock at her opening. "You...want—"

"Yes. Now. *Fuck me now*."

A wave of relief crashed over him as he pushed back inside her with a growl. Buffy released a sound that went straight to his dick, somewhere between a whimper and a moan and a gasp, and dragged him down for a fangy kiss. And then they were off to the races, biting and clawing, as much a fight as anything else between them had been.

Fuck, he'd imagined this so many times over the years—how a life-or-death battle could turn pornographic with one artful hip thrust. How he might seduce her one of the nights she stormed over to beat information out of him. How they might just argue and scream until there was nothing left to do but fuck out their differences. But this was something beyond his deepest fantasies. With her fangs scraping his lips, her tongue lapping up his blood, her hips smashing upward every time he pulled back, chasing him and moving with him like she might dust if he stopped pumping.

"Fuck," Spike rasped, tearing up the hem of her top so he could play with those gorgeous tits of hers. He nipped at her through the lace of her bra, and when she responded by clenching around his cock so nice he about popped, he did it again. "Perfect, Slayer. My perfect. Oh yeah, baby, squeeze me like that. Love your fucking cunt. Love your fangs. Love you, Buffy. *Love you, love you.*"

Okay, so that much he hadn't meant to say, but Buffy went wild. She tore at his mouth with hers, the cadence of her cries becoming the exclamation point of every thrust. And she was smiling at him, smiling around her fangs and looking up with those gorgeous yellow eyes of hers. He'd told her he loved her and the girl was *smiling*.

The only thing that would make this better would be sinking his fangs into her throat, but he knew if dared, it'd be all over and he wasn't ready yet. He needed to feel her come first, needed to know just how sweetly her pussy would choke him when she reached that moment. He slipped a hand under the cup of her bra and pinched her nipple, watching in delight as she gasped and bucked and snarled back at him.

"Spike," she gasped, hooking her legs around his waist, leveraging him deeper inside her, "I can't... Touch me, please."

Whatever the lady wanted... Spike reached between them, hand dancing over her slippery flesh until he had her clit pinned beneath his finger.

Buffy threw her head back and sobbed. "Oh god, oh god..."

Spike skated his fangs along her neck before burying his face there, focusing on the burn spreading through his body. "Taste so sweet," he murmured. She was going to tear holes into his duster if she grasped

him any tighter, and he couldn't find it within himself to care. Not with her gripping his prick like that every time he slammed home. He growled and pressed harder on her clit. "Come for me, baby. Drench my cock."

"Spike—"

"Slayer—"

"*Bite me.*"

The two most perfect words in the bloody language. Spike snarled again, and though he knew he'd spill the second he tasted her blood, he could deny her nothing. Just had to hope that she came with him—that he was fucking her hard enough, stroking her clit just right, because he was a bloody goner.

Another roar slashed through his throat as his fangs tore into her soft skin, and *fuck yes*, she exploded around him, her pussy spasming hard around his cock and bringing him over with her. The combination of her blood on his tongue and the vise-like squeezing of her cunt spelled the end for him; he bucked and growled again as he spilled himself inside her, flooding her with jet after jet. The way he felt, he could have come forever. And hell, maybe he would. Maybe this was the way he dusted. It was the best way to go.

He was so thoroughly hers. He would do whatever she wanted to could keep her. Any pretense of letting her go was had flown the bloody coop. He'd thought it the night before after eating her pussy. He'd thought it again when she'd taken his cock into her mouth. He'd thought it so many times over the last couple of days, but never as strongly as he did right now. Looking at her as her face became human once more, as she gasped and stared at him like he was really something.

Fuck, he'd never let her go.

"Buffy," Spike gasped. "My Buffy..."

She murmured something unintelligible, raised her head and nibbled on his ear.

"I meant it, you know." He pulled so he could see her eyes. "What I said. I love you. I fucking love you."

There. It was all bloody out there now. For better or worse, she knew him completely.

“Spike...”

He didn't know how to take her tone, but instinct and experience had him preparing for heartbreak. So, in an effort to avoid the blow, he found himself babbling. “That's why I told Rupes I'd storm Drac's castle. Didn't know it at the time, but that's why.” He paused even as his brain raced on. “And...I'm sorry that I'm not sorrier. That your being turned is the best bloody thing that happened to me. Know that's wrong and selfish, but I'm a wrong and selfish bloke, love. And fuck, I love you so much.” He pressed his brow to hers, his eyes fluttering shut. “So much.”

The silence that followed was deafening. Then, softly, “I love you, too.”

And the world stood still.

“C-can...” Spike pulled back, barely daring to hope he'd heard correctly. “Can you say that...again?”

Buffy looked up at him, her vivid green eyes focused and clear. “Spike, I love you, too.”

For a long moment, all Spike could do was stare, waiting. For her to start laughing at him and shove him away, or for the stake he knew he deserved to smash its way into his chest. For anything that would make the words she'd given him make sense. But Buffy just looked back at him, grinning up at his face, and when it registered that he wasn't imagining things, he gave a strangled groan and smashed his lips to hers. She whimpered into his mouth and squeezed her thighs around him, earning a long moan and a quick thrust. He wanted her again; bloody hell, he'd want her until the end of time.

Something they might now have.

“I love you,” she whispered again.

“Love you, too.” He skimmed his teeth along her neck. “And I want you again.”

In reply, she squeezed those exquisite muscles around his cock. “I really don't mind.”

“Bloody hell,” he murmured. “I'll fuck you anywhere you want, Slayer. Say the word and I'll lay you out at the Bronze and get you to come all over my tongue.”

“Uhh, no.”

Spike chuckled. It was going to be so much fun wearing down her modesty. “Point is, think I’d like to make it back to our bed for the next round. Bit exposed out here and wouldn’t wanna be interrupted during anything...” He dragged his blunt teeth over the mark on her throat. “...crucial.”

She fed him the sweetest little sigh he’d ever heard. “You...think we’d be...interrupted?”

“Lots of beasties go *bump* in the graveyard.” On the word *bump*, he thrust his hips forward and swore up a storm when she worked those fantastic muscles of hers again. “And if your commando boy decides to take a stroll...?”

That was likely a mistake, bringing up the human bloke she’d not yet managed to give the boot. All sort of delicate emotions to go with that, things she likely hadn’t sussed out for herself. Yet Buffy managed to surprise him.

“Good call,” she said, making a face and pushing gently on his chest until he pulled back and out of her. “That would be of the very bad.”

Spike rose to his feet, still feeling like he was navigating a mine-field, and held out his hand to pull her up. Then they were doing the awkward shuffle together—cock back in pants, skirt nice and straight, brushing dirt and grass off clothes, pulling twigs out of hair. He didn’t know if he should push the Finn issue at all, wasn’t sure he wanted to know just how much mental space she’d given the wanker over the past few days. But she’d said she loved him, and fuck, Spike believed her. One thing he knew about Buffy Summers—those were not words she parted ways with lightly.

“I will tell him,” Buffy said a moment later, reaching for his hand. “I mean, I’ll kinda have to. Once I’m all with the...being around people again.”

“Yeah?”

She rolled her eyes, and he relaxed. There was the Slayer he knew and bloody worshipped.

“Of course I’ll tell him!” she replied, smacking his shoulder. “I’ll tell all of them. This...you and me thing is going to freak them out, probably, but things are different now. Like way, way different. And if I can

get used to being a vampire, they can get used to me dating one. Again.”

“We’re a bit beyond dating, pet.” At least he hoped they were.

Buffy snickered and finger-combed her hair. “Yeah, well, let’s handle that convo with kiddie-gloves. I think they might actually blow a collective gasket.” She turned to him with a grin. “So...race you home?”

Home. She really was beginning to think of the crypt as home.

“What’s the winner get?” he asked.

“Hmm. To have an article of clothing removed by the loser?”

“That all?”

“With his teeth?”

“Her teeth, you mean.”

Buffy’s eyes flashed. “Aww, he thinks he stands a chance. That’s cute.”

“Slayer, just bloody—”

The little cheater gave a squeal of delight and took off, slayer and vamp muscle combined. Like there was a sodding contest to begin with.

Fuck, he loved her. And there was simply no feeling in the world comparable to this.

No feeling at all.



BUFFY WAITED UNTIL SPIKE WAS WITHIN REACH OF THE CRYPT TO seal her victory, then proceeded to do a very wiggly celebratory dance just inside the crypt. He’d all but tackled her to the floor—just to do his part as the sorry loser, he’d said—and proceeded to undress her with his fangs, one torn piece of fabric at a time.

When she’d complained that hey, she’d liked that bra, he’d taken his time apologizing to her breasts, leaving them wet and swollen before he’d taken a tour south.

At some point, maybe after she’d passed out after the third time—something that he had yet to stop bragging about—he’d hauled her down to the bed. That’s where she was now, spread across the

mattress, naked, her nipples erect and her pussy throbbing and Spike too far away to do anything about it.

"Christ," he said from where he stood at the foot of the bed, devouring her with his eyes as he pumped his cock. "You are so fucking lovely."

She lifted her head and pouted. "Are you just going to stand there and look all night?"

"Could. Happily. But I'd rather do this instead." The mattress dipped with his weight as he began to prowl toward her. When he reached the apex of her thighs, he inhaled deeply and lowered his head. "You smell divine," he growled before lapping at her slit. "So wet and sweet and spicy. And you taste like—"

"Spike!"

"Mmm..." He delved his tongue inside her pussy, licked once, twice, before turning his attention to her swollen clit. "Yeah," he decided, grinning. "Come to think of it, you *do* taste like me."

A hard, surprised giggle burst out of her. "Perv."

He chuckled into her, and the vibrations felt so good that she didn't realize she had gasped until she met his dancing eyes.

"Get up here," she whispered.

An insolent look crossed his face and, raising his chin in defiance, he sucked her clit between his lips. "You don't want me here?"

"Ahh, wait..."

A finger slid inside her. "I rather like it here."

"Spike..."

"So lovely." He dipped his tongue into her again before reclaiming her clit and slipping another finger inside her. "The sounds you make... the way you taste."

"Oh god!"

"But," he conceded with a sigh, "if you insist..." He drew his fingers out, sucked them into his mouth, then resumed his prowl up her body. The head of his cock parted her folds, slipping over her wet skin. Her breasts were pressed against his chest, his arms hooking under hers. Not a breath passed between them.

Then all tease was gone. He kissed her so tenderly she thought she might cry.

“I love you,” he whispered.

“Love you, too.”

He sank inside her with a moan of completion.

And this was it. Home. In the arms of the man she loved. The man who loved her back. She was swimming in him and it wasn't enough. Too much but still not enough.

So much had changed in such a small amount of time.

Spike murmured into her throat as he rocked inside her, whispering things that set her blood aflame. He drove her to new extremes without even realizing it. He had replaced her pain with love.

And she wouldn't let anything come between them.

ANIMALS

OVER THE YEARS, Buffy had starred in a number of Spike's dreams. This one just happened to be his favorite. The Slayer on her knees, pumping his cock with one hand, squeezing his balls with the other, and doing things with her mouth that would make the Watcher's Diaries some truly riveting reading. It was a good dream—fan-fucking-tastic.

And, he realized as reality began chasing away sleep, not a dream at all.

Spike's eyes flew open and he sat up sharply, took one look at the blonde between his legs, moaned and fell back to the bed.

"Oh...oh bloody fuck."

Buffy released the head of his cock wet a wet plop. "Evening," she said, massaging his sac against her palm.

"Christ," he whimpered, rolling his hips to thrust deeper into her mouth. "B-Buffy...I...how long have...I been..."

She made this slurping sound that about had him shooting off like a coed. "Missing out?" she asked, licking the underside of his cock. Flashing him that tongue of hers. Driving him wild.

Spike threw back his head, wondering how in the bloody blazes he'd ever gotten so lucky. Then decided it was bad luck to wonder and

he ought to just enjoy it. "And here I was...planning to...wake you up like this."

"I just wore you out good, huh?" She swirled her tongue around his cockhead before giving it a firm, direct suck.

"Best bloody...god, Buffy, I need you up here." Before she could object, he seized her by the shoulders and dragged her up the length of his body until her pussy was hovering over his shaft. "Like this," he whispered, claiming her mouth as she sank onto him.

She pulled back with possibly the sexiest look on her face. Of course, he thought every look was sexy. But this one he really fancied, knowing he'd put it there. That the reason her brow was furrowed and her lips were rounded was because of the way his dick felt inside her. "Oohhh," she moaned, and Christ was sexy too.

"Fuck yeah," he gasped in agreement. He took in the sight of her. Astride him, his naked nymph. Perfect breasts just waiting to be cupped and licked, strong thighs bracketing his, and her pretty pink cunt stuffed full of him. Spike ran his fingers up her sides, tugged at her nipples, then gripped her hips. "Ride me, baby. Ride me to a bloody gallop."

Then her eyes were on him, wide and uncertain. And he understood.

Fucking hell, why had she been wasting time with tossers who couldn't give her anything beyond bloody missionary?

"Lean back a bit," he whispered, doing his best to swallow his shock when she complied. That was something he would never get used to. Buffy not arguing him for the sake of arguing. Buffy with him because she wanted to be. Buffy starting to bounce on his cock because *she loved him*.

That hadn't been part of the dream, right? She really did love him?

"Bleedin' hell," he gasped as those amazing muscles of hers began working their magic. He trailed his hands up her sides again until he had a breast against each palm and her nipples under his thumbs, and just watched her as she found her confidence and her rhythm. As she began trusting what came natural, and Christ if it wasn't one of the most breathtaking scenes of his unlife. He kept his trained on the glorious sight of her pussy swallowing his juice-slick cock again and

again. He'd seen a lot in his life, from the deliciously erotic to the downright depraved, but nothing had ever affected him like this, and it had everything to do with her. The fact that the girl riding him was his slayer. "You're so fucking gorgeous."

"Unh..."

"You know what you do to me, don't you?" he whispered, his voice a rough hiss that was barely audible over the wet smack of their bodies. He pumped up into her with a needy, heated frenzy. This wasn't going to be a long, drawn-out lovemaking. He needed to feel her pussy spasm. Needed to hear her scream. "Make me so hard. Always have. And fuck, how wet you get for me. How good you feel. How you taste. Your mouth... You drive me insane." He dropped a hand to where they were joined, positioning his knuckles so he nudged her clit on her every downstroke. "How nice you fuck me with that pussy."

"Oh god, Spike!" Buffy increased her speed, slamming down harder on him, making his bones rattle. "Oh god!"

"Fuck yes, you feel so good," he growled. "So fucking good."

Her shyness had melted away, leaving behind a wanton goddess. She was slamming into him, those miraculous muscles of hers strangling his cock, her face contorted with ecstasy that had him drunk. Fuck, he needed to feel it now. Needed to feel her cunt tighten and spasm. Needed to watch as she came.

He nudged her clit harder, then snaked a hand around her ass and fingered her puckered hole.

"Oh god!" she gasped, throwing her head back. "Ohhhh..."

"Need to taste you," Spike growled, hauling himself up and sucking on the proud bite mark he'd given her the night before. "God, Buffy..."

"Please!"

That was all he needed. His fangs elongated and sank into her milky flesh, and she exploded around him. Her head thrown back, her eyes glassy as she rode out the throes of her orgasm. Her blood pouring into his mouth. Her body trembling hard around him. He growled into her and flipped her over, pounding into her with bruising, frenzied need.

She had awakened something in him that had been dead a lot

longer than he'd thought, and he would never stop worshipping her for it.

Then he felt her fangs pierce his throat, and he was coming hard as her pussy milked his pulsing cock, tugging and squeezing like she was determined to keep him inside her. And when the world came back to him, she was there, hugging him to her chest as he panted and buried his face in her throat.

He had been alive for so long but had never experienced this sort of intimacy. Had never felt this close to someone and had the sentiment returned. She'd given him everything.

Purring with satisfaction, he pulled back and kissed her. Then there was this. The way she tasted, how she chased his tongue with hers. How she seemed as hungry for him as he always was for her.

"Hi," she said after their lips parted, enchanting him with her shy smile.

He grinned. "Hey."

Buffy settled back against his pillows. "How are you?"

"Bloody blissful." He nipped at her throat. "And you? Am I squishin' you?"

"Not possible."

"Good, 'cause I'm never movin'." In direct contradiction to his words, he rolled them over again so that she was sprawled over his chest, his cock slipping out of her, which made them both groan. "You bloody well blow my mind away."

"I woke up very horny."

"Not complainin'. Point of fact..." He nuzzled her with another small growl. "Any time you wanna jump my willin' body, don't let anythin' stop you."

"I don't plan on it."

A warm chuckle rumbled through his chest. "I love you," he murmured and brushed a kiss across her temple. The words hadn't been spoken today, and the minute they escaped his lips, he immediately tensed, daring fate to take yesterday's gift away.

The fear vanished the next second. "I love you, too."

A wide grin spread across his lips. "And I'm never gonna get tired of hearin' that."

She smiled, settling against his chest. "This is nice."

"Understatement of the bloody year," Spike agreed. "I'm so...I'd half convinced myself that I'd dreamt up last night."

"I woke you up."

"From a very pleasant dream. Then I woke up and she was still here."

"Wow, that was...lame. Like really lame." Buffy smacked his shoulder. "But you're sweet."

His smile melted into a scowl. "I mean it."

"I know."

He wedged a hand between them and pinched her nipple. "And don't be callin' me lame."

She giggled. "Sorry."

"You are not."

"Well, you're awfully adorable when you're lame."

A mock growl tumbled through his throat. "I bloody well am not adorable," he snarled, dropping his fangs on principle alone. "I'm a bad, rude, crude man."

"Uh huh."

He rumbled in disapproval. "Need me to prove anythin'?"

"No," she replied, dragging her own hand between them now and wrapping her fingers around his cock. Then she found the bite she'd left on his throat and proceeded to give him some of his own medicine. The demon instantly receded and Spike threw his head back with a long mowl. She smirked. "I don't think proof is necessary."

"God, baby..."

"We better stop," she said, releasing his prick.

"Why?" he nearly whined.

"Because if I stay, we're gonna have sex again."

"Not really a problem here," he gasped, rolling his hips against hers. "Fuck, what you do to me."

"Not a problem," she agreed. "Except I'm hungry."

He grinned at that. "Well then," he said, sitting up. "Let's go see what's in the fridge, right?"

"So we can come back and make with the sexcapades?"

If she wanted nosh, she needed to stop saying things like that. “Sounds like a plan.”.

Now it was just a matter of getting out of bed.
Successfully.



“WHAT’S GONNA HAPPEN?”

Buffy glanced up from where she sat on the corner sarcophagus, sipping on the cooling blood he’d handed her in what she was certain was one of Giles’s mugs, being that it read *Kiss the Librarian*. The seriousness in his tone worried her.

“When?” she asked.

“When you meet your mates.”

Buffy shuddered. “I...I’m not there yet.”

Spike nodded and stepped forward. “I know. But you’re gonna be.”

“I’m not.”

He met her eyes and held. “But you’re *gonna* be,” he said again. “And I guess... Love, I know things are different now. Believe me, I know it. But what happens when your mates try to...when they—”

“Try to take me away from you?”

A grin tickled his lips. “I doubt they’d get very far in makin’ you do anythin’ you don’t want to do.”

“Hence the *try*.” She smiled wryly and heaved a sigh. “I don’t know. I really don’t. I think...if I sit down and talk them through it, it’ll be okay. Will, Tara, and Anya... They’ll understand. Maybe even Giles.” She paused. “Xander won’t. Not at first.”

A silent beat settled between them.

“And Soldier Boy?” Spike asked softly. “How does he fit in?”

“He doesn’t.”

“Not at all?”

“I doubt he’ll stick around once we break up officially.” Buffy glanced down, ashamed. “Riley...he’s nice, in that big ‘aren’t I just the gosh-darndest best thing on two legs’ type of guy. And I wanted to feel...something with him. I really did. And I really, really tried.”

He growled softly. “I remember.”

"But...I don't want him. I want you. I love you."

The growl vanished almost at once, replaced by one of his soft, just-for-her smiles. "I know, pet," he said. "I just... He's not gonna take this lightly. Captain Cardboard's already President of the Let's Stake Spike Club. When he finds out about us..."

"He won't care."

"I find that rather unlikely."

"I'm a vampire, Spike. He won't care. And it's all the better, really. He'll bow out and that'll be the end of that." She shook her head. "I'm terrible. I don't want to hurt him, but I also... I don't want him to be here. Around you...us. I don't want to have to worry that he's going to do something crazy in what he'd think is protecting my honor."

"Bein' with me defiles your honor, then?"

"In his world, yes. And I know it because it was my world not too long ago." A trembling sigh spilled through her lips, and she shook her head. "Everything I've ever done to you, and you still—"

Spike was at her side the next minute, tilting her chin upward. "It's a two-way street, Slayer," he murmured. "I've done things to you that are bloody well unforgivable."

"I'm past that."

He nodded. "So am I." A brief pause. "But Buffy, your mates aren't gonna sit around and twiddle their thumbs forever. It's a sodding miracle we haven't stumbled across them on patrol just yet. Eventually they're gonna get tired of waiting and come for you. Then what?"

"I thought you told Giles we'd leave town."

"If that's what you want, you bloody well better believe it. I'll take you wherever you wanna go, kitten. Just say the word." He pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Doesn't change what you're gonna have to face, though. You love your friends. You'll wanna chat with the witch about some girly flick you wanna see. Or maybe strike up conversations with Demon Girl on the virtues of earth-shakin' orgasms." He wagged his brows. "It's gonna happen, though. Don't doubt it."

"I don't. I just..." She looked at him pleadingly. "I've tried though, right? I've tried going near people. I've accepted that I need blood and every time I drink, I just want more. I need a chip...or something. You think Riley could hook me up with an Initiative chip?"

Spike's eyes darkened and he snarled. "That git's not gonna touch you. You think I'd let him knock you out and put you under the knife? Are you—"

"No, of course not." Buffy offered a flat smile. "Bad joke."

"Oh."

"But I...I don't know what I'm doing wrong."

"Well, for starters, love, you didn't ease yourself into feeling round the humanly types. You went to the single most popular place in town. Of course, you felt your control slipping."

She shook her head. "But it shouldn't be like this. I just... God, I don't know."

Spike studied her for a few seconds, then muttered an oath and pulled her into his arms. She curled around him, burying her face against his chest, quivering with the weight of the world that seemed so adamant on cutting into her happiness. Happiness she'd found in pain.

"Vampires aren't meant to bag it, Slayer," he murmured into her hair. "It's against your nature. A part of eatin' blood comes from the kill. The violence of it. The rush. Achievin' two of the three essentials in one swoop is...well, what we're made for. It's one of the reasons why bringing fangs into our sex life is so bloody unbelievable."

The tremors wracking through her body intensified. "I'm not letting myself kill anyone," she swore. "It's not happening."

"I know. I know." He kissed her brow. "We'll think of somethin'."

"I hope so."



THE SECOND HE SAID THE WORDS, HE VOWED TO FIND A WAY TO make them true. Hadn't meant to say it just like that without a plan, but once they were out there they became his mission. By god, he *would* think of something that would appease her need for the hunt and the need for blood. Satisfy the demon so the woman wouldn't suffer. He'd walk through fire to spare her pain.

There was more to it than that. The demon wanted to claim her. Badly. Every time he slid his fangs inside her, it was all he could do to

hold the words back. He loved her so much but was so bloody terrified that something out there would still swoop in and take her from him. He had already achieved the impossible with gaining her love. Seemed like one of those things that a bloke like him couldn't hope to hold onto for long.

She had asked him time again and time again about the claim. How it worked. What needed to be said. What it meant for those under its power.

Distant hope was better than none. He was nearly sure if he asked her, she wouldn't laugh him out of the crypt, but it wasn't likely she'd say yes. Like popping the question after the first date. At least marriage offered the luxury of divorce. Claims were forever, and one didn't just rush into forever.

Spike knew what forever felt like. She didn't. He would love her until the world ended. Knowing Buffy as he did, having seen the way she loved as he had, he was almost sure she felt the same but almost wasn't good enough, because to suppose she would feel the way he did for the rest of eternity was a hard gamble. And he never wanted to be one of her regrets.

He would ask her, though. One day, he'd ask her.

Time and courage were all he needed. He'd steal the rest.

A MOVING TARGET

GILES DIDN'T KNOW when they had stopped immediately asking about Buffy.

At the start of the week, she was all they could talk about. The source of heated debates and hotter tempers. No one knew exactly what to expect from her anymore, when or if they would see her again. Only days had passed since the platinum pest had visited him and dropped his bombshell. Only days, and yet it felt as though years had gone by since Giles had seen Buffy's face or heard her voice.

Every night since then had passed had been spent speculating, torturing himself, of thoughts of what Spike was doing to her. If he had killed her himself, now that he could. If they were all fools for sitting back. The logical side of his brain would fire back that Spike could hardly hope to kill Buffy, as undoubtedly strong as she had to be. That if he'd tried, he'd end up eating dust, and Buffy would have returned to them.

Then the darker side of his brain would chime in with, *unless she has no will to live*. Those thoughts were the ones that haunted him the most. He well remembered that becoming a vampire was Buffy's worst nightmare, and this time there was no mystic dreamer to save. This time it was real.

But Buffy was stronger than that. God, he hoped.

Presuming that everything Spike had told him was, in fact, the truth, then there was no doubt that the little arse would abscond with Buffy if anyone attempted to approach him. That Spike had spoken the truth and Buffy wanted nothing to do with any of them just yet. That she needed the help of a vampire, and that placing her in the same room as humans was the most dangerous, damaging thing anyone could ask of her right now.

It just didn't seem right that Buffy wouldn't have gone to Angel. Angel had a soul. Angel loved her and would do whatever he could to help her. Angel wouldn't be the danger to her that Spike was.

It wasn't as though Giles liked Angel—he didn't, and he would never pretend otherwise. But Angel had far more motivation to help Buffy than Spike did.

When Giles had shared Spike's threat about leaving town if anyone tried to come near him, he'd received the reactions he'd expected. Willow had panicked. Anya had shrugged. Tara had frowned but refrained from saying much. Xander had gone crazy and demanded they storm the bloodsucker's crypt and save their friend, as she had obviously been brainwashed.

The most surprising response had come from Riley. He'd sat silent for a few minutes as chaotic debate exploded around him, his expression an odd combination of rage and apathy. As though he was not as much surprised as he was disappointed, but angry with himself because of it.

In the few days that had passed, the Scoobies' rage had fizzled from continuous debate, to casual conversation, and at last to a begrudging acceptance. Willow and Tara had come to the conclusion that, if sired slayers truly did keep their souls, then Buffy had to have gone to Spike of her own accord. And if Buffy wanted to be elsewhere, she would be. Right now she wanted to be with Spike, and they were in no position to deny what she needed. Even Xander had come around—not completely, but he'd admitted if Buffy felt she needed to be with Spike to get through whatever she was going through, then he would support her. They had no way of knowing what she was going through and storming in could be dangerous for a whole host of reasons.

Perhaps it was Joyce's reaction that had calmed everyone down. So much like his own. Horror, then outrage, then relief, then acceptance. Her daughter was not dead, nor was she a monster. And after Giles had explained the terms that Spike had set out, Joyce was determined to keep her daughter's friends away from the cemetery. She trusted Spike for reasons no one could understand.

If Buffy needed Spike right now, she'd said, that was that.

They were nearing on the end of a week, though, without any word. Only a week.

The longest week of Giles's life.

His living room was filled with the expected crowd. Willow and Tara were chatting about some spell they had finally nailed the night before. Anya was on Xander's lap, trying to persuade him to sneak off so they could get in a pre-Scooby meeting orgasm before she had to be bored for an hour and a half. Riley was sitting by himself, not engaged or even paying attention to the world around him. He looked as though life itself had been drained and nothing would ever make him happy again.

Giles sighed and removed his glasses. He didn't particularly want to see the facial reactions to what he was about to say.

"I have decided," he declared loudly, slicing through the mingled conversations around him, "to phone Angel."

There was a brief silence at that. Everyone stared.

"Angel?" Willow finally asked. "Why?"

"He deserves to know what has happened," Giles replied. "Furthermore, I'm not entirely sure that Buffy's judgment has been... Well, obviously, we can't know what's going through her mind, but I am getting worried, as I'm sure you are, as well. She's been with Spike for nearly a week now and we have no idea what he's doing to her."

Tara's eyes went wide at that. "Doing to her?" she echoed. "What do you mean?"

"Spike wouldn't have the gall to do anything to her," Xander agreed. "She'd stake him so fast, he'd see his own dust."

"I don't trust him," Giles said. "Buffy wouldn't have left us without word from her this long. Not a phone call. Not a letter. Not even a stop by her mother's."

"But we all decided," Willow shot back. "Spike said she was having trouble coping...you know, with the fangy thing? Being around people equals bad? And if she wanted Angel to help her, don't you think she would've said so?"

"Do we really trust Spike to have told the truth in that regard?"

Xander frowned. "Not to be coming to Captain Peroxide's defense, because hey, that's so not happening, but...why would he not tell the truth? That just doesn't make sense, G-Man. Like he wants a live-in houseguest for god-knows-how-long? Especially in Buffy-form? This is the guy that—"

"Kills slayers," Giles said with a nod. "Yes, Xander, I am perfectly aware of who we're talking about. Which is all the more reason to intervene before something happens that we're incapable of stopping." There was a pause, and he sighed. "I'm not about to forcibly remove Buffy from where she feels comfortable," he clarified. "I just...I have yet to hear from her, and that worries me. The idea that she wouldn't have gone to Angel, or at least tried to, simply doesn't make sense. He's the one with a soul. He's the one she..." His eyes caught Riley's in the corner, and he glanced away quickly. "I'm not sure Buffy has actually weighed an opinion, and I'm simply tired of taking all of this on faith from a vampire that has attempted to kill us all more than once, especially knowing that he has a particular agenda when it comes to slaughtering slayers. Perhaps Buffy realized that she couldn't get to Angel in time, and went to Spike as a fallback under the provision that he help her to Los Angeles."

"If killing Buffy was his intention, don't you think it would have been a little easier to have not come and told you that she was staying with him?" Anya asked, looking bored and unimpressed. "One would assume that he would have found her, killed her, and not said a word to anyone. Spike's been around for a hundred years or more. He might be thickheaded but he's not stupid. What is it with you people and constantly searching for hidden motives, especially where demons are involved? Especially ones that make absolutely no sense?"

"Because demons often have hidden motives, sweetie," Xander said, patting her back.

A look of pure agitation flashed across her face. "You just don't understand me at all, do you, Xander?"

Willow narrowed her eyes. "Okay, I'm about to do something kinda crazy here, but I agree with Anya."

"Thank you," the former demon said, smiling.

"I'll admit, you do raise a good point," Giles conceded. "However, under the circumstances...especially while we know so little...I believe that we should contact Angel. If Buffy truly wants to stay with Spike, that's fine. I would simply rather hear it from a vampire whose last life's conquest was not in the Slayer's death."

"He doesn't want her dead," Riley murmured, his eyes glued to the window.

"How do you know?" Giles asked.

"He doesn't want her dead," he repeated, turning to face them. "He just wants her."

Xander made a face. "Say that again? That sounds like the sort of sense that...you know, doesn't make any."

"Spike. He wants her."

"Spike?" Willow forced a small laugh. "Spike hates Buffy. Why in the world would you think he—"

"Because I..." He released a short breath and glanced down. "Two nights ago, at the Bronze... Buffy was there."

The five faces surrounding him went slack with disbelief.

"She was?" Xander asked, voice quivering. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"I was going to, but then Spike showed up. She looked very... She wasn't happy." He paused. "She looked like she was in pain, or something. Like she was... She just looked bad. But I only saw her for a few seconds, and then Spike showed up and she was fine."

Willow heaved a deep sigh. "Well, then, that doesn't mean he...he wants her or anything. He was just there and—"

"She grabbed him," Riley said shortly. "And kissed him. And they practically had sex on the balcony. That's why I didn't say anything. Buffy's with Spike because she wants to be, and Spike doesn't want her dead. He just wants her." He turned his eyes to the ground. "Makes sense, I guess. He's killed so many... Why not want one...to have?"

Giles's stomach twisted, the bitter taste of acid filling his mouth.

"Buffy..." Xander shook his head violently. "No. No, she wouldn't do that."

"She's a vampire," Riley replied. "Why not?"

"She has a soul!" Xander pointed at Giles. "He promised us that sired slayers keep their souls! Why would she...with Spike? That's... that's just..."

Anya shrugged. "Well," she said, "it's about time she got some sexual gratification."

Xander and Riley glared at her.

"What?" the former demon asked, genuinely confused. "Buffy's been needing a good orgasm for months. I would have thought you"—she gestured at Riley—"would have noticed that. After all, you were the designated orgasm provider. If she wasn't satisfied, it makes sense that she would have turned to a vampire to fulfill her sexual needs. They have amazing stamina."

Riley looked angry enough to throw her through the window, with or without Xander attached. "I have amazing stamina!"

"You're human," Anya retorted. "Humans don't have amazing stamina."

"Ahn." Xander was bright red. "Now's not exactly the time—"

"Buffy always said—"

Willow threw up her hands. "Okay!" she snapped, tossing her girlfriend an apologetic glance. "This is really approaching the line of TMI."

"Approaching? Oh no," Giles muttered, "look behind you."

"There's no way Buffy would ever...with Spike," Xander decided, making a face. "You saw wrong."

"I didn't see wrong. You think I like this? My girlfriend's a vampire. She went to a vampire because she didn't trust any of us not to stake her on sight, and now she's sleeping with Spike." Riley shook his head. "Trust me, if there was a way to see it wrong, I would've spun it by now. There wasn't. Buffy was there. She molested Spike on the balcony, and he really, really didn't mind. And they left in a hurry, so where they were going with what intention really leaves little to the imagination."

"And you really kept all of this to yourself?" Giles shook his head in outrage. "You selfish, stupid boy."

Riley glared at him. "You have something to say to me? I didn't want...I don't know..."

"If what you're saying is true, you should have told us from the beginning. But you didn't. To spare your broken ego, you kept your mouth shut. And now Buffy is..." Giles broke off with a muttered curse. "If she really is...with Spike like that, I'm sure there's a reason."

Xander snickered. "She's a vampire, he's a vampire. I guess they hit it off." When this comment earned him a series of glares, he threw up his hands. "I was just kidding. But... Look, I know I'm the last person in the world to say this, and obviously, I don't feel like celebrating, but... Buffy is...if she feels she can trust Spike, and if he's what she needs, I guess..."

Willow arched an eyebrow. "And just a few seconds ago, you were about ready to declare war on the thought."

"A man can't grow in a few seconds?" Xander shrugged. "Don't get me wrong, nothing—and I mean nothing—gives me a bigger case of the wiggins than thinking of Buffy and Spike and anything to do with..." He glanced to Anya dismally.

"Orgasms?" she supplied.

"Yeah." He heaved a sigh. "That's just...but she's... She's going through something, you know? She has to be going through something. She went to Spike, and..." He made another face. "Gah, this entire conversation is just wrong."

"You have no idea," Riley all but growled.

"Well, that settles it," Giles said. "I'm calling Angel."

Willow's eyes went wide. "Why? Color me stupid, but throwing Angel into the mix—especially if Buffy's involved with Spike...like that— isn't that like, a bad idea?"

"Not any worse than Buffy sleeping with Spike," Riley retorted.

"B-but," Tara interjected, "if Buffy is with Spike, doesn't it stand to reason that she wants to be? She's a vampire now, right? And Spike's there for her, so...maybe we should trust that she knows what she's doing."

"Or maybe he's brainwashed her," the shunned boyfriend muttered.

"Into sleeping with him? Buffy doesn't get brainwashed." Xander paused. "Except for the entire 'allowing Drac to lure her to his castle and vamp her' thing."

Giles released a hard sigh. "We don't know anything," he said. "This is all pure speculation. However, if Buffy and Spike have developed a... physical relationship, as Riley's testimony seems to suggest, I do believe that calling Angel is essential." He held up a hand. "To make sure... No one has ever been able to reach her like Angel did. If what she's...doing with Spike is nothing more than a side-effect of her turning, Angel should be able to reach her." He paused. "If Spike has taken advantage of her..."

"You really think that might be it?" Riley asked, his voice small.

"I don't know. It might be."

"But if it's not, we're just creating a whole new problem," Willow said. "If Angel's here, and Buffy's all naked and groiny with Spike, don't you think he might, you know...go to the dark side?"

Giles rolled his eyes. "Willow, it takes a moment of pure happiness to make Angel...go to the dark side. I rather doubt knowing that Buffy and Spike have engaged in a...physical relationship will give him any emotion remotely connected to happiness."

"Yeah, but..." Willow shook her head. "Angel's all...with the temper? You know. He came here and practically beat the crap out of Riley. And Riley's all...human."

"He did not beat the crap out of me," Riley shot back.

"Children, please." Giles placed his glasses on the bridge of his nose. "We'll deal with that when it happens," he told Willow. "Right now, Buffy is our priority."

"Yeah, and if she gets pissed and runs off with Spike, we might never see her again," Xander retorted. "Say this thing she's doing right now is legit. She's not going to be happy that you called Angel."

Willow tossed him a wary glance. "You really need to stop doing that."

"What?"

"Acting all logical and sense-like."

"I know. It's kinda creeping me out, too."

Giles smiled humorlessly. "Well," he said. "If it...comes to that,

hopefully she will have the foresight to acknowledge that we were acting in a way that we thought served her well being. I simply cannot... My slayer is out there, turned, possibly involving herself with another vampire—be it voluntarily or not—and I have to know...she's my daughter." He earned another roomful of stunned glances. "Figuratively," he clarified. "She's my slayer. My daughter. If she's with Spike because she wants to be... I will try to find it within myself to not stake him and lock her in a room until she realizes what she's doing. But if she isn't... If she wants to be with us, or heaven forbid, Angel, we need to know." A short pause. "I can't keep waking up every day, worrying about her like I do. It's killing me."

Those last three words seemingly killed any rebuttal waiting to be fired in his direction. Riley turned back to the window, taciturn and displeased. Xander exchanged a long look with Willow, then nodded.

"I'll make the call," Willow said, slipping off the couch.

"No," Giles said shortly. "Leave that to me."



"YOU READY TO PACK IT IN?"

Spike glanced up, wiping dust from his hands, a slow grin spreading across his face. "Three vamps?" he retorted, tossing his stake to the ground. "You're ready to pack it in with just three vamps?"

"Well..." Buffy dropped her eyes to his chest, raising a hand to fondle the leather of his duster. She knew he could smell her excitement because, hell, *she* could. Still, he seemed to want the words as much as he wanted anything else, so she gave them to him. "You looked really hot doing that."

"I look really hot doing anything."

She smirked. "Wow, have I stroked your ego one too many times?"

"Feel free to stroke anythin' of mine that tickles your fancy." Spike dipped his head to tease the bite mark on her throat, seizing her wrist and guided her hand to his crotch. "Anythin' tickle your fancy?"

"Well...it doesn't really tickle." She gave his erection a fond squeeze.

Spike threw his head back with a long whimper, then took one look

at her smirking face, scowled, grabbed her hand and began storming back to the crypt with a fury.

“What’s gotten into you?”

“Nothin’,” he retorted. “But something’s gonna be *in* you in about five minutes.”

“Oh, someone’s feisty.”

“Not feisty.” He nearly growled as he turned and tugged her into his arms to ravage her mouth with a hungry kiss. “Horny.” Another kiss. “Want you...but not here.”

“Have you already lost your sense of adventure?” she teased as he renewed his mission to get her to the crypt.

“In a town full of wankers who want me dead? Moreover, who want *you* dead?” He shook his head. “Never. Just don’t fancy sharin’ you with the whole bloody world. You’re all mine.”

“Am I, now?”

“Better bloody believe it.” He turned to her again, his expression softening. “I love you.”

Guh. Spike used language like a caress. Every time he told her that, she’d swear she felt the words running over her skin. “I love you, too,” she said.

“You are mine, you know.”

Buffy kissed him again. “This ownership thing goes both ways, right?”

“You better bloody believe it.”

She did. She really, really believed it.

And she wanted it forever. But forever was a long time—a hell of a long time. Something she was desperately trying not to think about. Because, not all that long ago, she’d thought something else could be forever and it hadn’t been. And yeah, comparing Spike to Angel was all with the unfair, but being burned twice on this road couldn’t help but make a girl all kinds of nervous.

Spike loved in ways Angel didn’t, but this was all still so new. Maybe when the novelty wore off, the love would too.

The insecurities of Buffy were never at rest.

Hopefully, one day, that wouldn’t be true anymore.

Hopefully.

LANDED

HE WOULD NEVER FORGET the look on her face. Never. Even after a thousand years had passed in each other's arms, this moment—today—would be fresh in his mind.

"You..." Buffy swallowed, looking at him in awe. "You really want that?"

The fact that she even had to ask tore him to bits.

"God, yes," Spike replied, nearly tripping over himself in a rush to get the words out. "I love you. Of bloody course I want it. Wanted it that first night, when you were here and crying and I couldn't do anythin' for you. I wanted you..." He glanced down and released a steady breath. "This is it for me, sweetheart. I've never loved anyone like I love you. And I never will. You're it for me."

"But you thought Dru was it for you, too," she said hoarsely.

"She wasn't."

"But what if you meet someone else and...someone who's not hampered by a soul and is all 'Oh, humans! My favorite on-legs happy meal!'" Buffy tore her eyes from his. "I just...I just want you to be sure. I couldn't take it if you..."

"If I killed? Slayer, your soul's big enough for the both of us. This chip comes out and nothing changes." He barked a laugh. "Don't you

think I know that? Thought about it plenty over the past couple days. If anything happens to it, we're—"

"That's not it."

It wasn't? Spike's face fell. "What, then?"

She wet her lips. "If you left. If you realized you'd made a mistake. If you met someone who didn't have my human hang-ups...and you realized you'd made a mistake with me, but were bound to me for forever."

Spike growled slightly and hopped off the sarcophagus, storming to where she sat and all but yanking her into his arms.

"Now, you listen to me," he said. "I love you. I don't dick around with words like that without meanin' it. You own me, body and the other thing. And I know you're it because it's never been like this for me. Never. There's no one out there I could ever begin to want as much as I want you, let alone love. I don't do it half-assed, Buffy. If my feelings were different, I wouldn't've asked you. If I thought this was a fling, I wouldn't've said a bloody word. You're it for me." He broke off, shaking his head hard. "I can't fathom an eternity without you. I got over Dru because she wasn't it. Because what I felt for her was just an imitation of the real thing. You're it. You...leavin' you wouldn't just destroy me. There'd be nothin' left at all. It'd be the end of me. With or without the claim, I'm yours forever. I just want you to be mine, too."

Buffy looked at him long enough to give a man a complex, then choked a sob and pulled him to her in a hug that reminded him just how strong she was now. She held him, trembling, and making the sort of restrained sounds that let him know she was about to start bawling in earnest.

"God, I'm a git." Spike pulled back slightly and kissed her mouth. "I'm sorry, baby. Never wanted to make you cry."

"No, no." She shook her head and pulled away, wiping at her eyes. "I'm okay."

"Buffy—"

"They're happy tears, Spike," she said. "I just...I guess...I didn't think you'd really want to tie yourself to me forever. I mean, forever's a big thing."

“Reckon I know that a bit better than you do,” he said, and kissed her again. “You’re the one who needs to be sure. Would shatter my heart if you ever regretted it.”

“I’m sure.”

“Nothin’ you need to rush into, Slayer. I’ll wait forever.”

“Yeah, well, waiting’s for weenies. It’s real for me too.”

Spike couldn’t help it—he knew the smile that spread across his face was downright goofy, but fuck if he cared. For the first time in his existence, he felt...well, everything. From her eyes, he could tell she was serious—as serious as he was—and this was something he’d never had before. Something he’d fooled himself into thinking he didn’t need so long as the woman in his life faked it convincingly enough. But now that he’d touched it, tasted it, he couldn’t imagine being without it again.

“So that’s a yes,” he said, just to be sure. With the Slayer, one never knew what might get lost in translation. “You’re acceptin’ my... Well, proposal, for lack of a better word.”

Buffy choked another sound, but this one was happy and pure. “This is the second time you’ve proposed to me in a year, you know.”

“Yeah, well, if you’d actually gone through with it the first time...”

“Me? You’re the one who called it off.”

“Yeah. ‘Cause every would-be groom wants to hear their lady bemoan their kisses. I might be a soulless, bloodsucking thing, but I have my pride, you know.”

“Do you hear me bemoaning them now?” She kissed him again. “See? No bemoaning.”

“Buffy, I’m on pins and needles here.”

“Waiting for me to bemoan?”

“Waiting for your answer.”

She rolled her eyes. “Geez, you doof. Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“You know damn well what.”

“And a bloke doesn’t like to hear it?” He chuckled and leaned in to nibble at her throat, growling when she whimpered. “This is, after all, a proposal to an eternity bein’ stuck with yours truly. Don’t want you to walk away from this thinkin’ that you got the consolation prize.”

"You're so not the consolation prize."

"Buffy—"

"What do you want me to say? Yes, yes, yes to all of the above. I want you to claim me. I want to be of the claimed. I want to claim you. I want it all."

Spike tackled her back on the sarcophagus, kissing her into the next world. His hands were everywhere; he couldn't taste her enough, touch her enough, to appease his hunger. He wanted to do this now. Wanted to lose himself inside her for hours. Wanted to sink his fangs into her throat as he took her body, and whisper those glorious words that would make her his forever.

Pulling away was one of the hardest things he had ever done. There were certain things that couldn't be rushed.

In order for her to be his—for them to be each other's—there was one more thing they had to do.

And he suddenly knew how to do it.

A frown crossed her face when he sat back. "Why stopping? I was on the way to being ravished. Make with the ravishing."

Spike pulled himself out of his thoughts long enough to grin at her. "Oh, you'll get it, sweetheart."

"Then why stopping?"

"I think I just figured somethin' out. Gonna give you somethin' you need."

She was working a hand between them, pulling at his belt. "Yeah, there is something I need."

"Ah, ah, ah." He seized her wrist and dragged her away. "Playtime later."

"Evil."

"Yes. I've never tried to steer you otherwise." He planted a kiss on her nose. "I'll be back soon."

Buffy sat up, her pout deepening. "So now you're not only turning down sex, you're leaving me, too?"

"Two things," he murmured, "that I can assure you are not in my workin'."

"And yet, towards the door you go."

Spike smiled. "Won't be long. And then we'll give this theory of mine a test."

"Theory?"

"Help you with your demon. With the violence and the rest—a way to make it so you can be around your mates again. Could be I know how." He cupped her cheek. "It's important, love, before we make it official."

The mock-pout in her eyes vanished. "You...really? You have an idea?"

He nodded.

"H-how?"

A smile at that. "That, Slayer, would spoil the surprise, now wouldn't it?"

"Surprise?"

He winked. "You'll see."



SPIKE WAS NOT KNOWN FOR HIS PATIENCE WHEN IT CAME TO keeping a secret. Well, to be completely fair, he wasn't known for his patience at all, so the fact that he hadn't blabbed about what he had in mind had her all kinds of intrigued. He'd arrived home about an hour after he had left, taken one look at her, then dragged her across town to the wooded area that surrounded Sunnydale.

"Is this really necessary?" she asked, side-stepping a fallen tree limb.

Spike tossed her a narrow look. "Would I have you out here if it wasn't?"

"I mean, is it necessary for me to be out here in the forest? What's wrong with the graveyard?"

"Well, I'll bet all the money in my pockets against all the money in your pockets plus a carton of ciggies that you just don't get out here all that often. And I want you somewhere where you don't know your way around with a bloody blindfold on."

"You know, if you wanted to be voyeuristic, we could've gone somewhere more public." She paused. "Are you filming a porno out here?"

That earned an all-out laugh. "God, I've completely corrupted you, haven't I?"

"What?"

"That's all that's on your mind, huh? Sex, sex, sex."

"Well, you know that phase in new relationships where you can't keep your hands off each other?"

A sneer crossed his face. "Do I ever," he retorted, pinching her ass and earning a squeal. And Buffy was suddenly assaulted by five feet ten inches of an intensely aroused vampire. He hauled her into his arms and gave her one of those kisses that jump-started her body and made it hard to think of anything that didn't involve his mouth. "What does that tell you?" he asked against her lips.

It took a second before she remembered that she didn't need to breathe. "That you shouldn't be throwing stones."

"God, I love you," he murmured.

"Love you, too. Which is why I let you drag me out here instead of staying home where clothing is optional. Don't you have some thingy to be teaching me?"

"Right. First of all..." Spike nodded at her empty hands. "What're you packin'?"

She shrugged and pulled a stake from the back waistband of her pants. "Just the usual. Why?"

"Leave it here."

"Spike, we're about to go into a hellmouthy forest, and—"

"You're a vampire," he reminded her softly. "Lesson the first: you already got your weapon, love. And this"—he let his fangs descend, then gestured at himself—"is all the weapon you'll ever need. You got everythin' else. The speed, the cunnin', the strength...everythin' to scare any worthy opponent."

Buffy arched an eyebrow. "Whatever happened to your affinity for weapons, Spike? Now you're the one who doesn't practice what he preaches."

"My reasonin' remains the same as ever. I don't need them; I just like them." He grinned and repeated the very action that had sealed their introduction all those years ago, running his hand suggestively down his middle and coming to rest at the waistband of his jeans. "And

you know why.” Then he was serious again. “The difference is, I’m comfy as can be without them. You’re not. You’re always needin’ to improvise. And yeah, as the Slayer, that’s expected. It’s what you required to survive. You didn’t have a nice pair of sharp fangs at your disposal before. Well, sweetheart, you do now.” He tucked her hair behind her ear and leaned forward until their lips were almost touching. “So let’s see ‘em.”

There was a minute of consideration before Buffy complied. Spike merely grinned at her.

“Lesson the second,” he continued. “As the Slayer, reckon you were taught to push aside your darkness and bloody well ignore it because it was wrong, and all that rot. We’re all from the same mold, kitten. Demons and slayers alike. Your job as the Slayer was to make sure the balance was kept. Your job as a vampire is to disrupt that balance as much as bloody possible.” He held up a hand before she could protest. “Now, now. I don’t expect you to go muck-havin’ and making life for the new Chosen bird a living hell. That’s not you. The real secret is finding a medium between what’s good for you as a person and what’ll satisfy your demon. You’ve had the wirin’ for this all along, kitten. Now you’re just playin’ on the other side. Where before you were encouraged to hold back, now you gotta...let go.”

Buffy frowned. “All right... What...?”

Spike crossed his arms. “Why do vampires hunt, love?”

“To feed,” she answered. “To kill. To cause chaos.”

He grinned. “Yeah. That’s part of it. I won’t lie to you. But, despite how your Watcher might’ve liked to muck up the truth, there’s a lot more. It’s the hunt we need, you see? Doesn’t matter if we’re chasin’ a pulser or a creature of the night, which was why I took to killin’ my own kind as right naturally as I did when the Initiative prats shoved the chip into my cranium. As long as it puts in a good chase, the demon’s always satisfied with the outcome. The difference being the taste. Pig’s blood won’t ever be as good as human, but it doesn’t need to taste like absolute swill. Bagging it’s against your nature. You just don’t know the difference because you’re human to your center. To be a vampire, you need to have tasted it. Which is why your first trial is

gonna be to let loose and accept what the monster inside you wants, what it always wants...”

For a minute, she swore her heart was pounding again. The look he gave her shook her to the very core. “What’s that?”

The next few seconds were practically alive, she felt them so hard. A lifetime ago, Spike had taught her how to be a slayer. Taught her with more words and action than she could ever learn from the dusty diaries and exercises of yesteryear. Her own pride had led her through trial and error to where she was now. Standing here with a creature she should not want—but did. Someone she should not love—but did. Someone who, against all his inner workings, should not love her back. But did.

And now he wanted her to accept her darkness. Moreover, he wanted her to understand that there was nothing wrong with it. Slayers and vampires were all spurned from the same dust—one born of light, the other of dark. The nature was there whether she wanted it or not. Accepting nature did not make her evil. It made her simply that—herself.

She had asked for this. And she knew it meant a lot to him.

So she did nothing but shiver when he leaned in and whispered, “One. Good. Day.”

Spike smiled and waited until he had her gaze once more before answering. “I want you,” he murmured, “to go hunting.”

With that, a timely squeal sounded through the air and a full-grown pig raced by them. Buffy gasped when she noted the predatory swirl in her vampire’s eyes and immediately understood.

She jumped back as though burned. “You want me to kill the piggy?”

“More than that. I want you to *eat* the piggy.”

“Gross! No!”

“Don’t think of it as a piggy. Think of it as supper. A nummy treat.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Sorry. There is a piggy-factor here. I can’t eat the piggy.”

“Buffy...” He shook his head. “That’s the very same pig that was gonna be bled for our supper tonight. Forked over a few more bucks

and it's here now instead of waiting to be gutted at the butcher's. It's not like you weren't gonna taste it, anyway."

"So let it be bled!" she barked. "It's...you want me to...with my... that's gross, Spike." Buffy waved her hand airily and stepped back, her nose wrinkling. "Ew!"

"It's what you are," he said softly. "You wanted this, Buffy. You wanted me to show you what you are. The demon always wants the hunt. Always. And yeah—pig's blood is a piss-poor substitute for what we both know you really want, but is a whole helluva lot better to take it this way than have it bloody spoon-fed to you. Vamps weren't made for that, and neither are you. They need the exhilaration. The sweat. The speed. They need to know that they've earned what they're taking. Now, if you wanna back out, that's understandable. But that doesn't change what you are. What your demon's always gonna want. What it needs...right now."

Buffy sighed deeply and forced herself to meet his eyes. There was no backing out. She knew if did, things would never be the same between them. He would always love her, of course, but he wanted her to understand. He *needed* her to understand. Rejecting her nature would be akin to rejecting him, because it was his nature, too.

A predatory grin crossed his lips when she nodded. "Then toddle off and get yourself fed, Slayer. Want you at full strength for the Big Bad."

Something icy and cold pressed against her mouth but was gone before she could reciprocate, or even realize that she had been kissed. "I love you," he said. Then it was over. Spike had disappeared, and the challenge had begun.



THIS WAS GETTING RIDICULOUS.

Don't think of Mr. Gordo, she warned herself. Or Piglet. This is not Piglet. This is a stinky, disgusting animal, and I want it for its blood. Don't think of Piglet. Piglet's a cute cartoon. Piglet doesn't smell. Piglet is Winnie's little friend. This is not Piglet. Or Wilbur. Bah!

From her line of sight, she watched the pig snort and bed itself into an earth covered with leaves.

He sure looks like Wilbur...or Babe...stop comparing your dinner to cartoon pigs!

The swine snorted again. And she could hear its pulse singing through the soundless forest.

And she was hungry.

Very hungry.

And stubbing her toe on a log her brain hadn't warned her was there.

"Dammit!" Buffy snapped loudly without realizing it, startling the pig to its feet.

Great, now you've gone and done it. So much for a surprise attack.

The pig snorted again as its beady eyes scanned the night-fallen forest in search of the creature lurking there. Buffy knew it looked directly at her more than once, but she had resolved to such schooled stillness that it somehow managed to miss her completely. Then she remembered her alleged vampiric thrall—the way she had mechanics about her that were supposed to melt her into the scenery, especially when the scenery was covered in shadows.

Spike hadn't taught her that. He hadn't even mentioned it. She just hoped it was innate.

Even so, that didn't mean the pig couldn't smell her.

Buffy caressed the underside of her fang with her tongue. She was starving. She knew she was starving. Spike had forbidden her to eat anything before they'd left. And sure, while she hadn't exactly expected a candlelit picnic, she had suspected that he'd brought provisions.

Well, Buff, he did. You're looking right at it. Your man would never let you go hungry.

The demon inside raged eagerly.

Time for a little death.

Buffy grinned. "Here, piggy piggy piggy..."

A hungry roar rumbled through her throat as her prey squealed to attention. Oh yeah. This was definitely going to work up an appetite.

No more Miss Nice Vamp.

It was supertime.



BUFFY VAGUELY REGISTERED THAT SHE WAS SURROUNDED IN THE darkness of the forest. She blinked, waning away the instinctive sleep that overwhelmed her after eating a large meal. Behind her, the dead swine lay in motionless glory. She refused to turn around and look at it. The reality of her actions had yet to settle in, but she begrudgingly had to concede that no amount of cinnamon or sugar could have made the bagged blood at home taste nearly as good. There had been something else there—something she couldn't name. She had listened to its heart slow to a stop as she fed. She had liked it. She had...

Rewind. She had liked it.

She had liked it a lot.

Can we say eww?

The rational side of her brain stepped in. *Stop. You liked it. You just don't want to admit that a certain lickable platinum pest was right.*

Hunting and killing that pig had enriched the blood to near orgasmic proportions. While Buffy had a vague recollection of the taste, it was like stepping into a marathon of déjà vu. Looking at the dead man in Dracula's castle. A man that had been hunted by her sire. Hunted for her. And despite the horrors surrounding that night, she remembered how good he'd tasted. How right it had felt despite the screaming of her human conscience. How the demon inside had rejoiced.

Spike had been right.

Again.

Damn him.

Buffy looked up sharply when a twig crunched against the earth. Her eyes flickered and she automatically hissed and scampered for the shrubs. A predator was nearing, and she needed to be on alert.

Predator.

The mark on her throat suddenly burned and a sharp pain attacked her gut. The incomplete claim mark that they had decided to make official when it felt right. While excruciating, she somehow managed to ignore it. It nearly seemed natural. Justified.

Something was about to happen.

Another perk to vampirism—darkness was no obstacle. While she had been blessed with uncanny perception as the Slayer, Buffy had discovered over the past few days that her night sight was damn near scary at how much she could pick up.

She saw him before she heard him, but that didn't make his words any less provocative.

"Sla-yer," the aforementioned platinum pest singsonged. "Here, kitty, kitty, kitty..."

Another callback to their first fight. It should disgust her, but it didn't.

Predator. Vampire.

Mate.

Not yet. Not her mate yet.

Something inherent rumbled through her, and she knew all cause was lost.

It was time.

Spike stopped at the pig carcass and inhaled appreciatively. "Got your supper, then," he drawled. "Honestly wasn't sure you'd go through with it." She watched him scan the terrain and used her own vampiric-mojo to remain stealthily secluded. "I know you're there, Buffy! I can smell you. Feel you." He emphasized the last by running a hand down his middle again. She refused to allow her eyes to follow. "Time to come out. Come out, kitty. We're gonna dance."

There was a low growling in the back of her throat—subhuman but as natural as anything she had ever felt before.

Powerful.

Oh yeah.

He had brought her so far in such a small amount of time. From cowering and screaming at what she was to embracing it. She would never have envisioned herself here.

And if he wanted to dance, she would give him a dance.

Slayer and demon combined.

Spike's eyes widened in glee when she launched herself at him, wrapping herself around him with a fierce roar. He growled back at her, his yellow eyes taking in every curve of her body. They struggled for dominance for a few delightful seconds, and though she was

stronger and faster, she was still younger and a bit slaphappy after the hunt. Also eight kinds of turned on, which was how she figured she ended up beneath him. Buffy gasped with realization as the world came back to her, and her demon receded once more deep within her body, leaving her at the mercy of a master vampire.

That was all it took. Spike smirked at her through his fangs, but when he lowered his mouth, it was his human lips that caressed her own.

"See there," he murmured huskily. "What you are hasn't changed who you are inside. You're just this, too."

A long mewl tore through her throat, and she thrust her hips against his. "Spike..."

He licked at the blood still on her face. "Mmmm?"

"God, Spike, please! Now?"

She meant everything—*now* was time for everything. She could only hope he understood because she wasn't sure she could summon the words.

He reeled back, eyes smoldering. "Not out here."

"Home then?"

"Home," he agreed.

CAVALRY

THE LOOK in Angel's eyes was downright murderous, so much so that Giles experienced an unexpected but profound stab of instant-regret that he'd called the man here at all.

"I still can't believe you didn't call me first," Angel snarled, storming past him and into his flat. "How stupid could you be?"

Giles rolled his eyes. "Please, come in."

Behind Angel came an unfamiliar man with a tough street-face that looked supremely out of place in Sunnydale. He gave Giles a long, unimpressed look, then threw a duffle bag onto the floor next to the sofa. "Nice digs," he said by way of greeting. "We hookin' it up upstairs?"

"Angel..."

The vampire whirled around. "This is Gunn. He's a friend of mine."

"That's all well and good. What's he doing here?"

"Spike's mine. I can handle him." Angel paused. "But if what you said was true, we might have a problem with Buffy."

"So you've brought a friend of yours to distract her?"

"He's a vampire hunter. He has experience."

Giles's eyes widened. "You're sending a vampire hunter after Buffy? Have you completely lost your mind?"

Riley emerged from around the corner, wiping his hands on a dishrag. "That would imply he had one to lose in the first place."

Angel rolled his eyes. "What's Captain America doing here?"

"You really think I was going to let you go after my girlfriend without me?" Finn retorted, beating Giles to the punch.

"Well, it's obvious she's not getting any satisfaction from you if she's shacking up with Spike." Angel stepped forward. "If she's so in love with you, what on earth is she doing with him?"

"Maybe because he's the one vampire that hasn't left her."

Giles threw himself between them before Angel could lunge. "Riley has a right to go," he said. "You two are simply going to have to put your differences aside and think about Buffy's welfare." He eyed Gunn warily. "Which is why I think those who don't know her should be excluded from this."

"First of all, she's a sired slayer. I kinda think she could take him. Second of all, no, the last thing I want him to do is go after her." Angel shook his head. "We don't know what to expect. It's always better to have reinforcements."

"Well, I'm sorry if I'm not too keen about sending a vampire hunter that I just met after my recently sired slayer. How in the world do I know I can trust him?"

Gunn's brows arched. "You said the girl has a soul, right? I haven't had too many problems with Angel yet—that don't mean I wouldn't stake his ass if he started nailing puppies to walls. I'm just the muscle, Rupes. And I damn well made Angel bring me 'cause we don't need no pile of dust signing our paychecks."

"I'm sure a pile of dust would have more personality," Riley grumbled.

"And Boy Wonder is one to talk," Angel retorted.

Giles and Gunn exchanged a long look.

"Okay," Gunn said the next second, "now I'm going just to make sure you two don't kill each other."

Giles heaved a sigh, decided this was one of those times to pick his battles, and turned back to Angel. "Your prerogative is to ascertain Buffy's welfare. If she...if it turns out that she is fine and not under

some vampiric thrall..." He frowned. "Can vampires put other vampires under a thrall?"

"The weak-minded," Angel replied, shooting Riley a pointed look. "But Buffy isn't under a thrall."

"How do you know?"

"Well, for one, I think we can all agree that Buffy's not weak-minded. Second..." He paused. "Spike doesn't use thrall. He never has."

Giles's frown deepened. "Are you telling me that in all his years with Drusilla, he never once attempted to master her powers?"

"He had no use for them. I'm telling you, thrall isn't a part of this. Buffy likely went to Spike because she didn't know what to do about the hunger. She might..." He broke off, a strange emotion entering his eyes. "If anything...if she is...involved, as you seem to think...it might be some take on the Stockholm Syndrome or something. She might be mistaking gratitude or..."

"Regardless, if she wants to be there...if you get there and..." Giles drew in a breath. "The last thing I want for Buffy right now is to take away anything that makes what she has become less tolerable. I merely hope that if we reintroduce aspects of her former life, she might realize what she is doing."

There was a long silence.

"And if she doesn't?" Angel asked softly.

"Then leave her be."

"With Spike?" Both Angel and Riley balked in horror.

"If that is where she wants to be, then no one here has any right to try to tell her whom she can or cannot..." Giles waved a hand. "If her feelings for Spike are...beyond gratitude and the...carnal... If she truly went to him because she felt he was... She's her own person. I can't—I won't—approve, but she is perfectly capable of making her own decisions."

"Even if—"

Giles leveled his eyes. "Yes. Even if she wants to stay with Spike, I will not tolerate anyone trying to interfere with what she wants right now. And in order to ensure that my words of caution are received in the nature intended, I've had Willow and Tara place a sanctuary spell on the crypt."

Riley's eyes widened. "From here? How's that possible?"

"They are two very resourceful witches," Giles retorted dryly. "If you wish to test my warning, go ahead, but I have it on good authority that the results would not be beneficial should either of you"—he tossed dual glances to Gunn and Riley—"ever wish to procreate." He turned to Angel. "And you...well, suffice to say, it should ensure that you will never again be in danger of losing your soul because of a moment of happiness."

The three men glared at him. Giles couldn't be bothered to care.

"All this to protect Spike?" Riley demanded.

"No. To protect Buffy. If Buffy is with Spike against her wishes, or because she's disillusioned and confused, I'm sure she will deal with him later, on her own terms." Giles paused. "Regardless, Spike has taken care of Buffy faithfully for the past several days. I'm not happy with the way he has gone about it, by any means, but similarly, I am not about to go against Buffy's wishes. She has been through enough, and I think that's something that everyone can agree on." He met Angel's eyes and held. "I called you because if anyone can reach her, should this situation be a charade on Spike's part, it would be you."

Riley tried and failed to hide the flicker of hurt that flashed across his face.

Giles ignored him promptly and turned to Gunn. "I know your loyalties lie with Angel, but as the only one here who hasn't met or had a relationship with Buffy, I am trusting you to serve as the voice of reason when it's otherwise astray."

Gunn brought his hands up, shaking his head. "I don't wanna be a eunuch, so I think we have an agreement."

"Good." He nodded. "Make it so."



THERE WERE CANDLES EVERYWHERE OF ALL SHAPES AND SIZES. THE ground was scattered with white and red rose petals. She felt like she had stepped into a storybook.

"Oh my god," Buffy said, spinning in a slow circle to take it in. The crypt was absolutely transformed.

She felt Spike smiling behind her and shivered as he ran a hand down her arm. "Do you like it?" he asked, nuzzling her hair.

"When did you do this?"

"While you were catchin' yourself supper." He brushed his lips brushed against her throat, wrapping his arms around her middle. "Wanted it to be perfect for you...tonight."

"Oh god."

"You're not havin' second thoughts, are you?" He paused. "Bout the claim?"

"No. No! Of course not. I just can't..." Buffy twisted in his embrace, her arms going around his neck. "You went to all this trouble for me? It wasn't... Spike, I didn't expect you to... You didn't have to do this."

"I wanted to. You don't like it?"

Yeah, she did. It was the sort of thing she saw in movies and had once thought she might experience on prom night. Candles, petals, mood lighting. Riley had been sweet but never really romantic, and as the newness of their relationship settled into habit, even the small gestures had stopped becoming regular.

"I love it," she said, feeling one-hundred-percent like a girl for the first time in forever. "It's beautiful."

He smiled and brushed a tender kiss across her lips. "Then it was worth it. I just... This is important to me, Buffy. It's somethin'...sacred. Not many vamps..." He bristled and tore away from her, looking at the ground. "And now you must think I'm—"

"Adorable? Sweet?" She arched an eyebrow. "So gonna get laid?"

Spike smirked at that, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "This is more to me than that, love."

The tease abandoned her. Buffy stepped forward and cupped his face. "It's more to me, too."

"And you're sure?" Spike released a deep breath. "I just... You're ready to do this tonight? We can—"

"How many times am I going to have to reassure you that I want this?"

"Oi! I had to reassure you this afternoon."

"Yes, and after that little lecture you gave me, I believed you."

A small smile crossed his lips. "I just...never thought I'd be here,"

he said. "Never thought you'd... You could really want... It's a little beyond me, Slayer. You've given me so bloody much."

"Not more than you've given me."

"I beg to differ."

A soft sigh hummed through her throat. "I love you."

Spike shook his head and kissed her again. "Still can't believe that, either."

"Believe it."

His grin broadened, and he dropped his mouth to her throat as his wandering hands tugged at her blouse. A rush of cool air collided with her skin when he flung the offending garment to the ground. Then her breasts were in his hands, his fingers tugging at her nipples through her bra. "Fuck, the sounds you make," he growled when she whimpered. "Never gonna get tired of hearin' that."

"So make me make them, already."

He chuckled and dragged his teeth up the column of her throat, fingers snapping her bra open. "So impatient."

"I'd make a pot/kettle reference here but yeah, with the impatience." Buffy tore at his belt, desperate to get him naked. He wouldn't be able to tease her so much if she was stroking his dick. Then she'd have him making all kinds of fun sounds of his own. "Are we taking this party downstairs?"

"Thought we'd make it there...eventually." Spike dropped to his knees without ceremony and buried his face in her sex. "Slayer," he growled before tonguing her through the fabric of her panties, "what have I told you about wearin' these?"

"Oh, crap." She clutched at his shoulder to maintain her balance. When his mouth went south of her bellybutton, leg-function became a concern. "Old habit?"

"Uh huh. That's what you get."

"Spike, get up here."

Her panties were gone the next second. "Make me," he murmured, then drew her clit into his mouth.

"Oh..."

"Mmm. What I thought."

Buffy drew in a shuddering breath and seized his wrists, calling on

every ounce of strength she had to drag him back up to his feet, even as her body screamed in protest. “Made you,” she gasped.

“Party pooper.”

“Want you.”

“I was givin’ you—”

“Inside me.”

“Fuck, Buffy.”

She nodded, diving a hand into his jeans and fisting his cock. “Yes, yes,” she agreed. “That’s the idea.”

He whimpered in protest. “Bleedin’ hell...”

“I’ve done two of the three things. I want the third now.”

“Three...” He rolled his head back, thrusting his hips forward. “Right, the three...uhhh...”

Buffy released her hold on him to jerk his shirt off his insanely sculptured chest. “Blood.” She tossed the top to the floor, somewhere near hers, and nipped at the flesh she’d uncovered.

He hummed in agreement, plunging a finger into her pussy. “Blood.”

Buffy shuddered, but wrapped her hand around his wrist, pulling him out. “Blood,” she repeated and sucked the finger he’d had inside her into her mouth. For the look he gave her, she could have come on the spot.

Then she shot a hand to his throat, took a moment to enjoy the shocked look on his face, before tossing him across the room. It had been a while since she’d done that, but her aim was still slayer-perfect—he landed with a hard bounce on the sofa.

“Bleedin’ fuck,” Spike gasped.

“Violence,” she said, her eyes dropping to his cock. If possible, he looked even harder than he had before.

She had to get him out of those jeans.

Spike must have read her mind, for they were nonexistent the next minute. She grinned and pounced, and stuck the perfect landing on his lap.

Yellow blazed beneath the blue of his eyes, his nostrils flared, lips pulled into a snarl. He looked seconds away from losing control, and *damn* if it wasn’t the hottest thing she’d ever seen.

“And sex,” he growled, dragging the head of his cock down the seam of her pussy until he was notched at her entrance.

Buffy seized his shoulders, nails digging into his skin, a low rumble scratching at her throat. “And sex,” she agreed, then attacked his mouth and impaled herself on him.

And then there were no more words. Stupid things were overrated, anyway.



“I STILL DON’T SEE WHY YOU HAD TO COME ALONG.”

“Forgive me if I don’t feel particularly comfortable with sending the grand *love of my girlfriend’s life* to check up on her alone. Especially since, well now, that reason you left?” Riley shook his head. “Not so valid anymore.”

“So this is because you’re insecure?” Angel retorted. “The fact that that same girlfriend is boning Spike hasn’t clued you into the ‘not being interested in you’ kinda thing?”

Gunn arched an eyebrow. “Guys, guys,” he said slowly, “ya’ll need to chill now.”

“If you go near her,” Riley continued, not even sparing the other man a glance, “you’re going to regret it.”

“Wow. Do you write your own lines?”

“Wow. Could you be any more cliché?”

“I’m beginning to think I should’ve listened to Wes,” Gunn retorted, shaking his head. “He definitely could’ve done a better job of toleratin’ you two without a stake involved.”



SPIKE WAS SURE HE’D DUSTED BECAUSE THE UNLIFE DIDN’T GET better than this. With Buffy bouncing on his cock, making the sounds she was making, practically tearing at his skin with her nails and biting at his lips with her blunt teeth. But most of all, that look in her eyes—dark and heady and all for him. Every bit of it for him.

And Christ, that pussy of hers. Clenching and squeezing and strangling him so tight he'd cry if she dared stop fucking his brains out.

"Oh fuck."

"Yeah," she growled, clawing into his biceps. It was sweet pain, and he relished it. He had helped her reach this understanding. She could hurt him good and he would just scream for more.

He would fuck her all the way to the bed. He didn't care how long it took.

He didn't want to claim her, though, until they were downstairs. Until the violence he had stoked in her faded and she became herself again. As much as he loved her demon, he had loved Buffy first, and he wanted her completely with him when his fangs found her throat. Wanted that to be just them, slow and hot and passionate all at once. For the past couple of days, they'd been bruising each other with their bodies, but he needed her to know he could do sweet and tender too. He could do anything and everything she wanted.

In the meantime, the very part of him that liked it fast and hard shoved the romantic bloke aside. He had his knuckles just where she liked them, so he could nudge her sweet, swollen clit every time she slammed her pussy on him. His balls were tight and holding off his own orgasm had become almost painful, but he needed her scream of release before he tumbled over. Needed to feel her cunt spasm around him. Needed...

"Fuck!"

Buffy threw her head back, her eyes flashing yellow as her fangs descended.

She was going to do it. Shit, she was going to do it now.

"Buffy!"

Her gaze found him then, and what he saw there was entirely her, demon-face and all, shining through as she fucked him to near-dust. "I love you," she ground out around her fangs.

Fuck, she'd never been more beautiful.

"I love you, too."

Something sounded throughout the crypt—the metallic snap of the door coming open. He would have ignored it had the scents not hit

him then, but then Buffy's fangs were descending, and sweet ecstasy tore through his body, chasing the thought away.

For about three seconds, until one of them gasped. Spike looked to the front and saw them—a collection of bewildered intruders staring at them in horror.

Buffy, blissfully oblivious, trembled and growled into his throat, clutching at him tightly as her orgasm took her. He was helpless but to follow, then, and they fell together. Her fangs lodged in his throat, her hips moving against him, pussy milking him for everything he had to give her.

And when he opened his eyes, they were still there.

All three of them.

CLAIMED

HE FELT her shudder and knew that she knew. Knew that their scent had pierced through the haze surrounding their lovemaking and that she knew that their stolen paradise had been invaded. Her fangs were still fastened in his throat, her grip on him becoming nearly unbearable, but he would sooner dive into holy water than ask her to let him go.

Angel. That righteous pounce. Were it not for Buffy between them, Spike figured one of them would already be dust.

How the hell had he found out?

The silent standstill lasted seconds that felt like hours but broke accordingly as all things did. When the hush subsided and Riley stepped forward, rage written in six different languages on his face, a low roar erupted from Spike's throat. It was over then. Buffy's fangs slid from his skin and she growled in kind, though the sound that exploded from her lips was more a wail of despair than warning, and it tore at his heart. She scampered from his lap at that, wedging herself between his back and the sofa so that Spike's body guarded her against the humans that had barraged into their happy place. Her arms went around his chest, her breasts flattened against his back, and just like that, he knew.

He had taught her violence tonight. An appreciation for everything vampires relished in, particularly in the kill. She was closer to it than she had ever been.

And there were humans in her home.

“Get out,” Spike snarled. His mind was clouded with fury and a deep instinctive need to protect his mate. A mate in faith and words only, if not in blood. He didn’t understand it but knew better than to question his intuition.

“No,” Riley spat. “I don’t think I’ll be doing that.”

His fangs descended, a terrible roar echoing through the crypt. “Bloody selfish bastard! She can’t be around people right now!” He leaped to his feet, hurt as it did. There was no way, though, that he would leave her unclothed in front of intruders. Fuck if two of them already knew what she looked like, it didn’t matter a damn to him. “She’s a vampire. You can’t come into a vampire’s home and expect—”

“I’m sorry, her home?” Riley’s eyes blazed. “Who the fuck decided this was her home?”

“She’ll come to you when she’s ready!”

“Yeah, looks like you’ve gone to great measures to make sure she’s ready.”

Spike snarled again, leaning forward and gathering his T-shirt from the floor. “Just giving her what you couldn’t, you bloody tosser.”

Riley’s face with rage and he stormed forward again. But before he could get a word in, Buffy’s voice tore through the air.

“Can we possibly put this on hold until some of us are a little less naked, please?”

Spike whirled to her immediately, abandoning his outrage to toss her his T-shirt. It wasn’t much but it was enough. And when she slid it on without argument—*his* shirt—it sent a clear message.

Buffy wasn’t going anywhere.

When Spike turned around, Angel was holding out his jeans, his expression stoic.

“Thanks, mate.”

The elder vampire made no move to reply. Instead, without blinking, he said, “Gunn, please escort Riley outside.”

"No way," Wonder Bread snapped. "I'm staying right here."

"No," Angel retorted. "You're really not."

"I don't see where you have the authority to—"

"You heard what he said." Angel nodded to Spike. "Buffy can't be around people. Last time I checked, that counted you. Now get out."

"Yeah. This works out nicely for you, huh?"

The other bloke, a fella Spike didn't recognize, stepped forward at that, holding up a hand. "Okay, okay. Since we're standing in a graveyard with three vampires, one of which has no control of her fangs, I'm gonna go out on a limb and say that moving our non-undead asses outside is a good idea."

Buffy nodded, wrapping her arms around herself. "Please."

There was a beat of nothing at all. Spike buttoned his jeans and returned to his slayer's side, where she promptly tugged him down to the sofa and wrapped her arms around his middle once more. And perhaps it was that visual that convinced Riley that there was no fight to be had here.

"Fine." Riley released a deep breath and shook his head, meeting her eyes. "Fine. Goodbye, Buffy."

And that was that. Spike had no doubt that the soldier's retreating backside would be the last he saw of Riley Finn.

Good bloody riddance.

Once they were alone, Angel's random bout of compassion vanished. He turned to Spike, his eyes dark and severe. "Get up," he all but growled. "Now."

Buffy tightened her arms around him, and he laced his fingers with her over his middle.

"No."

"I don't know what you've done to her, but I'm not buying it."

"Well, you ungrateful sod, that would be your problem, wouldn't it?"

Angel looked about ready to start throwing stakes. He glared at Spike for a long minute before turning his attention to the Slayer. Only then did his features soften. "Buffy," he said gently. "Buffy, it's me."

Oh how bloody typical.

“She knows who you are.”

“I’d like to hear it from her if you don’t mind.” Angel edged nearer. “Buffy...I don’t know what he’s done to you, but your friends are worried sick. You have people who love you.” He glanced at Spike, and there was murder in his eyes. “People that will accept you no matter what...despite what he’s told you.”

“You fucking bastard,” Spike snarled. “I haven’t told her anything!”

Then something went wrong. Something happened. Her voice reached the air, broken and disheveled, and he felt the world around him collapse.

“Yes, you have,” Buffy said softly.

Something inside him screamed out in anguished fury. Spike whirled back to her, not understanding. Just because Angel...

And then he did understand. Because *Angel*.

Angel, Angel, Angel. Always sodding Angel.

“Buffy...” He wasn’t too keen on begging anyone, least of all in Angel’s presence, but he’d tear his bloody heart out of his chest if that was what she wanted. “I love you.”

She cupped his face and smiled. “I know.”

“Buffy—”

“I love you, too,” she whispered before brushing a tender kiss across his lips, and he dissolved into her, devouring her mouth in a trembling wave of unyielding relief.

For a few seconds, Angel ceased to exist.

“Jesus, don’t do that to me.”

“Sorry.” She barked a laugh. “I realize I made with the vague. Also, not the best place for a dramatic pause.”

Angel shifted behind them. “Buffy?”

Buffy wiped at her eyes, not reacting to the sound of her name. “I’m sorry I scared you. Also, holy insecurities, Batman.”

“Yeah.” Spike grinned and kissed her forehead. At once, he felt downright giddy. Everything was going to be all right. Just fine. “It’ll take a minute to break that old habit, so forgive a bloke for over-reacting.”

“Ahem.”

Spike rolled his eyes and rose to his feet and twisted to face Angel. "You heard her," he spat. "She loves me. I love her. As you saw, we were having a brilliant shag before the lot of you interrupted us, so please toddle on off so we can get back to it. Big night, and all."

Angel's jaw tightened. "Yeah, and she said you've told her things."

"He's done more than that," Buffy said. "He's been unbelievable." She rose to her feet slowly, tugging on the hem of the T-shirt to remain covered. "Spike's helped me deal with this—understand it. What it means to be a vampire. That's what he did to me."

"And I wouldn't?" the big wanker retorted, hurt. "I would've done... anything. And Giles. And your mother? We would have done anything to help you. Anything."

"No."

"Buffy—"

"There is no way you can convince me that you or Giles or my mom or my friends would have begun to do for me what Spike has done." She shook her head. "With as much as I love my friends and Giles and Mom, you put me on this pedestal where I'm supposed to be perfect. Spike doesn't do that. I was in a daze and he brought me out, but he didn't lie to me to do it. He told me exactly what I was and gave me the tools I needed to accept it. It's been a week, Angel. A week. How can you tell me that I would have been nearly as well-adjusted after a week if I was anywhere else?"

"How do you know that you wouldn't be?"

"Because I know you," she replied shortly. "I would've been coddled and babied and talked down to. My friends would've thrown a massive wig—which, judging by your presence here, they did anyway. Mom would've been okay but she wouldn't have understood. And Giles? He's my watcher. How in the world is he supposed to help me deal with being the thing I was born to hunt? I never would've learned how to adapt."

"That's ridiculous. You have a soul. I have a soul. You think I don't get what you're going through?"

Buffy's eyes darkened. "No, I don't. You would have helped me hide and hiding's not going to make me not a vampire. I needed to *accept* it.

I'm on the road to okay because Spike *didn't* do what you would've done. That's what I mean when I say he did something to me—he made me okay.”

Angel couldn't have looked more shocked if she'd punched him. Which, Spike took a moment to note, would have been the only thing that could have made that little speech better.

“How can you call yourself okay?” King Forehead demanded. “Buffy, you were sired. Dracula took everything away from you. He turned you into what you hate. What sick, twisted thing has Spike told you that made you think that could ever be okay?”

“You bloody bastard,” Spike snarled. Fuck it all, he knew the Slayer had a soft spot for this git, but he was three seconds from ripping his righteous head off his overly thick neck.

“Stop it!” Buffy shouted, hands flying up. “Yes, I was made into a vampire. Yes. It could've killed me. I drank from a dead man, and that...that *alone* nearly killed me. I couldn't move without it hurting. I couldn't do anything. If Spike hadn't let me stay here, odds are high that I would have staked myself. He helped me understand that I'm violent. I need blood. I need...sex.” She glanced down, wiggling. “I need the things that all vampires need. But I can need those things and still be me. A different but no less awesome version of me. That being turned into a vampire doesn't have to mean my life is over—that I can cope.”

“And that's how you've justified this to yourself?”

“That's bloody priceless,” Spike barked. “You didn't see her after it happened. You weren't here. You're only here when it's convenient for you, right? When you learn that ole Spike is takin' care of the girl you just didn't love enough. Given her everything you were too good to give her.”

“I would never have done to her what you've done.”

“Pretty sure that's the bloody *point*, mate. Or haven't you been listenin'? Being here saved her from hating herself. You're welcome.”

“Saved her?” Angel stared at him for a moment before huffing a snicker. “You call keeping her in a hole in the ground with *you* saving her? She has a soul, you idiot. She's not like you. She can never be like you.”

A small growl tore off Buffy's lips. "*She's* also standing right here. And thank you, by the way. You're proving my point for me. This is *exactly* why I couldn't go to Los Angeles."

Angel blinked. "Have we entered the Twilight Zone, here?"

"No, your ego's always been this enormous," Spike spat.

"I killed my sire," Buffy said. "And I was in pain. This was as far as I got. I honestly thought Spike would kill me when I got here, but he didn't. He also didn't blow a bunch of smoke up my ass."

"I killed my sire, too, Buffy. I killed her for you."

"I know."

"And that means nothing?"

"Of course it means something. It means more now than it did to me then because I actually understand how hard that was for you. But it changes *nothing*." Buffy gave Spike a look that all but screamed, *I am speaking English, right?* before turning back to Angel. "We have souls and dead sires in common, yes, but I won't let what I've become define who I am and I won't run away from it. For the hundredth time, *that's* why I stayed here. That's what Spike gave me."

"So you're grateful. There's nothing wrong with that. But don't mistake gratitude for love. This is Spike we're talking about. Spike doesn't have a soul."

"He can borrow mine if he needs it," Buffy replied. "But I don't think he will. Chip or not, he's... I love him. I'm sorry, I know that's hard for you to understand but it's the truth."

At this, Angel looked bloody pained. Like something was twisting his gut from the inside. And yeah, that was a Kodak moment. One Spike wagered he'd replay for the rest of his days for how spectacular it was.

"It can't be," Angel muttered. "It just...*can't* be."

Spike rocked on his heels, trying and failing to smother his shit-eating grin. "I'm not sayin' it makes sense to me either, mate. But she loves me and I love her. And you're not wanted here. So toddle on off."

"I'm not leaving without Buffy."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Buffy—"

"I'm home. I'm not going anywhere."

“Buffy, I—”

That was when it happened. Angel made the mistake of stepping forward. Of taking a step too far. And then Buffy was in motion. A roar rent the air, and the next thing Spike knew, those bloody beautiful fangs of hers were in his throat, and he could have creamed his pants. Didn't, being that Angel was a decent cold shower and he hadn't been hard, but had he been? Would have ruined his jeans.

As it was, he let out a moan that left little to the imagination.

Then she pulled back, licked the spot she'd bitten, and said, “Mine.”

And that was it—Spike promptly forgot about Angel. About keeping her shielded. About everything that wasn't being inside Buffy. He twisted and began peppering kisses across her face, his insides singing with rich...well, belonging. He *belonged*. He felt her in his body, in his bones, and he was completely hers.

Which reminded him. He had a part in this play, too.

“Yours,” he whispered into her hair. That sensation within him locked. It was permanent. Nothing could tear him away now. Not even sodding Angel.

What became of the wanker, he didn't know. Only that when he looked up again, the crypt was empty.

All the better. Time to do some clothes-ripping.

“Spike,” she gasped, fumbling with the clasp of his jeans. “Do it. Do it now.”

He ripped off the shirt he'd given her, smoothed a hand down her pale throat, then roared and sank his fangs into her skin as he pushed inside her. And fuck, her cunt immediately clamped hard around him, and she spiraled off into an orgasm he had no choice but to follow.

“Mine,” he growled into her bloodied skin. “My Buffy.”

“Oh, yes. I'll be yours.”

“Bloody right you will.” He hiked her into his arms, intending to carry her to bed. Only he didn't get that far. With his cock buried inside of her and her blood in his mouth, the best he could do was against the crypt wall.

One little word. Even after everything he knew, everything he'd

read and wanted, everything he'd desired, part of him had doubted it could come down to one little word.

But it had. He felt her inside him, giving him new life.

And if they lived a thousand millennia, he could never make it up to her.

SHINE ON

GUNN STUMBLED into Giles's duplex just seconds after Angel slammed the door shut, the vampire having apparently forgotten he was behind him. Or maybe even that he existed. From the way Angel had stormed out of Spike's crypt, much too fast for any human—vamp hunter or otherwise—to follow, Gunn was prepared for just about anything. And therefore wasn't surprised to find his boss and the old British dude screaming at each other, their faces maybe three inches apart.

"I told you to leave her alone if she—"

"She's clearly not in her right mind! She claimed Spike! Do you have any idea what that means?"

"No, Angel, I'm only one of the topmost experts on vampires and blood rites on the west coast. Please explain a ritual claiming, preferably slowly and with small words."

"How can you be so calm about this?"

"Ummm." Gunn raised his hand. "Is this the reason you moved to LA? I don't think I've ever seen you have more than three facial expressions...ever."

It was true. Angel was a hot second from vamping out, and Gunn had never seen him so worked up.

Giles grinned wryly. "One of many reasons," he retorted without

taking his eyes off the big brooding sulk. "I told you to leave Buffy alone if she was with Spike because she wanted to be. You were to go over there, gauge the situation, and only return with Buffy if that was what she wanted."

"Why isn't he all...eunuch Angel?" Gunn frowned. "Did you just throw in that bit about castration to keep us in line? 'Cause man, threatenin' a bro's package ain't cool."

"No," Giles replied. "That much was very legitimate. My only guess is that Angel never got close enough to attempt a bodily removal of Buffy from Spike's crypt. Is that right?"

"I never touched her."

"Yes, I suspected as much." Old English heaved out a sigh. "Very well. You have done what I asked. Thank you. Now leave."

There was a long, silent beat.

"Leave?"

"This is what a civilized person typically does when their presence is no longer welcome."

"You really think I'm going to leave while Buffy is mated to Spike?"

"From where I'm standing, you don't have much of a choice." At this, the old man looked almost giddy. "This was her decision, and quite frankly, if your current behavior exhibits the match she *could* have had for eternity, I say all the better for her."

"How can you approve of this?"

"I never said I approved. But, from where I am standing, it is not my choice to make. Obviously, Buffy's feelings for Spike have changed dramatically over the past few days. None of us can or should know what happened between them, but if she feels this strongly for someone, I believe you know as well as I do that there is nothing anyone can do to sway her." This he punctuated with a hard look. "Especially now, since she has decided to seal her lifeline with his for the rest of time."

"If I challenge Spike's claim—"

"No. You will not be doing that. You will *not* go against her wishes unless you'd like me to have Willow whip up a new spell that will ensure you will not bother Buffy or Spike again. Perhaps see if we can

require an invitation for you to cross the city limits. Not sure if it's possible, but if not, we'll work out something else."

Angel stared at him, his eyes cold and dead. "You don't know Spike like I do," he replied. "You can't begin to know what she has gotten herself into. He's soulless, she's not. He has no moral compass. He thinks he's in love with her, sure. But love affects Spike... He's at his most dangerous when he's in love."

Giles was unmoved. "Then I'm going to count my blessings that it's the Slayer that won his heart and not a deranged vampire that you made after destroying her family. Perhaps with someone who does have a moral compass as his mate, this dangerous shadow in Spike that, quite frankly, has never truly shown face, will dwindle altogether."

"Never truly shown face?"

"Not in the way you led us to believe when he first barreled into Sunnydale, no."

"He's a monster."

"Yes. And yet, I don't recall hating him as I hate Angelus." Old English's eyes flickered, and he stepped forward. "Now get the hell out of my house."

Gunn stood stock still for a moment, then edged forward and clapped a hand on Angel's shoulder. "Come on, man," he said. "We're done here."

"I'm not."

"Oh yes," Giles said, "you are."

That was it. No more discussion. No more debate.

Gunn pulled on Angel, and this time the vampire didn't resist.

Just turned and stormed back out into the night.



HONESTLY, BUFFY DIDN'T REMEMBER COMING DOWNSTAIRS. SHE wasn't sure how she'd gotten here. There had been the wall, against the sarcophagus—which, eww, but it was a nice memory—on the floor, and maybe actually on the ladder as they'd negotiated their way to the bed. That had to be it unless she'd been flipped upside down for some other reason. The rush that had followed the claim had been intoxicating,

like everything inside her had switched to primal mode and she'd sat back as her pure Id self took command of her body.

But now she was sitting at the edge of the mattress, Spike kneeling before her, running his hands up and down her bare thighs, and the lusty haze surrounding her head had started to clear. Well, not clear, but come into sharper focus.

"You're so gorgeous." Spike buried his face between her breasts—which she saw were covered in love-bites—and shuddered. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"When we got back, I wanted to do to the claim here. Wanted to be inside you when it happened. That was the plan." He rested against her for a minute, then raised his head and pressed a kiss to the mark he'd given her. "Shoulda been just us."

"I kinda like the way it happened."

"Slayer, I fucking *love* the way it happened." He barked a laugh. "You pulling your fangs out in front of Angel? Claiming me with him watchin'? Highlight of the sodding century. Gonna cherish that memory until I dust."

Oh god, she really had done that, hadn't she? Buffy wrinkled her nose, replaying what had happened...then let out a snort. "He was being unreasonable. Really, he left me no choice."

"It was perfect." Spike grinned, practically vibrating with glee, his eyes dancing.

Someday, he'd have to sit down and explain the whole big beef with Angel, but not now. Buffy didn't want her ex crowding any more of her day than he already had.

"Course," Spike said a moment later, his grin fading, "party's gonna be over right quick. Wager he's already tattled to your watcher. Just a matter of time before he comes back with a bunch of stakes and maybe a torch or two."

The thought had her raring for a fight. Buffy parted her lips and a growl escaped, low and guttural. Seemed the claim came with a shiny new set of instincts, which...fun. But she supposed she'd managed just fine thus far—she'd had excellent help.

"If they try, I'm gonna need your help to keep from hurting them too much," she said. "Which I know will put you in a weird place,

seeing as they'd be here to hurt you, but...if at all possible, I'd like to skip the bloodshed."

"You're no fun."

"Spike—"

He kissed her. "Course I'll help. Bloody lost for you, aren't I? Not much you can ask of me that I won't give."

"That...is a dangerous thing to tell me."

"I'm a dangerous bloke."

"Also, sexy."

He gave her one of his patented smirks and she started melting again in all the right ways. "So good of you to notice. But your mates—"

"Ugh. Enough about them. This our night. Screw 'em."

He released a low chuckle. "See, the only person I wanna screw is right here."

"Pig."

"I'm a pig, eh?" Spike chuckled again, the sound alone an aphrodisiac. "Don't you eat pigs?"

"Well, I ate one earlier tonight," Buffy replied with a smirk of her own, slipping a hand between them and wrapping her fingers around his cock. She stroked and pulled, scooting back so he had to follow her. Then, when she had him on the bed, she flipped him onto his back and replaced her hand with her mouth.

"Fuck, Buffy!"

"That pig was good," she said, releasing his cock with a wet plop, "but I think I like this one a little more."

Spike laced his fingers through her hair. "Just...a little more?"

"Mmm..." She lapped along the underside of his erection and brought a hand up to play with his balls. "Maybe a lot more."

Hot damn, this felt amazing. If someone had told her the sex could get better, she wouldn't have believed it, but she'd have been wrong. Every time she touched him now, she felt a whisper of the stroke within herself. It was the only way to live.

And that was what she was doing with Spike. She was living. Undead or not, this was life now and it was...scary and large and confusing, yes, but it was also kind of awesome.

“Oh bleedin’ fuck,” Spike gasped, throwing his head back. “Such a pretty, hot little mouth. God, Buffy.”

Pressure was building. Her insides were on fire; every time her tongue stroked his cock, a caress echoed against her clit. She lightly skimmed her teeth over the head, experimenting, hopeful, and moaned when he moaned. Her stomach tightened and she flushed with alien warmth, pinpricks of ecstasy numbing her skin. It built and swelled and then she couldn’t take it anymore. Buffy threw her head back. “Spike, I can’t wait.”

Spike shot her a heated, smoldering look. “Me either,” he said and seized her by the hips so he could roll her over. “It’s your turn.”

“No, just get inside me. I don’t need a turn.”

“I’ll be the judge.” He slipped his hand between her thighs, and she sank her nails into his shoulders when his thumb settled on her clit. “Fuck, you’re so wet.”

“Uhhhh...”

He plunged his index and middle fingers inside her. Buffy hissed and arched, and started to berate him when she noticed how transfixed he was by what he was doing and followed his gaze. The sight of his wet fingers pushing in and out of her had her clamping around him. It was illicit and dirty, so open like this.

“Fuck.” Spike sank his blunt teeth into the claim mark then he took chart down her body. “I gotta taste you.”

“Later. Just get inside me.”

“Believe me, baby, I will. You’re driving me crazy.” He sucked one of her nipples between his teeth. “Your scent. Your taste...your...fuck, I love you so much.”

“I’d love you a lot more right now if you’d just—”

Lightning fast, he released her nipple with a wet plop and buried his face in her pussy.

Buffy squeaked and thrust her hips against him. “Oh god!”

“You were saying?”

“Oh...was I?”

He laughed again, the little rumbles sending pleasant shivers through her skin. Then he nipped her clit and she squeaked again, though his answering groan drowned out the sound.

“Christ...” He drew a long line up her slit with his tongue. “I feel everythin’.”

She nodded, squeezing her legs around his head to pull him closer. “Uh huh.”

“Every little...thing.” Spike burned her with his eyes, the fingers still inside her rubbing some hidden spot she was sure hadn’t been there before. The make-Buffy-brain-go-bye-bye spot.

She arched into him with another long moan. “Spike...I...oh...oh my god. I need...”

“Know what you need, Slayer mine.” He sucked her clit between his lips, pumping his fingers into her harder, faster. “My mate.”

A low thrum of pleasure vibrated at those words. “Yes,” she agreed hoarsely.

“Want to feel you come. Come for me, baby.”

It was his voice that did it—the need there, how she felt the truth in his words. She touched the sky and fell back again, a hoarse scream bursting past her lips. She felt Spike growl into her in turn, felt the shudders quaking through his body and wondered how much of this he got to feel, too. All of it, she hoped, because hot damn, he deserved to. There was so much of it—endless and awesome and so pure she could have cried and might have had he not been there holding her as the world came back.

Shit, it was only the first day of this whole mate thing.

The first day of forever.

“Never get tired of doing that,” he told her when she opened her eyes. “Fuck, I love you.”

“I love you, too.” She offered what she knew had to be the goofiest of all smiles before tugging on his arms. “Can we do the sex now?”

God, she loved making him laugh. It was such a rich, deep sound.

“Think that can be arranged,” he murmured as he prowled back up her body, taking his time because he *was* an evil bastard. But then his mouth was against hers and his cock was at her entrance. “Buffy...”

“Now? Please?”

“And forever,” he agreed, buried his face in her throat and pushed inside of her.

“Finally,” she murmured, grinning when he chuckled again, then

whimpering when he began to move. Because hell, there was nothing like this. Before had been explosive and eye-opening on a number of levels, but now, feeling both his pleasure and her own, was more life-defining. It was more than sensation, too, though there was a lot of that, but every time he thrust into her, she swore she felt a little of him, his heart and mind along with everything else. There were things dark and passionate, violent and scary, but at the core was something almost radiant. Flawed but beautiful.

Was that his demon? Could she see that? *Feel* that?

“Oh my god.”

“Mmmm,” he hummed against her in agreement, thrusts slow and measured, though there was a burning behind his eyes that she was beginning to recognize as his control slipping away. Unlike when he fought, his sexual control had a completely different look. Like he wanted to pound her into the mattress but needed to continue this sweet torment. “Feel it too.”

“You do?”

He nodded, breathing hard. “Warm and bright and pure, you are.” His mouth skated over hers, tongue dancing with hers, the taste of her mingling with the taste of him until they simply tasted like each other. “My Buffy. Feels bloody incredible.”

“You too.”

“Fuck yes.” He shuddered a sigh, picking up the pace of his thrusts, but only slightly. Enough for her to feel every inch of his cock as it pushed in and out of her, feel the drag of her flesh along his, clench her muscles the way she knew he liked. She grinned when he growled, then moaned when he swirled his hips. Making love with Spike was like fighting him in many ways—just on a different field. Push and pull, give and take, thrust and parry, lunge and retreat. There was a reason he’d been her best enemy and she imagined it was the same reason she was here with him now, as he explored her face, throat, and breasts with his mouth. As he whimpered his pleasure into her skin. As he navigated a hand between them to tease her clit every time he sank home. He’d known how to draw out a good fight and he knew how to draw this out too. Make her burn for it.

For him.

It was too much and not enough at the same time—the very definition of sensory overload. The way he felt, the sounds he made, the squeak of the mattress and the slap of his balls against her flesh. How they sounded together, smelled. And then when he began talking, muttering about how good it felt when she squeezed him like that, how much he loved her and her *bloody magnificent* pussy, how much he wanted her, all the time, and how forever would never be enough, she could have burned from the inside out.

Then his fangs descended and she was staring into the eyes of the demon. And she knew what she needed.

“Spike. Bite me.”

He ran his tongue down one canine and grinned. “I’d be delighted.”

His fangs sliced into her skin, over the claim mark that tied them together for eternity, and she exploded around him, torn apart by sheer bliss.

This was it. This was where she belonged. This was where she had always belonged.

And she was finally home.

“Mine,” Spike whispered into her. “You’re mine, Buffy. Forever. Mine.”

“Yes, yes.”

“Say it.”

“Yours. I’m yours.”

By the time he licked the wound closed, he was pounding into her, hard thrusts that betrayed just how close he was. He groaned and bore his neck to her. “Bite me, Slayer. Tell me who I belong to.”

Her demon sprang forward as another fire began to build. A fire that shook her spiraling into a second orgasm when her fangs pierced his skin and his blood touched her tongue. And Spike all but howled as he spilled himself inside her, pumping his hips hard and desperate. As though it could go on forever.

And it could. With them, this was the first day of forever.

That was a hell of a thought.

“Mine,” she said into his skin before forcing her teeth back into her mouth. “Mine.”

“Oh, I am so fucking yours.”

Buffy giggled and clutched him to her. "Yes, you are."

Still trembling, Spike lifted his head and favored her with an arched brow. "Hey, you're mine, too, you know."

"Duh."

He shuddered and nodded, then released a contented sigh. "Still can't believe this."

"What?"

"You. You're here."

"I've been here for a while, buster."

His grin broadened, and he reached over to the unoccupied side of the bed, capturing two of the rose petals he had scattered throughout the crypt—one red and one white. At that, Buffy frowned. Not at the petals—because hey, romantic—but at the reminder of what he'd done to make tonight special. He'd gone to all this trouble to transform the crypt for her and her stupid exes and some random guy she didn't even recognize had ruined it. Kind of hard to appreciate the ambiance when being scolded for doing the thing that had made it possible for her to smile at all within a week of being sired.

Then she glanced back at Spike, and her anger faded.

Nothing had been ruined.

Spike brushed a kiss against her mouth. "Been here, yeah. But you've been in my head loads longer. Mite strange to suddenly have you both places." He dragged the red rose petal between her breasts, then around one of her nipples. "Red for blood," he murmured. "And passion. And fury."

Buffy trembled, flicking her gaze from the petal to his face and back again.

Then came the white petal, circling her other nipple.

"This for purity," he concluded. "Perfection."

"I'm not pure or perfect."

"No, baby. No one is...but you're as close as a bloke on this bloody planet could get." He pressed his brow to hers in that way of his. "You make me wanna be a better man. The sorta man that could deserve this...someday."

"Spike—"

"I have you," he replied. "Doesn't mean I deserve you. I'm a

monster, pet. That's the way it's gonna be forever. But I'll be a good monster for you. I'm gonna do things that... It's not gonna be perfect. But I'll give you as close to perfect as I can. I'll be good for you. I just...I—”

Buffy seized his cheeks and drew his mouth to hers. She was so not good with words, but, like him, hoped to be someday. Until then, all she could do was try and trust that all the things she told him without words would fill in the gaps.

“It doesn't need to be perfect,” she said when they broke apart. “Just real. I love you. We'll burn those bridges when we get there.”

“Don't you mean cross?”

“No, I think we'll burn them. Get across, yes...but then light a match and never look back. You and me will be all about the forward.”

Spike was still for a moment, panting hard against her lips. Then, slowly, he raised his gaze to hers and smiled. That open, happy smile she loved so much. If ever she needed reassurance that he did in fact love her, she could find it in his smile.

Something she hoped to give him every day from this day on.

BRAVE NEW WORLD

BUFFY AWOKE with her back plastered to Spike's chest, his arm around her, his teeth skimming her claim mark, and his cock sliding into her. Even a week ago, had someone told her that she'd end up here, she would have recoiled in disgust. What a crying shame that would have been, living a life without the man who held her now. The man who whispered how much he loved her into her hair as he pumped in and out of her pussy, growled about how good she felt when she started working those muscles she knew drove him batty. The life she'd led a week ago seemed now that it belonged to someone else. Or like revisiting a movie she'd loved as a kid that hadn't aged well. She recognized the beats but couldn't remember the appeal.

Buffy was far from prepared to say that becoming a vampire was the best thing that had ever happened to her, because hell trauma, but thinking about what she might have missed out on twisted her insides. Sure, it was possible she might have ended up with Spike—possible in the same way that she might one day *possibly* sprout wings and rein death to vamps from the sky. A prophecy about a winged slayer could exist, but was it likely? No. And without some large-scale eye-opening wackiness, she doubted the girl she'd been would have ever allowed herself to think of Spike this way.

The girl that had lived in her mother's house, the girl that had gone to UC Sunnydale, the girl that was Chosen, was dead.

"Slayer mine," Spike whispered into her hair before tugging at her ear with his teeth. He dragged his hand down her abdomen and over her mound. "Know you're awake now."

"Sleepus interruptus," she said, then giggled when he growled.

"Want me to stop, then?"

"Do and dust." Buffy spread her legs wider, stretching the topmost one over his so she could twist enough to see his eyes. The angle sent him deeper inside her, and they both groaned. "Hey."

Spike nipped at her mouth, then pulled back with a whimper when she began clenching around him again. "Fuck."

"Why yes, I believe that's what we're doing."

The whimper became a smirk and he settled his fingers over her clit. "Think you can come already? Not gonna last."

"That's what you get for starting without me."

"What you get for sleepin' through it. I'll make it up to you, baby. Promise. Just..." The rhythm of his thrusts intensified, becoming almost brutal so she could feel his desperation. "Just...need to feel you."

"Bite me."

"With pleasure."

His fangs slid into her throat and combined with the gentle way he nudged her clit—in direct contrast to the hard way he plunged in and out of her—got her to the edge in record time. Buffy cried out, felt herself tense and tremble around his cock, and it was all over for her. Then it was all over for him too. He snarled into her throat as his body rocked against hers, then pulled back to whisper a litany of dirty words and praises that, quite honestly, might alone have been enough to send her over.

In somewhat of a daze, Buffy found herself wondering what her human counterpart would be doing now, had everything with Dracula not happened. The sun had set, so she'd probably be making the rounds in the cemetery, after having spent the day with Riley. Then she'd head home, crawl into bed with him, and try very hard to

remember just how much he loved her while he did everything but rock her world.

As much as she hated the way that relationship had officially ended, she felt worse for this mythical other version of herself that would spend tonight not fighting alongside Spike in the cemetery. Because that version of Buffy was bored out of her ever-loving mind and either hadn't realized it yet or, even worse, thought that was as good as it could get for her.

But that Buffy was not this Buffy's problem, she reminded herself as Spike licked at the bite mark on her throat. And thank god for that.

"You're amazing," Spike murmured. He pulled out of her with a shudder, then turned her so they were face-to-face. "So bloody amazing."

Buffy smiled and brushed a kiss against his lips. "Good morning—*erm*—evening to you too."

"Fancy bein' woken up like that for the rest of eternity?" He grinned and nuzzled her throat. "Think that's somethin' you might like?"

She heaved a long, dramatic sigh. "I suppose I'll manage."

"Right sacrifice from where you're sittin'."

"Oh yeah. Major with the sacrifice."

"Minx."

"Hey, you asked."

Spike grinned and tugged her closer. "I did at that."

For a few seconds, they lay like that, enjoying a comfortable silence. Buffy sighed again—breaths that no longer hurt—and closed her eyes. There wasn't another person in the world that she could share this with. A silence that didn't strain. She knew how he felt without needing it spoken. Knew how to relax around him. Knew that he didn't expect anything from her—that she didn't need to do anything to make him feel loved. That there wasn't any one way she was supposed to be or act. It was simple on a level she hadn't known existed.

Best of all, he was there to help her face whatever came next.

"Mmm." Buffy opened her eyes again to find him watching her. "I think we should go today."

"Go?"

"To see Mom. And...the others."

No reply at first. Then, softly, "Are you sure?"

"No." She shivered and burrowed deeper into his arms. "I just think it's better if we go to them before they come to us. I don't want... I *need* to do be the one who does this."

"I know." A pause. "Do you want me to come?"

"Of course I do."

Spike sat up at that and pulled her into his lap. "They're not gonna like it, pet," he said. "That I'm there with you. That we're... You gotta know that."

She glanced down. "Yeah, I know." A beat. "But if they love me, they'll accept it. Even if they don't understand it, they'll accept it...right?"

"Angel's gonna have told Rupert what happened."

"Yes."

"And your soldier boy'll be the bloody icing on the cake."

"Well...they'll just have to deal with it." Buffy shook her head and buried her face against his throat. "If they can't deal, well..."

Well, she didn't know, so she didn't try to finish that sentence. Because Buffy could do a lot of things but pretend that she didn't care what her friends said or did was not one of them. This week away from them had been necessary and, on the whole, good, but she couldn't deny that she missed them. Even if she was terrified of what they'd say. How they'd look at her now. How different everything might be.

But she couldn't put it off forever. And she had promised herself when they met, it would be on her terms. She just had to hope they understood the choices she'd made this week more than Angel had.

"It's okay, Slayer," Spike murmured after a minute. "It's okay."

Buffy nodded and pulled back, wiping her eyes. "I know," she replied honestly. "I do...I just..."

"If they try anythin', we'll leave town, right?"

"I'm so scared it'll come to that."

Spike shook his head. "Don't think it will. You're Buffy. They love you."

"If they don't understand..." She looked down and sighed again. "I'm afraid of what I'd do to them if they came after you with stakes."

"I wouldn't let you hurt them."

"But there's a tremendous chance you wouldn't be able to stop me."

Spike didn't bother to argue with that, therein *again* proving why he had been the only option after she'd escaped Dracula's palace. Buffy had no use, in this new life, for people who coddled her. It was just another form of lying, intentions aside.

"They're going to ask me why," she said a moment later.

"Yeah."

"I don't owe them any explanations."

"You don't," Spike agreed and brushed a kiss across her brow. "Do whatever you want. It's your decision. They can't make you do anythin'." He paused, then chuckled. "Your Watcher'll likely grill me on my intentions, yeah? Insist I get myself a steady job and a cozy little house with a white picket fence."

She laced her fingers through his and shook her head. "He doesn't have the right to tell you to do anything. Besides...I want to stay here."

"Here?"

"Yeah."

"Buffy...this is a sodding hole in the ground—"

"It's home."

"It's bloody well beneath you."

"But not beneath you, is that it?" Buffy arched an eyebrow. "That's part of it too. Of all of this. It's not beneath me to live here if it's not beneath you. This is just what I am now. And hey, you've made this place as much a home for me as anywhere else. I know it's...yes, it's in a graveyard. I understand that. I know it's a crypt, but it's home."

"It's a..." Spike frowned. "I don't understand. I just...I always figured you'd wanna move. Get somewhere nice and cozy."

"This is nice and cozy."

"Buffy—"

"I don't want to move. Do you? Do you want to move?"

"I want you to be happy, Slayer. As long as you're happy, I don't give a flyin' fuck where we live."

"I like it here."

He stifled a chuckle. "I just never thought you could ever feel that way about this dump."

"Well, I'm not saying it's not a fixer-upper, but I do love it here." She sighed. "Anywhere else, and I'd be pretending to be something that I'm not. We can't live in an apartment and go to the grocery store or walk along the beach after playing volleyball in the sun. I can't go back to school, unless I enroll in night classes, which, hey. Might look into that. I'd also like to see if we can improve the bathroom situation, because cold skin or not, I love a good hot shower. But these things are negotiable. We have here what we've had for the past week... Do you want to change that?"

Spike cupped her cheek and kissed her lips. "Not for the bloody world."

"So we patrol, which is made easy since, hey! Residents of the busiest cemetery in town. And we make with the sexcapades."

"Out here where your screamin' like a sodding banshee isn't an issue," he observed.

"Hey!" She paused, then wiggled and glanced down. "Well, yeah..."

"Speakin' of, seems I made you a promise." Spike seized her arms and rolled her under him before she could reply. "Should probably visit your mum first," he said, then lowered his mouth to nibble on her neck. "Make sure she knows you're okay."

"Don't be talking about my mother while you're...doing that."

He pulled back, smirking. "Make you feel dirty?"

"Now that you mention it."

"So I should stop, huh?" He began sliding his hand down her stomach again, intention clear. "It's such a shame. Here I am, wantin' to touch you, and you're havin' to be all stubborn about it."

"Well, you can touch me if you want."

"Can I?"

She nodded, worrying a lip between her teeth. "Just leave members of my family out of it. They still think I'm a good girl."

"Uh huh."

"Well, everyone but my mom thinks I'm a good girl."

"Didn't you burn down a school buildin' once?"

"Shut up."

"Oohhh, touchy, are we?" Spike skimmed his teeth over the claim

mark on her throat, fingers sliding over her pussy. "Perhaps I have the remedy for that."

"Oh yes."

"See here. You're all wet." He slipped a finger inside her, his mouth working up her skin. "Only naughty girls get wet in bed."

"Gah."

"Very naughty girls," he said, adding another finger.

"Well..." Buffy drew in a sharp breath and arched off the bed, thrusting into his hand. "What my family doesn't know...won't hurt them."

"Yeah," he agreed as he began working his way down her body. "That's what I thought."



IT FELT LIKE A THOUSAND YEARS HAD PASSED SINCE SHE'D STOOD ON her front porch. The feeling had followed her all the way to Revello Drive and had lingered even as her mother choked a sob and took her into her arms. Sitting in the family room of the home that had been hers for the past five years, feeling strange and displaced, even if seeing her mother had provided a sort of peace that she hadn't even known was missing.

Joyce's reaction to almost everything came as Spike had predicted. She'd grabbed and hugged Spike, sobbing her gratitude onto his shoulder for taking care of her little girl. The look of discomfort that had flashed across his face as he'd looked to her for help was something Buffy would never forget. Spike wasn't accustomed to being thanked for anything.

After the tearful reunion, Buffy had explained quietly what had transpired over the past few days. What decisions she'd arrived at, and most importantly, the nature of her relationship with Spike. And Joyce couldn't have been happier. She'd been more than a little irate when she'd learned that Angel and Riley had paid them a visit, had muttered some decidedly unpleasant things about Giles under her breath, but overall kept to her joy and gave them both her blessing.

With one provision—they had to visit her at least once a week.

Something Spike was quick to agree to, muttering something about an ax and having learned his lesson well enough the first time.

That was the easy one. Her mother liked Spike. Her mother was grateful and supportive. And her mother had been avidly against any attempt to force Buffy to move out of the crypt, something she'd told Giles that Giles had ignored. There would be words in the future.

None of that altered how relieved Buffy had been to leave. The walls were constrictive, the lights made her eyes hurt, and while her bloodlust was in check, she'd spent so much time worrying about her demon that she hadn't once relaxed.

And that had been the easy visit.

Spike squeezed Buffy's hand. Now they were nearing Giles's duplex, and she had yet to say a word.

"You all right?" he asked.

"Nervous."

"I feel that. I meant... You were wound up so tight about seein' your mum—"

"I just..." Buffy wet her lips and shook her head. "It's hard to explain. Being there... I'm glad I saw her. I'm glad I got that over with." A shiver raced down her spine. "Is that a horrible thing to say? I love my mother. I just—"

"You were worried."

"That she wouldn't accept me. That she wouldn't accept you. That..." She ducked her head at his look. "That I couldn't take being that close to someone...who breathed. That I—"

"You're still worried about the other."

She nodded. Spike squeezed her hand again.

"Don't."

"Don't?"

"Worry. We're mated now, right?" He offered a small smile. "You didn't feel it though, did you?"

"The bloodlust? No." Buffy frowned. "That was you, wasn't it?"

He brushed a soft kiss across her forehead. "Bein' mated has a few advantages. Wasn't sure if I could, but guess it worked."

That thought had her bubbling with renewed excitement.

"So even if we get to Giles's and he and Xander and everyone want

to stake you, you'll be able to control my need to make with the bloodshed?"

"Well, love, at that point I think it might be more beneficial to leave. Not somethin' I'd want to learn through failure." A wry grin tickled his lips. "Remember, I might be the experienced vamp here, but neither one of us have been mated before. We're learnin' this one together."

Buffy smiled and dropped a kiss on his shoulder. "I can think of worse things."

The duplex was directly ahead. A familiar courtyard, unkempt but strangely beautiful for its rugged façade. The open view into Giles's front parlor. All her friends were there, as though they had known tonight was the night. As though they had known to come and wait for them.

She didn't feel Angel near. His scent was heavy, but his presence was gone. Riley as well. It was just her friends. No former lovers, scorned by her decisions. Just friends.

Why didn't that ease her apprehension?

Spike tugged on her hand gently and turned to look at her, his gaze all strength and reassurance.

"We'll stay as long as you want," he told her. "Be it five minutes or five hours, right?"

Buffy gave him what had to be a watery smile and leaned up to kiss his lips. "I love you," she whispered.

"I love you, too." He pressed his brow to hers. "So bloody much."

Buffy squeezed his hand and kissed him again.

Then she was ready.

"As long as you want," he murmured once more as they approached.

She didn't reply—there was no need. In short seconds, they were standing before the door, and Giles was on the other side. His eyes went wide with relief and understanding, sorrow and regret. For long seconds, they just looked at each other, saying nothing.

Then, at last, a soft smile crossed her Watcher's face, and he stepped aside. "Come in, Buffy."

She didn't move. Rather, she glanced to Spike and back again.

She wasn't going anywhere until it was understood that her mate went with her.

And to his credit, Giles recognized that at once.

"Both of you, of course." He nodded. "Come in."

"Weapons?" she asked, because she had to.

"Locked away in my chest."

"Angel and Riley?"

She knew the answer, but she needed him to say it anyway.

"Gone," Giles replied, his eyes darkening. He had the good sense to look abashed, too, which helped. "Riley, from what I gather, left last night. He stopped by to tell me, and to tell you... Well, I'm not going to repeat that. And I rather, err, threw Angel out of here once he told me what happened. Might have threatened to fix up a spell that would prevent him from returning Sunnydale without an invitation." He shrugged. "Not sure if that's even possible, but I am willing to look."

Spike barked a laugh at that. "Oh, to have seen the wanker's face..."

"I was too piping mad to appreciate it at the moment," Giles said with a small smile, "but it was rather...ahh...satisfying."

"Spike is mine," Buffy blurted without ceremony. "We're together."

"I know. We all do." Giles hesitated before turning his attention to Spike. "I'm not saying I approve, but I think I do like you better than the last one."

"Thanks ever so, mate."

"And as long as you're with Buffy...your home is my home."

And that was that. The tension in her chest broke at last.

This was going to work. Everything was going to be okay.

Apparently sensing the thought, Spike neared and whispered, "Bloody told you."

"You're not going to be right about everything, you know," Buffy replied as she stepped over the threshold, saw her friends waiting for her—looking as nervous as she felt—and at smiled.

"Buffy!" Willow jumped up and raced toward her, but only just managed to keep from throwing herself at her. "If I hug you, will you bite me?"

Buffy spread her arms wide. "One way to find out, if you're brave enough."

Turned out, all of her friends were brave enough. Eager, too.

And as Buffy settled beside Spike to recap the week she'd had—PG-rated, of course—she felt her vampire draw her hair over her shoulder, lean close and whisper, “Yes, I am.”

She would have smacked him if they were alone, something she knew he knew from the way his eyes danced.

Hell, he'd been right about everything thus far. Maybe that streak would continue.

This week had definitely proven that stranger things had happened.

