

NEMESIS

YELLOW BRICK ROAD BOOK II

HOLLY DENISE



THE SHREW

SHE HATED HIM.

She hated him, and that was the way it was. The world was a cruel, dark place, and she hated him. Life had continued, and she hated him. There was school every day and patrol every night, and she hated him.

Hatred like this was not born overnight. At first, there had been nothing—nothing aside from the sideways glances from her friends, the forlorn and overdrawn expression on her Watcher's face, and the not-so-direct questions from the would-be love of her life. Buffy had found herself adrift, her mind taking her back again and again to the panic room. Her dreams returned her to Spike's arms, to the moments they'd shared as though there would be no moments to follow. Then she would wake up, cold and alone, and remember how simple things had been before he'd screwed up her life. Before he'd thrown everything into question.

Not only that, but he had bolted the hell out of Dodge. She was alone in her confusion, and she hated him.

Her focus on everyday, menial tasks had become singular over the past few weeks. Patience was not among her virtues. She couldn't remember waking up that first morning and feeling different—aside

from the ongoing civil war in her head—though looking back, there had to be something. Time had passed, but not much. Not enough to make her hate this much.

But perhaps what was worse was that even now, hating him, Buffy still didn't regret it. She kept trying to, every time she revisited that night. Playing things over and over again, searching for the time she should have laughed him off and ignored him rather than provoke him into...well, admitting that he had feelings. Conversations that had let to necking, then to serious making out, then to sex that made her understand why people spent so much time trying to get each other naked.

Then there were other things weighing in, such as the fact that he'd said he would leave town and had. That—for once—he'd kept his word. The fact that she had to look at Angel every day and know that she had betrayed him. The fact that Spike said he would come back or the fact that he had yet to do it.

In the beginning, it had only been time, and she had accepted that. She had *demand*ed that. But damn, how stupid could one girl be? How had she come to the conclusion that enforced distance would magically solve her problems? And now time had passed. Time had passed, nothing was resolved, and she'd gone from missing him to feeling used. He'd come into her life, turned it upside down, said thanks, and bolted. Now it had been weeks, and she was facing the lion's den alone.

Buffy purposely avoided acknowledging that he had only done what she asked of him. Her will, however, was not to be satisfied. In what deluded world did Spike *ever* do what she asked of him? Twice before she'd asked him to leave permanently, and twice he had made a defiant return. Now that she *wanted* him back—if only to kick his pasty ass for the hell he'd put her through—where *was* he?

Currently, Buffy sat cross-legged on the floor of Willow's bedroom, doodling artless shapes on the corner of her algebra homework. She was only mildly aware that her friend had been speaking for the past half hour, having answered with the compulsory, "Uh huh" and "Interesting" when the timing seemed appropriate.

She'd become a ghost to her friends. And she knew she was doing it. She knew that her temper was nasty these days, and every time she made an effort to calm herself, her mood only worsened. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered, and they would never understand. What was there to say? *I banged my mortal enemy the night he was supposed to kill me.* Yeah, that'd go over well.

"Hey! Hey? Buffy!"

She jerked her head up to find Willow scowling at her. "Huh?"

"You're doing that thing again."

"What thing?"

Willow's face fell. "That thing where you don't listen to me."

Buffy blinked and forced an apologetic smile. "Sorry, Will. I just... really behind, you know." She gestured broadly to the ignored textbook. "This...problem's kicking my ass."

"And here I thought it was only demons that did that."

"Hey!"

"Aha! See? You heard *that*."

Buffy shook her head. "I'm sorry. I've just been a little spacey."

Much to her surprise, Willow simply glanced down, tucking her hair behind her ear. "No problem," she murmured. "Believe me, I'm used to it."

"What does that mean?" she demanded, knowing perfectly well what it meant.

Willow usually backed off when Buffy pulled out this tone. Tonight, though, she didn't.

"Oh, gee, I don't know," she retorted. "Then again, big surprise. I don't know much about anything these days, do I? You don't tell me anything."

"What does my homework have to do with me telling you anything, other than math and me being non-mixy things?"

Willow shook her head. "You don't even tell me *that* anymore. No Angel gossip, no complaints about Faith, no 'I hate Snyder' or 'why doesn't Ms. Penticuff understand the responsibilities of Slayerdom'? Not anything! Buffy, you've been here for an hour and a half and the only thing you've managed to write down is your name and a spiral-

thingy in the corner of the page. You came over so I could help you, and you're being all avoidy girl."

The hurt in her friend's voice struck a nerve and it wasn't like she didn't know that she wasn't being fair, but Buffy hadn't the strength to offer apologies. Apologies led to discussion, discussions led to explanations, and explanations led to a world of no.

"My mind's somewhere else."

"Well, color me astonished."

Buffy reeled her head back and fixed her friend with a glare. "What do you want me to say?" she snapped.

"How about anything? Anything would be a good start."

"What are you talking about?"

"I've just about had it," Willow snapped. This strained tension between them was worse than when she'd returned from Los Angeles last summer. "You can't keep telling me that nothing's wrong and expect me to believe it. Hello, best friend here! I've been trying to talk to you ever since you got here and you just shut me out. I must have covered every topic there is out there. If all this was about Faith, I'd understand. But it's not. Something—"

Buffy threw her arms up and began collecting the materials scattered around them. "I don't want to talk about this," she said shortly.

"Of course not! Go ahead, Buff. Run away. Shut me out. That sounds new and exciting."

"Forget it."

"I can't very well forget it."

Buffy was halfway out the door when Willow finally climbed to her feet to go after her.

"And it's not just me. You keep pretending everything's all nice and normal and tra la la la, but *everyone* has noticed it. You keep shutting us out!"

Buffy froze, then whirled around. "I'm going through stuff, here!" she snapped. "I mean, you know. With Faith and her random decision that vamps aren't enough, let's stake humans and see how they—"

"Don't *even* try to pin this on Faith." Willow was actually shaking

with anger. She didn't know if she'd ever seen that before. "You were acting wiggy before she killed the Mayor's assistant. And hey—let's not mention the random acts of violence. Breaking into that shop, for one thing. Oh-oh! And Angel told me that you really wailed on this vamp the other night before—"

"You and Angel have been comparing notes *behind my back*?"

"Well, we *would* talk to you, but you've made it beyond clear that you aren't interested in what we have to say." There was a heated moment of silence, color draining from Willow's face as she heaved a deep breath. When she spoke again, her tone was calm and tempered. "I just want you to *talk* to me. You've been all with the distance for...well, if I want to be really honest, ever since your little romp with Spike on your birthday. I—"

"My...my *what* with Spike?"

"You know...with the being locked in with him and everything. I mean, I can see how that would put the *wig* in your *wig out*. Hours in a room with him alone? I was wigged enough when he locked me up with Xander, and let's *so* not go there. But ever since..."

No. No no no. There was absolutely *no* way she was going to have this discussion. Buffy backed farther down the hall, shaking her head hard. "I gotta go."

It was a matter of physics. How far could she run before she started screaming in all-out mind-consuming rage?

God, she hated him. Hated him and his thoughtlessness. Killing her would have been sweeter mercy. At least the dead didn't have guilt. At least the dead didn't have to wake up every morning and face her friends with the knowledge that she was hurting them.

She hated him. She knew she did.

If only she could convince herself.

DINNER AND A SHOW

A DATE. A real date. With all the drama and heartache Angel had put her through over the past year, it seemed both bizarre and sweet that he'd want to take her out. They'd never really been on a date before—patrolling and battles to the death weren't exactly equitable with movies, flowers, and candy kisses. The whole prospect of dating Angel was so simple and complicated at the same time—she wanted to laugh until she cried.

In all honesty, Buffy's last *real* date had been years ago. One of the last years before she'd become the Slayer. Nothing else was comparable. Her brief interest in Owen had resulted in an evening full of vamps to be slain, and similarly, the would-be relationship with Scott always skittered around the inevitable, "By the way, and I *know* how crazy this is gonna sound..."

Angel had asked her out on a date. Friday. Date night. Bearing in mind that she hadn't realized they were on comfortable speaking terms, this was considerable progress.

The evening itself was long and awkward. Dinner stretched into what had to be hours. Hours filled with long, empty silences and a quip or two about how they didn't serve Angel's favorite food. Buffy was acquainted with the various forms of silence. There were silences

that spoke for things that neither party could say. Silences filled with quiet understanding. Silences where—

It was so dark, but she could see his eyes—hazed and bewildered, studying her severely as he pressed her against the wall, his cock at her opening, and—

There would be no thinking of that night right now. Even with the noise that surrounded them that seemed to amplify the fact that they weren't having any kind of meaningful conversation. Buffy sat and watched him. Watched him watch her. Watched as they tacitly concluded there was nothing to say. Nothing that either was willing to discuss, as it was.

Buffy found her nerves pressed when Angel spoke, always terrified that he would eventually cross that final threshold. He hadn't yet—he had more control, but it wouldn't last. Eventually, he would reach a breaking point. Eventually, he'd seize her by the shoulders and shake her until she spilled what it was that had happened those few weeks ago. She knew he thought about it. He thought about it often.

And they didn't talk.

With as much as she would like to blame him, Buffy understood that what had occurred was not simply because of Spike. Her layers of hostility brewed and festered, but that truth remained untarnished. Spike's intrusion into her life had not changed anything that hadn't needed changing. Rather, the entire affair had only brought her to a pivotal realization that otherwise might have taken years to reach.

That hurt, because she knew she'd once loved Angel. Over Christmas, she'd been convinced she still did, but that explosion of emotion had left her feeling hollow. Once she'd had back what she thought she'd wanted, it seemed very...incomplete.

Then Spike had happened and shattered any lingering delusions about whatever she had with Angel.

Buffy had loved Angel once, but she didn't now. Not in the way she had. Not in an everlasting way. He was no different than any girl's first love—he'd come and gone, and now she carried on with him as

though waiting for the director to yell *cut* so she could return to her regularly scheduled life. She needed a place to stop—a place to acknowledge the finale of their once-great love. There was heartache and despair down that road, but she'd been there before. Angel had shown her everything—love, yes, but moreover, turmoil, grief, and death. That was his great contribution to her life.

Without saying a word, he could make her feel like such a child.

It was different now. Spike had complicated things by opening her eyes, making her realize the thing she'd wanted to salvage was too broken to put back together again. It felt like she and Angel had—for all intents and purposes—already separated, only they'd skipped the messy 'we need to talk' thing.

Despite everything, Buffy didn't want to think about it. The idea of formally breaking up with Angel, putting a technical end to their relationship, had her road-blocked. He had been her first, and she clung to that. She remembered daydreaming about where they would be in twenty years, when she was no longer plagued with the burdens of Slayerhood, and for a long time, those dreams had starred Angel by her side. A fantasy that she now knew would never be.

To say that her first adult relationship was over felt like wishing away the last gasp of childhood altogether, as though the barrier had not been broken already.

The world was already too confusing to worry about absolutes.

Plus, dinner reminded her why she and Angel rarely went out. His affinity for appearing human did not stretch to his eating habits. She felt that he was punishing himself for being anything less than a man. As though she would forget everything he had done if he smiled soulfully in her direction.

It wasn't until they were ready to leave that he tripped over an area of discussion that merited more than the obligatory one-word reply. "How is Faith?"

A dark shudder rippled through her. Things had been quiet on the Faith front since she'd killed the Mayor's aide. Small talk in the greater scheme of things. Buffy was sore on the subject, but not to the point where she would stop their nightly constitutionals. Ever since

the birthday-extravaganza, it seemed the other slayer was the only one that refused to hound her for details or regard her as though she were diseased. This was likely because Faith was too wrapped in her own issues, or maybe she just didn't care. It was odd, given her tendency to pry into Buffy's love life whenever she felt like it. Not a suggestive word had come out of Faith's mouth in reference to that night.

Of course, that could be attributed to the latest weirdness with her and the Xander kissage. Well, more than kissage, but Buffy really preferred to steer clear of those visuals.

And now Angel was asking about her. He should know. He was her biggest sponsor at Slayer Rehab. Their nights apart left too much to the imagination. The other Slayer's occasional absence seemed to coincide with Angel's excuses of, "I'm busy tonight" whenever Buffy got around to asking for his time. All things considered, the thought shouldn't bother her like it did. But Buffy was nothing if not a walking contradiction.

"She's good," Buffy replied, attempting to mask her disdain. "I think she's...she's dealing slowly. Trying to come to terms..."

The look that flashed across Angel's face was reflective and understanding. It made her insides boil. "It'll take time," he acknowledged. "She went through something traumatic."

Yeah, because standing there and watching was a walk in the park for me.

"As it shows in her everyday behavior."

"People can put up surprising walls, Buffy," Angel reprimanded with a frown. "We all have our ways of dealing... It took me forever to come to any level of acceptance. Faith is...different. She's coping with what she has done in the only way she knows."

"By partying?"

"You wouldn't understand."

Well, ain't that typical? She wondered offhandedly if the love bite Spike had left on her throat was meant to pass on some of his more basic urges. That would certainly explain the *Angel can be such an ass* mantras that had a way of slipping in and out of daily thought.

"I wouldn't understand," she repeated. "Of course I wouldn't understand. How can I? It's just another one of those members-only things where—"

"What are you talking about?"

"Never mind," she replied, waving as she moved to finish off her water. He was not satisfied with that, she knew, but at the moment, she honestly couldn't give a damn. Not where Faith was concerned.

The rest of dinner passed by in silence. Neither had anything to say. This was the way it was. Things would be better once they got to the movie. Conversation was not required, and they didn't have to look at each other if they didn't want to.

Hooray for relationship goals.



BAD, bad movie decision. Bad. A whole world full of bad. Bad to the point of not being able to express the degree of badness. All the bad in the universe could not have prepared her for a cinematic experience of this variety.

Why oh why had they walked into a porno? And why oh why hadn't anyone stopped them?

Amazingly, Angel remained stoic throughout most of the film, hardly batting an eye if not to toss her an apologetic glance. She wondered if that could be accredited to the two hundred-plus years of experience working in his favor.

Despite the current mental fallout, one thing would remain fresh and permanent in Buffy's mind. Her time with Angel had been perfect, soiled only by what had happened after. He'd been tender and intimate, embodied everything that 'making love' was all about. And she'd loved him. She'd loved him so much that her love had destroyed her, her friends, and everything she held dear.

He had been considerate and gentle. He had been everything a girl could want in her first experience.

Well, until the next day.

"It's what? Bells ringing, fireworks, a dulcet choir of pretty little birdies? Come on, Buffy. It's not like I've never been there before."

Buffy flinched and jerked away from him, ignoring the confused look she earned. It wasn't his fault, she knew. He had not said those words to her. He had not filled her mind with doubt. He had not intentionally broken her.

No, that had been Angelus.

"Somethin' I oughta tell you, before we get back to tradin' nasty jibes," Spike said, nudging her head with his. Buffy blinked sleepily and yawned, fighting the urge to stretch. "Not sure exactly how long we're gonna be snuggled all comfy-like."

That very thought had crossed her mind more than once, but she refused to voice her insecurity. She stifled another yawn and rested against his shoulder. "You better tell me now," she warned. "A sleepy slayer is a grumpy slayer. I can't be held accountable for the monster you'll wake up to tomorrow if I don't get my beauty rest."

Spike chuckled. She loved the feel of it rippling sensations across her skin.

"Beauty rest is overrated, kitten," he told her. "Besides, from where I'm sittin', you've already had your fill."

"You're either trying to make me blush or you're very horny."

"Both, actually. You mind?"

She felt another yawn approaching but hadn't the strength to push it inward. "Get to the point, Spike."

Another chuckle. His cool lips found her forehead. "Where's all that slayer stamina I've been dreamin' about?"

"I'm all stamina'd out. And...dreaming?"

"Yeah. You're a right annoyin' chit once you get stuck in someone's head, you know that?" He ran his fingers down her arms, eliciting shivers and goose bumps, and he purred his delight. "Like those musical numbers I was tellin' you about earlier, only a lot more...entertainin'."

She found the notion way too comforting. To the point that she was on the verge of asking about the various scenarios and positions his wicked mind had entertained before remembering that he had awoken her for a reason.

"Again with the point. Points are a good thing. They're nice and...pointy."

Spike barked a laugh in return, squeezing her closer to him. "I'll let that one slide, pet."

"Thank god."

Spike graced her temple with a tender kiss, fingers finding the bite mark she had allowed him to give her earlier that night. "What he said to you... I don't know the whole story, of course, but he gave me and Dru a good hint. He was a bloody wanker, love. That rot about..."

Spike buried his face in her hair, inhaling as she trembled against him. This was it. This was the way the first time should have been. Lying wrapped in each other's arms, talking and touching as lovers. A sense of what had been fought for and what was found.

Irony, how I mock thee.

"You're such a fireball," he continued. "Christ, it burns me to think this was only your—"

"Don't," she whispered softly. "Don't bring him up. I can't...I..."

And because she asked, that was all he'd said.

Buffy shuddered and fell cold again. It was a conversation she relived more than she cared to admit, simply for the satisfaction of her qualms and misgivings. After all, if he had meant a word of it, he would have come back.

Even after she'd told him that she needed time.

Buffy honestly didn't know what she'd meant with the suggestion. It had been appropriate then. Everything was new and confusing. She remembered the dazed appreciation that coursed through her veins when Angel had swooped in and taken her into his arms. She remembered panicking when he discovered the fresh bite marks on her throat. She remembered the bewilderment that flickered across his face when she'd thrown him off the vampire that was supposed to be her enemy.

She remembered the flash of jealousy in Spike's eyes, too, and that she'd given him no reason to think that they would ever have more, aside from asking him to come back. Their hours together had

been infuriating, then annoying, then lust-addled, then passionate, and then the best of her life.

The very, very best.

Angel had not mentioned Spike's bite mark since that first night. The hurt in his eyes was too much for her to handle. And while she sensed he felt betrayed, something told her that he was just plain pissed on a solely primitive level that that she'd let another vamp's fangs near her throat. A sort of *if-I-can't-have-her-no-one-can* kind of thing.

Honestly, there were times when Buffy wished she had a soulful-monster manual that listed all the characteristics of a brooding demon. At least then she would know what to expect.

At that, she hazarded another glance in his direction, ill-timed with a guttural moan that hissed across the screen. She flinched but he did not. He merely sat there, stone-faced and watching. She thought about suggesting they leave but decided against it. There was a look of solemn resignation on Angel's face, as though God would have to strike the theater down before he'd budge. Perhaps he was too embarrassed. Perhaps he wanted to prove something to himself. Whatever the case, he wasn't moving. So she sat. And watched. And tried not to watch. And wished herself away.

And then felt horribly guilty. Despite whatever hardships they were going through, it wasn't fair to rub his nose in what he couldn't have.

Oh, speaking of... The leading man was descending rapidly down the actress's heaving body, his mouth well-aimed at her shorn pussy. Buffy's eyes widened, her mind shooting to all sorts of inappropriate things.

She made a small noise of complaint as the cool body she had been resting on slid from her embrace. Still half-dazed with sleep, she tightened her grip on him to hold him still, but his own wiry strength was still greater than hers. Spike had to be tired—he hadn't slept in five days, he'd told her, too rattled with adrenaline in preparation for tonight. Yet he acted like he had consumed twelve café mochas in ten minutes.

Which was all well and good, but she was trying to sleep. He had

allowed her an hour at first before waking her, then half an hour before feeling the need to reaffirm Angel's wankerness, then fifteen minutes before waking her again to ask if she was cold. Finally, when she threatened to emasculate him if he dared awake her again, he'd settled back with a pout and wrapped his arms around her, telling her to go on back to sleep.

To which, she responded, "Coulda sworn that's what I've been trying to do. You kinda did wear me out."

She felt him rumble with masculine pride. "Did I?"

"That slayer stamina you mentioned? I told you...slayer powers gone, ergo stamina's not as staminy as usual."

She loved it when he laughed. He was so boyish when he laughed. "That's not a word, pet."

"Anything's a word when I'm this tired."

"You know," he mused, "I'd like to try to wear you out when your powers are at their full. Figure we could have a helluva week figurin' trying to run down your batteries."

"Ego much?"

"Well, I am the bloke who 'wore you out.'"

"Yeah, yeah."

Spike snapped back a witty retort, she was sure, but she was halfway to dreamland.

She honestly wasn't sure how long he allowed her to rest during that interval. It seemed longer than a half hour, but the night was going fast, and morning would come too soon.

Which is likely why he caved to temptation and challenged her threat of emasculation.

When she awoke, it was to find Spike situated between her thighs, hungrily sucking at her clit. As soon as the first violent shudder ran through her body, he looked up to meet her eyes with a mischievous grin.

Cohherent thought crashed and burned. His gaze alone was enough to make her tremble—flickers of disobedience that simply begged to be disciplined. A strangled moan escaped her lips before she could think to stop herself. "Spi...wha..."

He winked at her before sliding down once more, his tongue probing her clit as he hummed with delight. "Sorry, pet," he replied, not at all apologetic.

The tremors that echoed across her skin in response to his voice had her arching, and she slammed her head to the floor. "Know you wanted to sleep." Another torturous lick. Buffy whimpered, her thighs closing around his head. "Figured a midnight snack this delicious would be worth the wrath of Grumpy Slayer Monster in the mornin'."

She moaned at his words, fisting a handful of platinum locks and holding him to her desperately.

"You're delicious," he murmured, his fingers stretching her pussy lips apart. "Christ, Buffy..."

"Gah..."

"So delicious. I'll want this every day. Every fucking day. You understand me?"

She understood. She just couldn't reply.

She knew she'd want it, too.

The movie was over, and the look on Angel's face left her feeling hollow. She knew he could tell when her pulse accelerated. When her eyes glazed over. When she was turned on.

He knew.

"Well," she said, trying and failing to sound normal. "That was... well, from the title, I thought it was going to be about food."

Oh yeah. Smooth, Slayer. Real smooth.

When had her conscience adapted an English accent? She didn't want to know.

Angel simply nodded and muttered some disjointed reply. Neither was really paying attention.

Buffy released a seething breath. Never before had she allowed her thoughts to sway toward the blonder persuasion in her boyfriend's presence. It was too dangerous, and it wasn't as though Spike would be waiting for her when she went home.

Again with the all-right-with-that. I'd probably stake him anyway. Hate him, remember?

All well and good. The word *excuse* was in serious need of redefining.

"No one's ever done that to you, have they?" Spike settled back, smiling smugly as he brought her back against his chest.

It was only then that she felt her cheeks flush. Her body was quaking still, coming down from a euphoric plane. "I...erm..."

"I've boldly gone where no man has gone before."

No one should ever be allowed that much arrogance, but she hadn't the strength to argue.

"Sure. Whatever. If you'll let me get to sleep, believe what you want."

He pouted. "You still wanna sleep?"

Buffy paused for a minute, turning to meet his eyes with a wicked smile of her own. The curve of her mouth fit naturally against his. Soothing and calm. The way things should have been for her all along. "Well," she said, "now that you mention it..."

"You ready?"

"Huh?" Buffy blinked vacantly at Angel before realizing that she had done it again. The look on his face was solemn, nearly hurt, and shot her head-first into guilt. That was one thing she'd never wanted to do. Hurt him. Hurt him with her own selfishness. Hurt him because her thoughts were with another.

Another who she hated.

"Right," she said, nodding more to herself. "Let's go."

Something told her that hell would freeze over before he took her to the movies again.

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

LET no one ever say that William the Bloody did not know how to make an entrance. So long as this pissant town kept putting that sign up, he'd be here to knock it back to the ground.

He pressed his foot down harder on the gas pedal. Sunnydale was a few miles down the road still, and keeping his focus on that bloody sign was pretty much the only thing that could prevent his mind from wandering to places it ought not.

Like he was coming back for any reason other than Buffy.

Self-control was not a trait Spike practiced. He'd known that forced distance would drive him insane—so insane that, for a brief period, he'd contemplated not coming back at all. He didn't want to defeat his Buffy lust, only to return and have it painfully rekindled right before she gave him the boot. It was a hasty, if not poorly constructed solution to the hole he had dug himself into.

Spike often wondered how it was for her. How long it had taken her to really regret what they'd done. After leaving, he'd waited for his own revulsion to kick in—for these stupid feelings conquered at last by his better senses. Had the Slayer. Fucked the Slayer. Ditched the Slayer. Consider that itch well and scratched so he could get back to being an evil son of a bitch like he was supposed to. But that hadn't

happened. The only regret he had was that their first time together had been about anger. That he'd wanted to kill her but found fucking her was more therapeutic. That he'd inwardly cursed Drusilla for driving him to Buffy, and then cursed Buffy for allowing him near. Then he cursed himself for believing he could taste her without becoming an addict.

Like he'd ever believed that himself.

Spike still didn't know where everything had gone so bloody wrong. He had volunteered himself for the position after disposing of Kralik with every intention of killing her. A snap of the throat, a sample of blood, and a hearty return to Dru. It was all there. A carefully constructed, fool-proof plan. Trapping the Slayer when she was at her most vulnerable. Although the prospect of taking her out when she couldn't fight back hadn't been all that exciting, desperate times called for desperate measures. It was that or risk the end of a relationship that had defined him for over a century. He had been more than furious. More than willing to rid the world of her. Ethics be damned.

He'd wanted to believe that confinement with Buffy for any period of time had the ability to reduce the Biggest Bads whipped little puppies, but he'd been hers for a long time now. Everything he'd told her had been true.

And when exactly had a soulless vampire obtained a set of ethics, anyway? He should have jumped for joy at the prospect of her death, regardless of the circumstances. Whether she be at full strength or weakened for the delights of creatures such as he, even if the thought had never rested well with him. There was no fun in taking out a slayer when she couldn't fight back. There was no thrill. There was no passion.

Everything had changed the minute he saw her. The instant he'd grabbed her wrist and pulled her flush against him. The instant he'd felt the heated power in his arms. He'd released his bloodlust almost instantly for just plain *lust* and allowed himself to slip into familiar banter. It'd felt, for everything, as though he had spent every day

since his siring on this level with her. With *Buffy*. Talking with her. Laughing with her.

God, he was pathetic. Buffy was dangerous to him, and he was addicted to her. She'd risen to the challenge. She'd squirmed—*ohhhh, delicious*—and voiced her usual threats. She'd demanded motive and made him question his own. Then they had gotten trapped in that blasted panic room, and all thoughts of killing her had flown out the proverbial window.

Then again, that wasn't exactly true, either. There had never been many thoughts of killing her. Well, at first there had been tons. Some with an unexpected adult rating and others without. Spike wasn't entirely sure when his daytime musings drifted from sinfully brutal to just plain sinful. There had been no true sign to bring his unnatural craving to a head. And at first, that had been all it was—a craving. A craving that had quickly turned into obsession.

Then they had formed that unnatural alliance to bring down Angelus, and he'd been lost. He'd seen her for what she was that night, and god, she'd amazed him. And though it had taken him a while to realize it, he lived now only to see her light. To revel in her strength. He wanted to be the one she relied on when the world was ending. He wanted to play her hero, even when she didn't need saving.

How bloody perverse was that?

Spike should have known that the way to confront the problem was not to place himself in a situation where his unnatural ethics would be put to the test. Everything had collapsed. Buffy had surrendered whatever sense of morality she thought she owed to herself. She'd given Spike a taste. He had felt her beneath him. Around him. Burning him. The flavor of her running delicious circles in his mouth. Oh god, it'd been corruption at its richest. He wasn't sure who lost that night. Whose fall from grace merited the most punishment. Her willful embrace of the dark, or his submission to her blinding light.

Those last few hours with her had been different. Completely reversed from the spiteful, vindictive girl he had originally found

himself trapped with. Buffy had laughed with him. Talked with him. Joked with him. Smiled at him. She had laid her head on his shoulder and allowed her defenses to collapse. He could have killed her whenever he felt like it. He *should* have.

But that thought hurt more than he could tolerate.

He'd stood outside her window the following night, and watched her watch him back. He'd fought the urge to climb up that tree that had played host to Angel on many a night and give her a proper good-bye. Instead, he'd managed to turn away with what little dignity he had left, and returned to the darkness as his feet turned to granite.

Spike had left Sunnydale and tried to burn the memory from his mind, despite the promise he felt dampen his heart. But here he was, back in Sunnydale, because staying away from Buffy was impossible, especially now that he'd had a taste. A sample of what he wanted. Nothing less could keep him satisfied.

It was wrong. It was more than wrong. No vampire should crave the Slayer like this. No vampire should want more and definite not more than a simple fuck. Oh, if only it was that. He could live with that. That was tolerable. That was explainable. The need to feel her beside him with every wake was not. The need to make her smile as often as possible was not. The need to hold her when she was crying was *definitely* not. The need to keep her safe from all others was bloody insane.

He was insane. There was no other explanation. No other reason he'd crossed that treacherous line from lust to... He couldn't even fathom the word. He hoped he never would.

Dreams weren't enough to send him back. After all, he'd thrived on scandalous, X-Rated Buffy dreams months before Drusilla's insane allegations had driven him into the Slayer's arms. No. It was simple realization. Driving down the highway one night, lost in his thoughts, and pushed to that fine edge of acknowledgment. Fuck what others thought. Fuck what Drusilla thought. Fuck everyone. He knew what he wanted for the first time—what he really wanted. He knew what he wanted with perfect clarity. He had told her that he was coming

back, and he would. Buffy wanted him to come back. She'd told him so.

What if she had changed her mind? Only one way to find out...

The old Desoto had pulled the mother of all U-turns, tires screeching in a silent night before righting itself on the road back to Sunnydale. Spike had no idea how far he had driven before coming to the conclusion that there was no place for him but back. Life after the birthday-incident had been a series of booze, floozies, and more booze. Quick women that he'd hoped to drown her memory with. A desperate need to escape that had only made him miss her more.

Bloody rotten irony.

In truth, they'd only been separated for a few weeks. More than likely, not enough time had passed for her to decide whether or not she wanted him in her life. And even if a verdict had been reached, it was more prone to weigh toward the other side. After all, what self-respecting slayer would willfully abandon her first love? He wasn't blind; he had seen the way she fawned and pawed over Angel. Hoping that he had a chance against that realized soap-opera was nothing more than wishful thinking.

But Buffy had asked him to come back. She wanted him back. She'd needed time to herself—time to see if their night together had been more than a grudge fuck. That she wasn't substituting him for Angel. That if she had some of her ever-blessed time, she could—

Figure out how to rip your heart out? Haven't you had enough of that this year, mate?

There was too much to consider. He had tried running away and failed miserably. And he was back now. Back in Sunnydale—the place that didn't know when to quit for the vampire that never stopped. A small grin tickled his lips at the thought, familiar shivers racing up his arms and down his back. The Hellmouth didn't exactly have a skyline—not like Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, and all those other fun pit stops he had selected as favorites over the years—but there was something about it that felt natural.

Something that felt like coming home.

William the Bloody grinned when he saw the *Welcome To Sunnydale* sign, revved his engine, and mowed it down.

It didn't look good there, anyway. He was doing the town a favor.

Spike grinned to himself, put the car in park, kicked the door open and inhaled the air that was inherently Buffy Summers.

Oh yes. This was why he had come back. Fool to think he could stay away.

A jovial smile crossed his lips, and he finally lit the cigarette that had been dangling there for the last few miles. "Home sweet—"

"Good Lord. You ran right through that sign!" A small, stuffy British ponce was staring at him agape. As though the world and all its citizens depended on the lifecycle of a postered welcome mat. "Do you have any idea how much the city spends to fund the replacements each month? How could you be so disrespectful? I have a right mind to—"

The bloke looked to be Rupert Giles's mini-clone. Tweed, glasses...yeah, he *had* to be a watcher. A watcher that didn't know a vampire. Moreover didn't know *him* when confronted face-to-face. Something that could be rectified very quickly...

Buffy's golden face flashed before his eyes, and he sighed. Or not. Killing a watcher likely wasn't the best way to get his girl's attention. This was bleeding fantastic. Couldn't kill him, and the stupid sod would probably go screaming to Buffy, which was something he didn't need. He wanted to watch her before he made his appearance public.

Balls.

More to it than that, a traitorous voice whispered as the man waddled closer. *You're holdin' back for an entirely different reason, aren't you, you ponce?*

That thought was beyond enemy territory. It was in the middle of the sodding holding cell. He might as well stake himself before considering the implications. Another task he had avoided in the field of self-evaluation. Not now.

Of course, that didn't mean he couldn't knock the bastard off his feet. No harm, no foul.

“Mite rude to interrupt a bloke in the middle of a soliloquy, don’t you think?” Spike’s fist met the prat’s eye without further delay. “I was havin’ a moment.”

The man fell to a heap at the vampire’s feet, a pitiful sound escaping his lips. Must be the new one’s watcher. Two Chosen Birds, another crime against society, even if Kendra had been a pushover. If the new one was taking orders from this clown, she had to be more of the same.

Two slayers in one town—one to fight and fuck, one to fight and kill. One would think he was being spoiled.

Like Buffy’ll let you off her sister in arms.

Still...it was a nice thought.

With a smile, Spike drew the cigarette away from his lips, exhaled slowly, and smiled. “Now, where was I? Oh right...” A shiver of anticipation. There was no denying that rush. He was looking forward to seeing Buffy again, no matter what rot he’d fed himself. These next few days were going to be tremendously fun. “Home sweet home.”

Of course, that didn’t mean he would rush into things. Patience was not his strongest virtue, but he would have to exercise it now. He wasn’t about to go waltzing back until he knew exactly what he was getting himself into.

At the moment, standing here in her town, with her scent on the air, he couldn’t see what had driven him to leave in the first place.

He couldn’t wait to see her again.

Even if it was from a distance.

PATROL

IN ALL HONESTY, she shouldn't have been surprised to practically slam into Faith as soon as they stepped out of the Sun. It was in the other Slayer's nature to experience happiness vicariously through others—at least, what Buffy could only assume was happiness. The date was already a non-success without Faith's help. After all, she had just spent the past half hour fidgeting uncomfortably while trying and failing not to think about her one-nighter with Spike, and something told her that Angel could smell it all over her.

Faith perked her brows when she saw them, likely debating how to make the best out of an awkward situation. Despite the crapshoot the movie experience had been, Buffy was tightly pressed at Angel's side, her fingers threaded through his. The closeness was forced—a failed way to alleviate the guilt that stretched her insides. And yet, she couldn't ignore the inner voice that screamed she was being unfaithful to Spike, which was several steps beyond crazy.

"Whoa, talk about power to the people, B," Faith drawled, nodding to the film's title on the marquee. "Never figured you for that type. You two certainly are skirtin' around the question of how to get your rocks off."

Buffy immediately flushed, and she didn't know why. She owed

Faith nothing. She was, after all, of age, and it wasn't as though she had *known* it was porn. Who would guess with a title like *Marquee: Le Banquet D'Amelia*? "I didn't exactly plan this, you know," she answered begrudgingly. "I thought it was about food."

"There was food," Angel offered, his assistance not in the area code of helpful.

"Right." *Oh, I'll say.* Buffy nodded, her mind dangerously treading the path of *going there again*. That was something she absolutely could not do, especially with Faith standing three feet away. "There was that scene with the...food. It was very artistic."

Faith's eyes narrowed and she stepped back. "Well, color me surprised," she said. "Even with Mr. Joe Restraint, I figured a cinematic experience like that'd have you pawing all over each other like a coupla deranged lust-bunnies."

Buffy shrugged. "We're good."

"Very good," Angel agreed in the same monotone.

Faith's gaze grew all the more skeptical. Her scrutiny was not welcome.

Why she felt like hounding this to death, Buffy had no idea. The guilt raging inside was wrenching but manageable. She had several weeks' practice under belt, and still her fool mouth decided to run away with her. "*Really* thought it was about food...other than chocolate and whipped cream," she insisted, and immediately regretted doing so. Bad line of thought. Bad. Need to get mind away from sinfully enticing film.

But it was too late—having already made the leap to another night a few weeks back.

"*You're the kinda girl a fella could spoil for centuries, love.*" Spike rolled a cigarette casually between his thumb and forefinger, gauging her eyes for reaction. It was odd hearing terms of endearment—near worship—pour from the lips of a man whom had so vehemently campaigned for her death. "Ohhh, now I'm gettin' all sorts've naughty ideas."

"Why am I not surprised?"

He favored her with a rakish grin, lightly running his hand down her

bare arms. "Cause you finally took the time to get to know me?" he offered. "Down to the bloody skivvies?"

"I swear I'm going to hang that Travers guy out a window by his toes when I get outta here." She paused, then pouted. "Doesn't sound nearly as menacing as when my mom used to threaten the same to me. Maybe I'll just beat him up. Seems to work on Willy the Snitch."

"Think I'll send him a fruit basket." He turned his head to meet her eyes. "Is that what you human-types do? Or should I just stick with a thank-you card?"

"As long as the blood of the innocent with a side of virgin's heart are left out of the gift package, I'd say you have free rein."

Spike barked a laugh at that. "You sure know the way to this man's heart, love," he said. "Now, like I was sayin'...what we need is a weekend somewhere. Don't look at me like that. I can pretend it's gonna happen, can't I? Don't know where we'd go, but I'm sure I could find ways to keep you entertained for hours. Teach you everythin' you need to know about foreplay."

As in, she didn't know what she was doing?

Spike seemed to sense this line of thought and swept in before a word escaped her lips. "Don't even," he snapped. "Don't turn that around on me. You know you're bloody perfect the way you are. But we could have fun, don't you think. You don' have to answer me, o'course. Keep to yourself. But..." He slid closer to her, voice intrusive and right at her ear. "I could show you how to have more fun with a can of whipped cream than you ever thought possible." He pulled away just as quickly, favoring her with a wicked grin and an innocent shrug. "Nibble on that all you like. Just a little food for thought."

"B!" Faith snapped her fingers in front of Buffy's eyes. "You really oughta send a postcard when you go off, you know? Least let us know where to find you. Christ, what's with you and the spacey?"

"I...ummm...lot on my mind." She kept her gaze trained on the pavement. *Do not look at Angel, do not look at Angel.* "Still got an exam to make up for. Remember? With the skipping out of class we did a couple of weeks ago?" She deliberately did not tag the implied 'You know...before you killed that guy and we nearly killed each other?' But it

was there. Oh, it was there. "I never really got the chance to make it up...with the...and Will having the evil twin from freaky-dimension-land. Giles managed to convince Mrs. Taggart that I was doing something much more important than chemistry...hence the making-up on Monday."

Faith nodded. "Nice. Two weeks, eh? Wish my old hang had been that chilled with the voluntary absenteeism. Might've actually lingered around past grade nine." She paused with an apathetic shrug. "Well, all's well that ends well."

"She didn't exactly give me two weeks," Buffy felt obligated to clarify. She didn't know why; it just seemed important. "I've kinda had something come up every time the opportunity arose."

That and it's been really hard to study with Willow mad at me 'cause I'm juggling free-flowing hostility and all these lusty Spike thoughts.

Faith shrugged. She was seemingly determined not to take any of the bait Buffy was laying out for her. That was so very Faith-like. For the millionth time that night, Buffy felt herself shrivel with envy.

"Hazard of living on the Hellmouth," Faith replied. "So, you comin'? I've got this itch that's gonna go unscratched unless we get in a few good kills tonight. No rest for the wicked."

"Council has you back on active duty, then?" Angel asked, making Buffy jump. She'd nearly forgotten he was there.

"Finally." Faith nodded. "They want us down by Mercer tonight."

"How are things with Wesley? Have you two been...I know you—"

"What, with the kidnapping bit? I'm in for the long-haul of no." Faith's eyes flickered dangerously. "But something of interest did happen in way of him tonight."

"What? Did his green card expire? Please say yes."

Faith snickered appreciatively. "Nah. Nowhere near that excitin'."

"Don't think the Council would go for that, anyway," Angel observed. A shadow of a smile had crossed his face.

"Apparently, Dudley Do-Right was takin' a stroll over to Giles's for a late-night batch of demon research and ran into somethin' nasty on the way." Faith flexed her shoulder. "Giles beeped me a while back to

give me the full. Guess he wanted to make sure I wasn't the one who did it."

A twinge of guilt rolled in Buffy's stomach. "Is he all right? Wesley, I mean."

"Unfortunately, yeah. Barely a scratch, save the glasses. I'm willin' to bet he hurts himself more when he jerks off."

Buffy's nose crinkled. "Eww. Save the image. So...right. Patrol." She turned to Angel at last, sending him a nonverbal apology for bailing on their date.

"I'll see you later," she promised, leaning forward instinctively, head tilting upward to receive his kiss. A casual touch. Brief. Fleeting. Empty. Something heavy fell in her stomach as his lips brushed against hers. Something cold that left her wanting.

No. More than that. Left her more than wanting. The heat was gone.

Their eyes clashed with mutual, troubled understanding.

"Right," he said. "Be careful."

Buffy watched him turn and leave as she and Faith started for Mercer.

It wasn't fair. No part of this was fair. Spike had strolled into her life and taken everything she knew away, made it into a big perversion, and left her to sort out the pieces. She hadn't asked for this. She hadn't asked for anything. She'd been happy before. She'd had friends. She'd had Angel. She'd had duties, and life was good.

God! I hate him!

Only she didn't and she knew it.

"Wow," Faith drawled from the sidelines. "I take back what I said. Less bunny and more cold fish."

"Faith?"

"Yeah?"

"Shut up."

A devilish smile crossed the other Slayer's face. There wasn't anything she enjoyed more than exploiting someone else's discomfort. "Hold on, B. I feel suddenly very out of the loop. What's up with the nonexistent UST?"

Something dark twisted in Buffy's stomach. Why oh why must this come up tonight? Faith had been surprisingly good about keeping her mouth shut, minding her own business—if her business consisted of killing the mayor's aides and attempting to pin it on her sister Slayer—without really breaching the line. Why did she feel the need talk about Angel *now*, of all times?

Probably because she saw us walking out of a porn film. Was it that obvious that I wasn't thinking about... Okay, so not going there.

Too late for that. She was there. She'd been there all night. She'd been there all month. She practically lived there.

Tonight was supposed to have been about moving on. About starting over and gluing the tattered remains of her relationship with Angel back together. Reminders of Spike were *not* allowed to pop up around every corner. Forget that she couldn't do anything without her mind dragging her back to that night. The argument with Willow was still fresh in her mind. They hadn't made up yet, and she wasn't sure when they were going to.

In all fairness, she had been distancey girl. She knew it. She watched herself draw away from her friends.

Oh yeah. Life sucked.

"Silence speaks volumes, B," Faith said, voice annoyingly cheerful. "Y'know I'm just gonna come up with my own opinion if you don't spill the goods, right?"

"Wow. This is me, astonished. See that? With all the astonishment?"

"Is it the close-but-no-cigar thing? Man, talk about balls. Takin' your Life-Would-Be-So-Much-Easier-If-We-Could-Pretend-You-Were-Impotent boyfriend to a porn flick?" Faith shook her head with a chuckle, promptly ignoring the death glare Buffy aimed in her direction. "Was he squirming in his seat? Must've been tough not to cop a feel of—"

Anger pillowed on the verge of eruption. Buffy felt it spread from her fingertips to her toes—addled, provoked, just begging for that final reason to break free and make someone feel marginally as bad

as she did. However, she maintained control of herself and counted to ten.

Do not take it out on Faith. That's what she lives for. Besides, she doesn't even know half the story. Let her believe what she wants.

It was a wonderful place, Denial. The atmosphere never changed, the climate was always great, and the company swelled with familiar faces.

"Oh, I get it!" Faith's eyes danced maniacally. "This has nothin' to do with ole Broody, does it?"

The line stopped there. This was a no-cross zone. "Don't." They'd reached Mercer now, and she couldn't be more relieved. A demon needed to show up right now and wash all remnants of the night away. She didn't care what kind. "Faith, when it comes to Angel, me, and me and Angel, do me a favor." *Oh. Excellent timing.* "Duck!"

A flash of curly brown hair and the offending Slayer was out of the picture, revealing the grubby looking thing that had perched behind her sometime during their 'we're never talking about this again' discussion. Short and of the wouldn't-take-him-home-to-mother variety.

Buffy hoped to convey her gratitude with a timely wallop. Convenient or not, he was still a demon. A demon sneaking up on two slayers at night. Either he was very stupid or had a big jones for pain. Or both.

There wasn't much time between the hitting and the whiplash to consider.

"Ow!" the demon wailed, head flying back as his hand jumped to his nose. "Ooh, what are you, nuts? Going around punching people?"

That was a laugh. Even with the dorky hat, it was more than obvious that he ran in a group that was not connected to the human variety. Buffy yanked said dorky hat off his head. "People?"

Faith had recovered, and was glaring daggers.

"So what? I'm a demon," the creature replied. Oddly like Whistler, only not as tolerable—or helpful, from the looks of it. And she was quite certain that Whistler hadn't smelled that bad. "That makes it okay?"

The Slayers exchanged a pointed look before raising their stakes in flawless synchronization, and the demon squeaked. "Hold it, whoa!" he cried, hands coming up. "Stake me now and you never find out what I got for you, huh? Think about it. Demon seeks slayers. Highly unusual?"

Buffy had to stifle a bitter snort. *Oh, not too unusual. Depends on the demon.*

"Talk fast," Faith hissed.

"How would you like to get your hands on the Books of Ascension?"

Buffy glanced to her companion. "Never really a priority, you know. But now that you mention it, does Barnes and Noble still have them in stock? Get to the point." She nodded at the stake still coiled tightly in her hand. "Before the point gets you."

Hah! There's a bit of the bad-pun-lovin' Buffy the world's been missing!

"Oh come on, you're kidding me! The Books of Ascension," the demon repeated. "Very powerful, and I'm not talkin' about the prose. Dark stuff—major dark stuff. And the Mayor, if you catch my meaning, would hate for someone to get a hold of them before he...well, you know."

Buffy shrugged. "Don't know. Before he what?"

The demon shook his head, his eyes wide. "Hey, hey. Read 'em and weep. That's all I got to say. Tomorrow, I get the books. Meet me here and if the price is right, well I give the books to you."

"Not really looking to trade with a demon," Buffy replied, smiling sweetly.

"And if this were still a barter economy, that would be a problem. I want cash, princess, five large for the whole set."

Faith arched a brow and gestured at him. "So you can buy...and I'm guessing here, skin care products?"

"Plane ticket. Out of the Hellmouth before it's adios, Slayer Loco. So, five G's, what do you say?"

The look on Faith's face turned scary for a second. She shifted and whipped a stake from her back pocket. "I think 'Die Fiend' sums it up, wouldn't you say?"

She was about to tear into him until Buffy seized her wrist and held her back as the smallish annoyance took off in a blur. “Let him walk,” she said, resigned. “I don’t think he falls into the ‘deadly threat to humanity’ category.”

There was something frighteningly neutral about the look on Faith’s face. Something Buffy couldn’t quite put her finger on.

“Demon’s a demon,” came the simple, soft-spoken rejoinder.

“Well, it could be important, and even then, I’m curious. I’d like to know about these Books of Ascension,” she answered. “We’re pretty much sitting ducks right now. I know Giles will go all ‘oooh’ when he hears about this...and anything that would pin the Mayor down would be great. Annoying as it is, the thing had a point. If he’s seeking slayers out, the big upcoming bad must be...bad. You think he’s the one that got to Wesley, as Wesley is the walking epitome of pansydom?”

Buffy wasn’t even sure that Faith was following anymore. There was a cold, dispassionate look in her eyes that took a minute to clear. “Nah,” she said at last. “Wes said that it was a guy just getting into town that got him. Story goes, as retold to Giles, he got into some stink with this guy who has a seriously outdated ‘I Love The ‘80s’ complexion ‘cause he burst through the good ole Welcome to SunnyD sign on the way into town. Oh, but it gets better. Said it was a vamp. ‘Course, Wes’s description of the vamp was twelve feet tall and wicked-long claws that’d gouge your eyes out in a second. Wonder if the prick pissed himself when he saw his first—or five hundredth—demon. To be honest, B, the story doesn’t stick. Probably looking for his five seconds of sympathy, ‘cause no one’s shelving that out by the bushel anymore.” She gazed off thoughtfully. “Not that we did in the first place. I don’t get why a regular vamp’d leave a defenseless flesh bag when he coulda made with a midnight snack.”

Faith could have just as casually mentioned that her pet penguin was a chain smoker it wouldn’t have mattered. Buffy had heard nothing beyond the needed. Vamp rolling into town and knocking over the welcome sign in the process. An 80s reject. And Wesley was alive.

Would Spike have left Wesley alive? Would he have recognized him as a Watcher? Would he know to...

It couldn't be. For all her wanting and waiting, it couldn't be.

"Hey, girlfriend. Still with me?"

Numb. For all the feelings she had touched tonight, this was the last she'd expected. She walked without feeling her legs, spoke without registering the words on her lips. Now. Was it now? Had the wait come to an end? Was he back for her at last?

Buffy paused and forced herself to rein-in her thoughts. She refused to jump to conclusions on secondhand information from a girl she didn't trust.

Better to get to Giles before her emotional blockade initiated a self-destruct sequence of bad tidings. Better to do it now when she felt somewhat attached to her surroundings.

Was it now?

One thing was certain. That old *Divinyls* record that had gone neglected since the years of Billy Ford would be worn to disuse before the night was over.

BEYOND THE LOOKING GLASS

THE MAJORITY of the trip to Giles's consisted of Buffy trying to convince herself that the vampire that had scared Wesley was most likely a wandering miscreant who had flocked to the Hellmouth to take advantage of its reputation. There was no reason to believe it was Spike. None whatsoever.

When they got to Giles's, though, and Wesley began telling his harrowing tale, her conviction began to crack.

Old ratty car. Burst through the welcome sign. Cigarette. Leather. Blond. British.

Fortunately, she wasn't in a room full of mind-readers. Faith was more interested in leaving and getting in a few good slays, and Wesley wouldn't know Spike from Kiefer Sutherland in *The Lost Boys*. And Giles...

Giles was the loose cannon. Giles knew her better than anyone at times. And Giles was currently studying her with the same look that told her that he knew she was hiding something. It didn't seem so terribly long ago that she'd been able to pull a fast one without him so much as batting an eye, but he was beyond that now. Buffy swallowed hard. He was thinking the same thing she was. He *knew* the same thing she did.

Spike had returned.

But that didn't explain why Giles didn't say as much. It didn't explain the *something different* in his eyes. It didn't do much to explain anything. He wasn't one to withhold information, especially with a renowned and proud slayer-killer wandering the streets. There was more than comprehension there. He was watching *her* for a response.

Out of everyone, Giles had been the least vocal about the night that had rendered him jobless. There was nothing he could say that had not already been said; nothing he could imply that had not been beaten into the ground. Plus, it was possible that he felt that he owed her something. Buffy remembered well how angry she'd been with him for keeping the birthday ritual from her. She trusted Giles more than anyone—her mom or her friends—and he'd crushed her with his betrayal. Nothing had hurt as much as that. Not losing Angel to Angelus, nor killing Angel when she'd had no other choice.

"Really," Wesley was saying, "it's completely miraculous that my eye isn't much worse. Had I been caught on better awares, I—"

"Would have fallen over without getting hit first?" Faith offered with saccharine smile, earning a wounded look.

"This was no ordinary vampire," he insisted for what had to be the twentieth time in ten minutes. "I daresay, he—"

"Was the most foul, cruel, and bad-tempered vamp you ever set eyes on?" Buffy offered.

Wesley blinked at her. "Well, erm, yes."

Giles frowned. "Did you just quote Monty Python?"

Oh crap.

"Ummm. No," Buffy replied quickly. "I mean, I didn't mean to. I just wanted to shut him up."

"Pardon me if I believe more attention should be drawn to the matter," Wesley huffed. "After all, with a vampire of that brawn loose in Sunnydale, I shudder to think how quickly the bodies will begin to pile."

Faith rolled her eyes. "Enough about the damn vamp, all right? Honestly, Wes, I'm startin' to think you just pulled this story outta

your ass to get some notice. Nifty shiner you got there. Are you sure you didn't just walk into a lamppost?"

"I... How dare you!"

"Look," Faith continued, "maybe you didn't notice, but there are more important things to discuss, rather than yap away about some so-called vamp who—by *amazing* coincidence—decided *not* to kill you, okay, Chief?"

"Are you seriously insinuating that I fabricated the event?"

"Ohhh, now *there's* a thought," she drawled. "Maybe next time we'll get lucky and he'll tear your head off."

"I'm with Faith," Buffy muttered, earning a wounded scoff from one Watcher and a bewildered look from the other. "Not about Wes...well, actually, yeah. About that, too. But more to the effect that there are important things to discuss. Sacred duty stuff. I only meant that if we can progress beyond Screams-Like-A-Woman's recent crisis, we have an update from the demony front."

That caught Giles's interest. "Oh?"

"Something that might be related to the Mayor," she clarified. "Demon caught us on patrol. Said he was willing to sell us the Books of Ascension...whatever those are."

There was a long pause.

"The books of what?" Wesley finally commented.

"Ascension," Buffy said again. "Like I said, not exactly on the 'here's the definition' front, but he said it has something to do with the Mayor."

"He could have been lying," Faith offered. "Demons tend to do that, you know. He might've just wanted the money."

Giles tilted his head, slipping off his glasses. "How much?"

"Five G's." Faith shrugged. "Seems to me if these books were so important, he would've upped the price to something he knew the Council could front."

"I believe it's unusual that a demon would want cash in the first place," Wesley observed.

"Demons after money," Giles muttered. "Whatever happened to

the still beating heart of a virgin? No one has any standards anymore.”

Buffy arched an eyebrow.

“I was just saying...” Giles replaced his glasses on the bridge of his nose and cleared his throat. “Ascension...that’s not a term I’m familiar with.”

“Nor I,” Wesley commented.

Buffy rolled her eyes. “Well, that was a given...”

“There might be some books at the library...”

“Ascension sounds big with the power, and power seems to be Willow’s primary focus right now.” Especially since Buffy had been sucking hard in the friend department. “Didn’t you lend her most of your books?”

Giles shook his head. “I let her take home one, maybe two at a time. There are also some volumes of deeper magic that I keep in a secure location. With the rate at which she’s progressing I fear what might happen if she pushes herself to higher levels.”

She snorted. “Yeah, she might actually float erasers instead of pencils.”

“I’m serious, Buffy. Considering where she was in her studies this time last year, she has made remarkable progress. People with access to that kind of power tend to...” His eyes went hazy. “Jenny practiced her entire life and had only surpassed the stage Willow is at *right now* when Ang...when she died. Given Willow’s dedication...” He looked down, his throat working. The one-year anniversary of his girlfriend’s murder had only recently passed. He hadn’t said anything, of course, but he’d been touchy and distant.

Much like hers, but to a lesser degree. Giles had the decency not to let his emotions influence his behavior.

Faith broke the uncomfortable silence as only Faith could—faking a wide yawn and heading for the front door. “Well, L’s and G’s,” she drawled, “as much fun as this has been...it’s wicked early and I have better things to do than sit here and reminisce.” She locked her eyes on Buffy. “You know where to find me if all this hoopla starts to make sense, don’t yah, girlfriend?”

A weak nod. "Yeah. You Bronzing it?"

"That and then some." She shrugged. "Might as well. The night's still young, and tomorrow's not a school day. Well, no day's a school day, come to think of it. Not for me anyway. Ta."

"I really don't like her," Wesley mused the second she was gone.

Buffy sighed, pouting. "Responsibility sucks," she complained under her breath. "Faith parties and I'm stuck with the homework. Giles, I'm going home. It's been a long night. Movie and Wesley nearly-getting-almost threatened by a twenty-foot vamp with bear-like claws."

And Spike might be back in town, and you're not sure how to feel about that.

"I beg your—"

She shook her head as she headed for the door. "I'll see you on Monday. Don't hesitate to not call if something really boring happens."

Stepping outside was like surfacing after being under water too long. There had been too many surprises in one night—too much to consider. Bad sex movie. Faith's casual indifference toward the living. The demon's proposal. Wesley's loud shiner. The possibility that the bane of her existence was back in town and her hope that the possibility was true.

Though she so shouldn't be excited about that. She still had pieces to pick up. And who knew? Perhaps it wasn't Spike. There were plenty of vamps that went around without care for the property they destroyed. There were plenty of vamps that came and went. There were plenty...

Who left Watchers alive?

It might not be him.

Yeah...and maybe tomorrow you'll win the lottery, get the Nobel Prize, and be crowned the Queen of England.

Everything in the Land of Buffy was so irreversibly screwed up, and she didn't know how to begin fixing it.

Perhaps with a good night's sleep.



HE WOULD NOT LURK outside her window.

Spike was many things. A killer, a vampire, a slayer-killer, but he was not some gammy Angel-wannabe. He would not lurk outside her window and brood. He would not watch her when he knew he could not be seen. He would not reach in and caress her skin while she slept.

No, he refused to lurk.

Pacing outside her window was a completely different story.

Where was she? He'd given the cemeteries a quick once-over, and while the air smelled like her, he hadn't been able to pin her down. The infuriating bird had been on his heels every bloody step he'd taken the year before but the second he wanted to find her, she made with the disappearing act.

Of course, if she was done patrolling, that could mean she'd be home at any time. Would she scale the tree or go in the front door? Mum knew about her slaying now so the front door was the safest bet.

And what would happen if Buffy caught a glance of him pacing below her window? What was the step after that?

Bloody brilliant, mate, Spike scoffed, lighting up one of his last cigarettes. Come roarin' back into town, determined to steer clear of the chit long enough to see if she's even interested...and whaddya do? Go to her house straight away.

His plans never worked.

It didn't seem to matter, though. She wasn't home. Hell, he couldn't blame the girl. It was Friday night. While Sunnydale wasn't exactly a tourist destination, he seemed to remember the Bronze as being somewhat entertaining.

Full of blokes with pulses and others without. Those with massive forehead space and perfectly square jaws. Those who got to touch Buffy every day. Who got to kiss her. Who breathed her in every day.

A growl scratched at his throat. Fuck, he'd been a fool to return. Despite what she had said, Spike couldn't honestly expect the Slayer

to give a damn about him. He had known the minute he'd stepped away from her window those short weeks ago that returning would be the dumbest thing he could do. Leaving in the first place had been the idiot's way out—rendering her alone with her Slayer thoughts that reeked of nobility and Angel-prone googly eyes.

If he'd stayed, if he'd tried to suss out his feelings then along with her, what would have happened? Would she be with him tonight instead of grinding up against some pimply-faced schoolboy? Would they be trading barbs as fast as punches? Or would they be fucking each other blind?

He'd never know because, git that he was, he'd hightailed it.

Spike stamped out his cigarette and reached for another. He eyed the tree that led directly to her room. To her empty bed. Was it Angelish to climb up if she wasn't there? He couldn't remember Angel staring longingly into a vacant room that *smelled* of her, even in his not-so-soulful days. No, Angelus had always gone to her when he knew she was there. When he wanted to torment her with his presence.

Spike had no intention of tormenting Buffy. To enter the room that was saturated with her scent would be like waving a zebra carcass in front of a starved lion. Suppose he didn't want to leave? Suppose he got one of his bright ideas, stripped, and crawled into her bed?

Mmm...comfy bed...Buffy in comfy bed...Buffy naked in comfy bed...

Which was precisely why he shouldn't risk it. He hadn't yet composed what he wanted to say when he saw her again.

Sod it.

Spike climbed the tree. He knew he was going to. No sense dragging it out.

The window to her bedroom pushed open easily, and his senses were immediately bombarded with the essence of Buffy Summers. What he'd felt upon roaring back into town could not hope to compare To this—it was Slayer concentrate.

The room itself was so...cute. Elements of kid-dom were scattered

here and there. He helped himself inside, took a moment to marvel that the Slayer hadn't had the witch rescind his invite, and tried not to read too much into that because it meant rot. Instead, he approached the bed and picked up a stuffed pig with an amused grin. She had the weirdest taste. From the animals to the New Kids' posters. The text books to the scattered CD collection. He found it charming.

This was where she came when the vamps were dust. The air was hers. The space was hers. The bed was hers. He fancied he could see the indentation her body made in the mattress if he looked hard enough.

Personal. It felt personal being here. Standing in the place where she lived. His skin practically hummed.

An annoying but persistent voice in the back of his mind began chirping that this was wrong. Spike was invading her privacy, he was entering without permission. She would be livid if she found him here. The prat of a Watcher that the Council had sent over hadn't moved for quite some time after he'd hit the ground, even though Spike had barely tapped him. He wondered briefly how the Slayer would react to that. The story would spread soon of how they crossed paths and why. When she heard, there was no doubt that she would piece two and two together.

Then again, how much would the bloke remember?

Then something else occurred to him. Perhaps that was why Buffy was gone tonight. The Watcher had squealed and she was out there looking for him. Would she greet him with a stake or a kiss? Did they have to pretend to fight or could they leap right into shagging each other unconscious?

These questions really had to end. He was giving himself a headache.

Spike decided to make the visit brief. There was no sense dragging things out. The longer he stayed, the harder it'd be to leave. He inhaled as much of her air as he could, wanting to keep her in his mouth until he retired for the evening.

He turned, then paused as his eye caught on something. A

discarded rental box for *The Life of Brian* sat on the far corner of her dresser.

The Life of Brian.

And here he'd thought she hated Monty Python.

A grin tickled his lips. Maybe things weren't so bloody desperate after all.

Something else attracted his interest. There was a pile of dirty clothes in the corner. Spike quirked his head and followed his nose, and discovered, to his delight, a pair of discarded knickers. He plucked them up, held them to his face and inhaled her scent with a muffled moan. God, he had missed that. Raw, unadulterated Buffy. The same he had tasted and craved. Enough to fuel a thousand nights' worth of dreams, if nothing else. His cock twitched, and he knew it was time to go.

The Slayer's personals found their way into his back pocket. He returned to the window, then paused to glance over her room once more. Buffy was caught in that blessed stage between childhood and maturity. He often had to remind himself how young she was. The night they shared had shown him both the stuck-up teen and the woman she was destined to become. And both sides drove him batty.

Which is why you shouldn't've come back, he warned himself, slipping down the tree. *She's the Slayer, for God's sake! It's bad enough you can't kill the chit. Are you sayin' you're—*

No. That was a path he had not yet explored. One he didn't want to think about. Lusting was one thing. It was natural and just. Love...love was...

Outta the bloody question.

Spike sighed. Tomorrow he would attempt to see her. Try to establish communication, even if it lasted for only three seconds. He needed to know where he stood. This forced distance had to end. She was a drug, and the town was his supplier. Coming home, he'd admitted his addiction and he was in desperate need for a fix.

Or twenty.



SOMETHING WAS OFF.

Buffy stood in the doorway to her bedroom, visually scouring the landscape to see what was out of place. It looked like it had when she'd left, but it wasn't. Faint wisps of nicotine tickled her nose. Hints of leather and...was she imagining that? No, there was definitely a cigarette feel in here. Combined with the tinglies that were going stir-crazy in the pit of her stomach.

How long had Spike been here? What had he been looking for?

Why hadn't he stayed?

Buffy was vaguely aware that she should be furious at the intrusion, and she was sure she was, somewhere. But for now, at the end of an impossibly long night, all she felt was...empty.

No question about it anymore. The bleached bloodsucker was back in town. Spike was back, and he hadn't forgotten about her or what she'd said.

What they'd said to each other.

And damn, she had no idea what that meant for her.

WHEN THE NIGHT IS NEW

IT WAS QUIET, too quiet, and that made her nervous.

Spike had not yet shown himself, and that wiggled her out. True, only two days had passed since the night he'd plowed down the Sunnydale sign, but the guy was not known for his patience. How many of his plans had she undermined simply because he'd rushed something? Why wait now?

Then again, perhaps his patience deserved more credit than that. He had waited for months to regain the ability to walk and stewed even longer in the wheelchair after his legs had healed.

But this was different. Mitigating circumstances had intervened back then, and right now, all the circumstances were set. Despite anything she'd said to the contrary, Spike was intelligent. He made the frequent mistake of acting rashly, but it was obvious that he moved only when he knew he could handle the negative consequences of his actions.

It seemed more than peculiar that she would go two entire days without seeing him, now that she knew he was in town. The Spike she knew would have leaped out immediately, ready to fight or...well, something other than fight. The Spike she knew was not one to *wait*.

All of this made her nervous. She kept expecting him to pop out

from behind headstones and didn't know whether to feel relieved or disappointed when he didn't.

And then there was Angel. Or rather, avoiding Angel, something she'd become rather good at. It was so strange to think about how their relationship had deteriorated in just a matter of months. From mourning him to trying to move on, to the shock of finding him alive and the cautious dance they'd done around each other, trying to negotiate their relationship as friends. Until Spike had blown into town and told them that *friends* was something they'd never be.

Then on Christmas Eve, begging with him to not meet sunlight. Telling him she still loved him, sobbing it, and the pure relief that had followed when they had decided to throw caution to the wind and be together—**BuffyandAngel™**, accessories sold separately. Prepared to link hands, face disapproval, and be together—albeit always at arm's length

And that had seemed to be that. Up until her birthday.

Until Spike.

Until she'd literally fucked her enemy, and her own mind in the process.

But even if Spike hadn't shown up then... Well, it wasn't like her relationship with Angel had ever been perfect, no matter how much she loved him. No matter how much she tried to pretend otherwise, knowing that they could never share more than a few kisses bothered her. She hated that it bothered her, but that didn't make the bother stop. And she'd been willing to put up with it because she had loved him. There was no doubt in her mind that she loved him still. It was only now that she could see that there would be others. There would be love like she never knew, but nothing quite like what she'd had with Angel. The love she felt for him now was not the passion that had initially drawn them together. If it had been, Spike wouldn't have gotten close enough to sniff her, much less...what he'd done. True, she had fought it, but her actions of that night had not been those of a girl who believed she belonged to one man for all eternity. At least, not a girl who believed she belonged to Angel.

And there it was. Angel was already her ex-boyfriend. She'd

moved on. There was some residual sadness, of course, but she didn't love him. Not like she had. She loved the memory of the guy he'd been once upon a time, but even then, the memory wasn't enough for her. The guy in the memory belonged to a girl that no longer existed. She wasn't the sort of person who could love Angel. Not anymore.

Was that all that Spike had been to her? A wake-up call? No, it couldn't be something so cold and simple. He had haunted nearly every waking thought since his departure. Her body ached for his touch even as her mind rebelled at the thought. Because whatever else, she wasn't sure she could ever love Spike. He was a killer, a soulless killer. Like Angel had been.

Just like Angel.

Only not, because soulless Angel would have killed her by now. If soulless Angel had been with her the night of her birthday, he'd have kept her alive just long enough to make her beg. He'd have spent the evening raping her, tearing out chunks of flesh, and laughing in the face of her pain.

Soulless Spike had had every opportunity to do the same. Instead, he'd made small-talk. Asked her about her mother and friends. Every time he'd tried to work himself up to kill her, he'd melted into her instead.

Soulless Spike was safer than Angel in either incarnation. He held nothing back and expected nothing less than the same. And that, more than anything, was what she'd carried with her after that night. Spike had been all demon and her soul had been enough for both of them.

That shouldn't have been possible, but dammit, here she stood.

By the time Buffy made it to the school library that day, her brain was throbbing. She made it two steps in and wished immediately that she'd just headed home, but too late—she'd been spotted.

"There was one reference to the Ascension," Giles said by way of greeting, "in the Marenschadt Text. Not much, mind you, but significant."

Buffy nodded, though her gaze was drawn to Wesley's shiner. It had grown worse over the weekend, but it was still just a bruise.

Spike had left him alive. That's not something soulless Angel would have done.

"So," she said, forcing her thoughts away from vampires and her love life. "Ascension in the negative? I didn't catch the demon on patrol this weekend, but—"

"It would be very wise for you to track him down," Giles agreed. "Before someone gets word that the books are in his possession. I would hate to think of what might happen should they fall into the hands of the Mayor. I didn't find much, mind you, but I found enough. There is a reference to the journal of Desmond Kane...a pastor in a town called Sharpsville. In May of 1723, he wrote, 'Tomorrow is the Ascension. God help us all.' And that was the last anyone heard."

"Of Kane?" Wesley asked.

"Of Sharpsville. It more or less disappeared."

Buffy pursed her lips. Nothing like a cold dose of apocalypse to put things in perspective. "So, I'm thinking this is one concert I don't need to see."

"You should meet with the demon, Buffy. If he has the books—"

"And I'm getting the money from where? Hello, unemployed high school student here. Do *you* have five thousand dollars?"

"It's wiser to find the demon sooner rather than later," Wesley stated with his trademark pomposity. "Perhaps persuade him to *lend* us the books free of charge."

"You didn't see the demon, Wes," Buffy replied. "He wasn't exactly on the up and up of high-flying patrician society. He wants cash, and he's looking for a sell, not to become the world's first demon library service that delivers."

"I believe he would have an enlightened point of view if, say, his life were at stake," Wesley countered. "Perhaps if you exercise Faith's more notable persuasion techniques..."

There really was no disputing that point, much as she would have liked. "Yeah, yeah, I hear you." Buffy sighed. Seemed she wouldn't be staying long after all. "I don't suppose either one of you saw Faith over the weekend? She's been MIA girl since Friday night."

Giles narrowed his eyes. "Are you suggesting Faith would suddenly develop the presence of mind to report to us following her patrols?"

"You're right. No flying pigs in tonight's forecast. My bad."

"It's better that you find Faith," Wesley said. "The demon needs to be located, and fast. Given the Mayor's resources, it's safe to say he might get there first if we do not act quickly."

There was no denying that. With a mute nod, Buffy turned to head out of the library. She had checked Faith's usual haunts over the weekend with no success, but the other Slayer knew not to stray too far from sight, lest the Council be brought back into the mix. It was only a matter of time.

And, if anything, looking for Faith and hunting down a demon would be less confusing than what she had been tormenting herself over for the past two days. Spike's thoughts were too muddled. There was no sense in beating herself up about it if he wasn't going to seek her out.

Famous last words, a pesky voice warned.



"FAITH." There was no reason to mask the shock in his voice. While Angel was accustomed to a host of late-night visitors, she had not approached him since her failed intervention. The consequences of their last heart-to-heart had damaged the tentative understanding between them, and he had not attempted to rekindle it.

Which was why he was so pleased that she'd sought him out.

Pleased for about ten seconds before she stepped forward and the scent of blood hit the air.

"Angel." Faith's voice shook. "I didn't mean to intrude, but I got nowhere else to go. Look, I hate asking for help, but I'm asking, 'cause I'm in trouble. I'm in trouble of the extremely bad variety."

"It's okay," he said without thinking, knowing already that it wasn't.

"No, it's really not. It's a couple county lines over from 'okay.' Believe me."

A sigh rolled off his shoulders. "Look, just talk. I'm not going to judge... I really can't. Start from the beginning."

The look that crossed her face was dazed, almost maniacal. "Mind if I skip past the 'mom never loved me' part and get right to it? I'm scaring myself."

"I know the feeling."

"Yeah. That's why I came to you. I don't wanna get all twelve-steppy, but remember what you told me, that killing people would make me feel like some kind of a god?"

The whiff of blood dancing through the air suddenly assaulted his senses with a powerful blow. Her hands were in view, covered in grit and stained in red. He'd known it wasn't human from first smell, but the sight worried him all the same.

"It's not human if that's what you're thinking," she muttered. "Not that that makes me feel any better or this guy any less dead."

The way her voice cracked told him all he needed to know. Human or not, the demon hadn't deserved whatever she'd done to him.

Angel took her arm and guided her to the sofa. "Faith, you need help," he said, cradling her hands. "You can't do this alone."

"I know. For real now, I'm scared. Scared of what I am...what I'm turning into." Her eyes burned into his. "Cold-blooded straight up killer. Like you."

Well, that stung, but this wasn't about him. "Not like me. I didn't have a choice. You do, Faith. You can stop this."

"Believe me, I don't wanna end up the way everybody said I would. Dead or alone or a loser."

"No, you don't have to."

There was defeat in her tone. If there was one thing he couldn't stand, it was defeat. Defeat wasn't for the strong. He'd fought his demon for almost a full century, and though he'd wanted to quit more times than he could count, he hadn't let that want defeat him.

"Maybe it's too late for me," she whispered. Her lower lip quivered. She was close to tears.

"It's not."

"Angel...I'm so scared."

The next thing he knew, she was in his arms, clutching at him as though he was her lifeline. And maybe he was. Maybe that was what he could be for her. A lifeline. The thing that kept her from slipping further into the dark.

But then she pulled back and brushed her lips against his. The contact was so light, so fleeting, that it could have been accidental. Could have been, but he knew it wasn't.

Angel snapped. "Whoa, Faith. Hold on." He grasped her wrists from where they were linked around his neck and secured them in her lap. "I'm here for you. I am...but not like that. I'm with Buffy."

"You're with Buffy," she echoed dully. "With Buffy. Of course. Well, *bully* for Buffy. Are you sure *she* knows that? Huh? You're with Buffy, but is Buffy with *you*? Honestly, Angel. You're pretty, but not exactly the brightest crayon in the box."

Angel couldn't help it—he flinched. There was no sense denying it. Every time he reached for Buffy, she withdrew. And he'd understood at first, or he thought he had. Spending the evening with Spike had to have left a mark. She'd had his fangs in her throat and her wrist—she'd realized, for the first time perhaps, that to vampires she was food. Being around him had to remind her of that on some level.

Then again, she'd faced worse. She'd faced *much* worse.

She'd faced *him*.

Still, he couldn't let Faith know how deeply the barb had cut. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, you gotta be kidding me!" Faith leaped to her feet and began pacing. "Come on. I know you love the girl, but you're not deaf and blind. Little Miss Perfect Buff hasn't been the same since the you-know-when. Right? Isn't that when this started? The mood swings, the distancing, the holdin' back on the lip-action. I was *there* two nights ago when you got out of that movie. Sweetie, I hate to break it to you, but she has *not* been thinkin' of you as she uses her slayer

muscles to get herself off. I'd know. And you know what I'm thinkin', 'cause you're in the same damn boat. I'm thinkin' five-foot-ten of the blond persuasion. I'm thinkin' the *exact* same thing you and everyone else has been thinkin' since that night. Why don't you come out and admit it?"

Those words cut, too, echoing fears he'd done his damndest to bury. "Faith, this isn't the issue—"

"Then it needs to *become* the issue! You, King Wes, and all the grubby little Scoobies have been flockin' to me like *I* have some sorta problem. So yeah. I killed a guy. Accidents happen." Faith snapped her mouth shut as though she'd realized too late what she'd said. She was quiet for a beat, swallowed, then continued, more subdued, "I killed a guy, and I feel shitty about it. I do. I really do. But I'm getting just a little fed up with everyone focusing on putting *me* through rehab when it's Buffy who's banging the undead. The not-so-safe undead. The sort that's *not* you."

Angel jerked his head back. "You have no right to make that sort of presumption."

"No right? I have no RIGHT? I sure as hell *do* have a right! All your little girlfriend has done since I came to this shit-pit town is judge me. Let's count the ways that Faith is a screw-up and Buffy is queen. And yeah, she's good at what she does. She fucking *has* to be. But she's not perfect. She's far from it."

"I know that—"

"Do you? Do you really? Is it because of common sense or because you know in your gut what really went down that night?" Faith leaned forward. "You can't stand there and tell me you haven't been thinking the *exact* same thing ever since she and your vamp-sprout got locked up together. Come on, Angel. I'm here to listen to you. Why don't you ever listen to me? Huh?"

It would have been easy to shut this down. One word. One syllable. Step away from Faith and remember that *she* was the one in need of help. That *her* problems were much more complicated than whatever was happening with his relationship. However, the drive to do so, to say that, wasn't there. For the last few weeks, he'd stood aside as

Buffy distanced herself from everyone in her life. He'd watched as she'd claimed that everything was all right, all the while knowing the truth was far more complicated, and had the power to hurt. Looking at Faith now was an eye-opener, and he couldn't pretend anymore.

So he said, "All right."



IT WAS GROWING HARDER and harder for Buffy to ignore the fact that the lower the sun sank in the sky, the closer she drew to the three-day mark. Three whole days since Spike had allegedly burst into town, and there was still no word from him. Nothing aside from Wesley's injury and a pair of purloined panties to suggest that he was in town at all. No Spike. No sign of Faith or the creepy demon that wanted to sell books.

Her life was just screwy.

With nothing else to do, Buffy had set on her way to Angel's, because if anyone could help her track down the missing slayer or the deal-making demon, it was the human-shaped bloodhound. No matter that she had no idea what to say to him or that they hadn't talked since their disastrous date night.

These days, Buffy thought nothing could surprise her. Turned out she was wrong. She was close to the mansion when she saw them—Angel and Faith, Faith and Angel, talking in hushed whispers in the doorway. Standing close to each other, really close. Kissing close.

Anger shocked her system. How long had Faith been here? An hour? Two? All day? Perhaps they had spent the weekend together. She knew it wasn't right, feeling betrayed. Hadn't she been doing that all month? But this...this was beyond comprehension. This was sick and wrong and it was time to go.

It was Spike's fault. Everything was Spike's fault. If he hadn't come back...if he hadn't *messed* things up...

Well, she'd be deadlocked in a passionless relationship with Angel. Not so different than where she was now, really. Only she'd be without Spike-shaped lusty dreams to get her through the day.

It irritated her that her reason for being mad at him had just turned into gratitude.

Buffy sighed heavily and turned on her heel. Other than betrayal, she felt nothing. And it wasn't *my boyfriend's cheating on me* betrayal. It was *Angel's found redemption in another slayer* betrayal—like the special thing she could have given him, with or without a romantic relationship, had been snatched from under her nose.

I just wanna go home. Draw a bath, snag some historical porn, and forget.

But then she looked up and the bottom of her stomach dropped. Standing not five feet away was Spike.

Spike.

"Hello, love," he said. "Fancy runnin' into you here of all places."

Buffy opened her mouth and tried to reply, but words wouldn't come. She just stared at him, soaking him in. As though he'd vanish if she dared blink.

Spike tilted his head slightly and took a step forward.

Buffy swallowed hard, concentrated, and forced her voice to work. "Spike..."

A soft smile tickled his mouth as he ate up the ground between them. He was close now. So close. So close that his scent filled her nostrils and his unnecessary breaths fanned her skin. He lifted a hand brush loose strands of hair from her face. When he spoke again, his voice was low. And now all she could do was stand and stare. Just a few feet away from Angel's mansion, where he was chatting with Faith. This was no good.

"You gonna stand there all night catchin' flies?" Spike drawled in a low, husky tone, eyes roaming over her without shame. It made her shiver; she had seen that hungry, feral gleam before. "Or are you gonna welcome me back...good and proper?"

That snapped her out of it, and she remembered she was angry with him. Angry for the weeks that had *not* gone by quickly. The mess he had left for her to clean up. The way she still burned for him when all she wanted to do was forget. And now he was touching her. And she was letting him.

Buffy glared at him, not realizing she had moved to strike until her fist connected with his jaw and she watched him barrel backward and landed on his ass. A shiver of satisfaction shimmied up her spine. God, that had felt good.

Only now he was angry too.

“Bloody hell, woman!” Spike all but shouted, reminding her all too quickly of Angel’s proximity. “So much for giving us a welcome back snog. Guess I shouldn’t have expected as much. Slayer back in full motion, ready for a round of fisticuffs. Fancy a dance, then?”

Hell yes, she wanted to dance. Right here and now, with her fists and legs and mouth and tongue and all the other parts of her that he’d touched that night. And she would have leaped into it, launched herself at him and given him the bruising he deserved, had the night not split with Angel’s voice.

“Buffy?”

She swung her head to the walk, the sound of Angel’s footsteps only then registering to her ears. He would turn that corner at any second and find her here. Find them both.

She looked back to Spike, who remained on the ground, studying her with an intensity that made her legs tremble.

Dammit all.

This was not going to be her night.

EMPTY-HANDED

IT WAS the longest moment of her life, and she had had some long ones. Standing there as Angel drew nearer and Spike just stared at her like whatever choice she made would make him cry.

No. This couldn't happen right now. Not like this.

She tore her gaze from Spike and forced her feet toward the sound of her approaching boyfriend. The second she collided with Angel, she placed her hands on his shoulders and pushed him back the other way. All the way back to the mansion.

"Buffy!" Angel snapped, grabbing her wrists and. "What are you doing?"

That was a perfectly reasonable question, but she had no answer. Instead, she threw what had to be the least conspicuous look over her shoulder to the place Spike had been and released a long breath when she found it empty.

Okay, so disaster averted.

Temporarily.

"Buffy!"

She started, shook her head and turned back to Angel. "Sorry. I'm sorry," she said like she hadn't just manhandled him back into his own house. "I was walking and came by and—hey—there you were.

All...stand-in-the-doorish. Figured it might be nice to drop in and say hey.”

Angel gawked at her. She couldn’t blame him. But she also couldn’t look at him, so she looked around the room, desperate, and noted the book sitting on his coffee table. “Oh, what’s that you’re reading? We’re having to read *A Streetcar Named Desire* for English right now. Have you read it? I mean, *of course* you’ve read it. You probably remember when it was published. God, gotta love Tennessee Williams. It *is* Tennessee Williams who wrote it, right? There are so many, I—”

Rambling. Not good. While it was true that Angel was accustomed to her rambling, he also knew what it meant. Still, that didn’t convince her idiot mouth to stop yapping.

“—and Vivien Leigh. She was just...well, to quote Keanu: *whoa*. Played Blanche great, though you really can’t compare to Scarlet O’Hara, can you? I don’t think she—”

“Buffy,” he said again, an edge to his voice, his patience tested. “What are you doing here?”

She blinked and the panic that had been fueling her at last began to die. “I was...patrolling,” she replied. Then stopped. There was no reason she *shouldn’t* be here. It wasn’t as though she had come thinking that she would run into Spike. Or possibly interrupt a liaison with Faith.

“Patrolling.” Angel perked his eyebrows and crossed his arms. “At my house?”

“Well, I’m not saying this is the best place to take my business, but I kinda just wandered over here and...wait, why is this even an issue? I thought you’d be happy to see me.”

Angel looked at her for a long minute. “After this weekend, I wasn’t expecting you to try and visit me anytime soon.” He glanced down and sighed. “You know, I’m tired. Buffy, I am so, so tired. I’m tired of dancing at arm’s length with you. I’m tired of walking around on eggshells whenever we talk. I’m tired of pretending that everything is okay. So rather than stand here and prolong something that is making us both miserable, I’m going to be painfully upfront.”

Buffy swallowed her heart in her throat. "What do you mean?"

He shot her a look that told her full well that he knew that *she* knew damn well what he was talking about. "I've tried and I've watched you push me away. I've *let* you push me away. God knows I've wanted you to let me in and just *tell* me that everything I worry about is nonsense. That you wouldn't...but I can't. I'm going to ask you up front—once—and I want a straight answer."

Fresh panic shot up her spine, but she wouldn't let him see it. She couldn't—even if she was about to say something profoundly stupid. Even if she was about to open the gate. "Fine. I mean, okay. Okay. Take your best shot."

"What happened between you and Spike?"

There it was. The question. She'd known it was coming, but damn, it still knocked her off balance.

"What do you mean?" she asked, feigning ignorance.

Angel scowled, taking a step forward. "Oh, don't do that, Buffy. You know exactly what I'm talking about. You. Spike. Birthday ritual. I want the truth. What happened?"

"What do you mean, what happened? I've told you what happened. Did Faith say something?"

"How did you know Faith was here?"

"I saw her here. With you. You looked all kinds of cozy."

Angel just stared at her for a moment, then he was angry. No question about it. He was angry—furious—and though he had every right to be, seeing it astonished her just the same. Angel had spent far too much time not caring these past few weeks. Letting her skate by on fragments of truth interspersed with full-out lies. Apparently, that time was over.

"Stop it!" he snapped. "This has nothing to do with Faith! This is about you and me. You can't keep shutting me out. I'm still here and I think I've been a pretty good sport about this."

"You are so off base now."

"Really? Maybe I'm not thinking that clearly. Maybe I am a little off my game, but I don't think so." He was so close to bursting into game face now that even she could taste it. "But as long as you refuse

to tell me what happened...why you let him bite you, why you let him go..." Angel broke and shook his head again, attempting to rein in some control. "I can't be with you when you're like this."

I can't be with you, period.

That would be the best thing she could do at the moment. Stop hedging and make the damn cut. Do the necessary thing, the thing they both saw coming. But there was that part of her—the part that would always, in some way, belong to Angel—that wanted to hold on. That mourned everything they'd lost last year. Not just the way they'd felt about each other, but the potential for what it had never gotten a chance to become. The place they had been going before his soul had been ripped out. They'd barely had any time together. And it could've been something—something good.

But here she was, ready to leave him for the *idea* of another man. Because Spike had shown her, if nothing else, that she could never fully trust Angel. The shadow of his monster would consume her whole and leave nothing behind.

And she was tired of being *handled*. Tired of decisions being made on her behalf. Tired of her choices not mattering.

Tired of all of it.

"I'm like this," Buffy said at last. She felt so little when she looked at him. There was nothing worth saving. "Deal with it."

"Just... Buffy, just leave."

Not too long ago, those words would have crushed her. But Buffy wasn't that girl anymore.

She had nothing to fight for here, so she did as he asked.



THE FASTEST ROUTE home was through Restfield, so that's the route she took at a fast clip. So fast, in fact, that she didn't have time to skid to a halt before colliding against Spike's chest. The forward momentum sent him to the ground and her along with him.

"Oof," Buffy said, planting her hands on his chest and trying to sit up. "Did you do that on purpose?"

"Can't deny I like it when you're on top, love." He grinned, gripping her hips to keep her from standing. "Seems you oughta keep an eye on where you're going, yeah? Never know what sort of nasties are waitin' for you..."

Great. He was doing that thing with his voice that she liked.

"Yeah," she replied, "and you're walking proof of that, aren't you?"

"My, my, aren't we in a snit tonight?" His eyes danced and she was *not* going to flush, dammit. "Though I gotta say that you made it out here a lot sooner than I'd expected. What happened? Things not go well with your big brooding hulk?"

This was so not the way to have a conversation—any conversation—with Spike, but he didn't seem willing to let her up anytime soon. Buffy wiggled against him, ignoring the way he groaned and *definitely* ignoring the hard length suddenly pressed against the apex of her legs.

"Let me up," she said, cursing herself when she sounded more needy than angry.

"Why?" Spike lifted a hand to caress her cheek. "I'm all comfy, here."

"Well, I'm not." Buffy flushed. She was such a liar. "Emphasis on the *not*."

"Watch it. You'll ruin a bloke's ego."

"All the better. Spike, let me up!" Ignoring, of course, that since he only had one hand on her now, and that she was astride him, that if she wanted to get up, she had the means to do so.

"No." His eyes sparkled with defiance, and before she could protest, he raised his head and nuzzled her neck softly. Her eyes fluttered shut and a gasp escaped her lips. A gasp transformed into an all-out moan when his tongue darted out to taste her skin.

"You're so warm," he murmured against her. "Christ, Buffy, do you have any idea how warm you are?"

It was the use of her name that did it. Jarred her back to herself. Spike the enemy didn't call her by her name. Spike her lover did.

And she could not go there again. Not tonight, not after Angel, and definitely not like this.

"Let me go," Buffy said, pushing harder at his chest. "I mean it."

This time she did. And when he pulled away to look at her, she knew he saw it too for the hurt that flashed across his face.

"So," he growled as she climbed to her feet. "That's it, then? Little taste, little tease, and you run back to your sodding broody bear."

"Spike, you have eyes, right?" she replied, dusting herself off. "'Cause the way I see it, I'm running *away* from Angel."

"Yeah. Excuse me if that fails to reassure."

She arched a cool eyebrow at him. "I don't seem to recall promising you anything."

The hurt on his face hardened into anger. And for a second, she thought that might have been it—a door closed on whatever they'd shared a few weeks back for good. But then the anger faded too, and she was left not knowing what to think.

"No," he agreed softly. "You didn't."

Buffy stared at him, at a loss. Left with nothing but instinct, she reacted the only way she knew how. "Oh, don't *even* do that."

"Do what?"

"Make like I'm the bad guy. I told you—"

"Know damn well what you told me, *pet*. I've played it over and over, trying to talk myself outta comin' here, because I knew exactly what I'd find." He scoffed and paced a step away. "But did it stop me? Hell no. Had to come. Had to see you. Had to prove to myself that the girl I touched that night didn't really exist."

"What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?"

Spike scowled at her but didn't immediately reply. He dug his hands into his duster pocket and fished out a cigarette. "Means I knew it. I knew it the minute I started. Bloody knew it, but did that stop me? 'Course not." His eyes found hers as he lit up. "I knew you'd be like this."

"Like what?"

"Like this! Little Miss Stake-Up-Her-Arse Slayer. Giving me the brush-off when all I bloody well did is what you asked."

Buffy released a shaky breath. He was right, of course, but that just pissed her off. She didn't want him to be right—she didn't want

to face that her life had been in a state of constant hell because of a choice she'd made. A choice that had seemed right at the time, seemed right *still* given her state of mind these days. She'd needed time to figure things out but time didn't work that way. There wasn't a magical alarm clock someone could set on decision-making. Understanding what she did now about her relationship with Angel hurt enough. Trying to factor in how Spike fit into the equation was a different beast altogether.

Because Spike was part of the problem. Spike being all demon but still looking at her the way he was now. Knowing that it was possible for demons to love after all, but it hadn't been possible for Angel when it had counted. That everything she'd told herself and been told about vampires and souls was a big fat lie.

"You act," Spike continued softly, "like it meant nothing to you."

Yeah, she knew she did. Because if she let on just how much that night had meant, it would mean letting go of everything she'd once believed to be true. And that was a tall order for anyone to fill.

It scared the crap out of her.

So Buffy did what Buffy had done every day since Spike had barreled out of town. She lied her ass off.

"Who says it did?"

There was nothing for a long beat. Hurt bloomed in his eyes but he made no move to lash out. To shove it back at her the way a vampire should. At that moment, he looked very much like a wounded man. A man that could be destroyed with something as simple as words.

Spike's voice was hoarse when he spoke. "You did," he reminded her. "You said that it—"

A taste. She had a taste of it now. That blunt, raw hurt, and she wanted more. Buffy quivered with need but she didn't allow herself time to stop and consider. She wanted to see him angry. She *needed* to see him angry. She needed to see that he was just a vampire. That the world as she'd known it hadn't been up-ended on her birthday. That he was indeed simply a reason her relationship with Angel had failed. Not the root of why it had been doomed to fail from the start.

“Yeah,” she spat. “I say a lot of things I regret later, but I didn’t honestly expect you to take them seriously. That’s kind of pathetic. I mean, what do you take me for, anyway?”

Silence for a long, long moment. No telling flicker of the eyes. No angry growl. No shoving her away or sinking his fangs into her throat. No sign that he was a vampire. He wasn’t going to make her bleed, dammit.

“All of it?” he asked at last, taking a step forward. “Everythin’ you told me that night was a bunch of rot?”

Spike seemed to be considering, walking forward again, and she couldn’t stand it. The fact that, for whatever reason, she couldn’t hide from him. He saw through all the barriers she placed, every brick she laid. He saw enough to know that her words weren’t entirely her own.

They stared at each other for long seconds, and she couldn’t keep from shivering when he brushed a few loose locks of hair from her eyes.

“Is that so?” he asked, voice distant.

She fought to remember what they were discussing and failed miserably. All that mattered was that he was here. He was here at last, touching her, filling the void that had all but swallowed her whole. Making something right after the weeks of just *wrong*. And she loved it.

“I hope not.” His mouth was on her throat then, his hands hovering over her arms, not touching, and her resistance cracked. He nibbled softly on her skin, but his fangs kept their distance. There was nothing bloody or monstrous about the way he touched her—just all Spike, all man. As she remembered.

Buffy’s lips parted and a loud gasp tore at her throat, and when his teeth tugged at her ear, she all but surrendered.

“Cause I’ve thought about it,” he was murmuring. “Every bloody night.”

It wasn’t much of a battle, she realized. Nothing more than the nasty barbs turned back and forth. Those that had cut more than she would consider. This was new; she wasn’t used to this. To feeling the need to heal the hurt before she was done inflicting it.

And he made sure. He made damn sure that it was *her* mouth attacking *his*, *her* hands reacquainting themselves with *his* body. Spike allowed her to explore for what seemed like forever before melting into her. Before running his hands over her body, cupping her breasts and stroking her nipples through layers of clothing, capturing her moans in his mouth before venturing his left hand south. She broke for a gasp of air and craned her head back, allowing him access to her throat once more. A throat his fangs had slid inside but never torn. The hand at her breast became bolder, teasing her nipple until it ached for something more. And when he bent to nip at it, even with fabric separating her flesh from his mouth, she knew she wasn't going to last. Here in the cemetery with the air around them silent save for their shared sighs, as need and want melted into one forbidden entity. When he finished toying with her breast, he skated his mouth up and captured her lips once more. There was nothing to fight. Not when he kissed her like that.

For whatever reason, that thought broke through the lust-addled haze, and she numbly realized what she was doing. What she was allowing *him* to do. The faint voice that she had shoved to the back of her mind finally screamed loud enough to be heard over her traitorous hormones. With a strangled cry, she pulled back, shaking her head.

"No," she said, right before drawing him down for another kiss. "No." She kissed him again. Have mercy, she could drown in him. Whiskey and cigarettes. Leather and danger. Everything that she shouldn't want. "Spike, stop...no!"

She forced her hands to relax—to stop gripping him to her so tightly—and managed to put some actual air between them. Air that was heavy with her gasps and his heavy breaths. Breaths he didn't need to take. Breaths that shouldn't be his.

Buffy waited until she knew she could trust her voice. Until she knew that she wouldn't throw herself into his arms again. "This is wrong," she said. "I was stupid for letting it happen once—"

"Not once," Spike snapped, still panting. So odd that he would

need more time to recuperate than she did. "That night lasted forever, Buffy. And forever wasn't long enough."

"It doesn't matter. I told you I needed time, and I've made my decision. Stay away from me."

There was a long beat as he considered her, his head tilted. "Is that what you really want?" he asked, taking a step closer.

Closing distances equals bad decisions and more making out... and she didn't want to do that. *Uh huh*. "Y-yes."

The gleam in his eyes told her well that he knew otherwise. "You mean you haven't wanted me here all along?" Spike asked. "Touching you?" He ran a hand up her arm, gently caressed the swell of her breast, then dropped it to pull at the button of her trousers. "Kissing you?" He nipped at her lips, grinning when she whimpered. He took that as permission and slipped his fingers inside her slacks, rubbing her pussy through the fabric of her panties. He wrapped his other arm around her waist to hold her to him when her knees buckled. Lips and teeth on her again.

Oh, this was not good. Well, it was, but not when she was trying to tell him to leave her alone.

A rumble at her ear. Spike tracking the lobe with his tongue before murmuring, "Making you growl out those sexy little mewls. Mmmm. God, baby. I missed you."

Buffy's body screamed even before she pulled away. Not that it did any good. He chased her mouth with his own. It was then that anger returned long enough to seize possession of her lust-addled mind, and she shoved him to the ground. "No!" she barked. "God! Stay away from me!"

Spike was on his feet again the next instant, and she saw that he knew he had crossed a line. "Buff—"

"You wanna know the truth?" she spat. She was fully aware of what would happen if she let him talk and she couldn't let that happen. So she lashed. "Not once. I haven't thought about you once."

And there it was. The pain she'd wanted. There in his eyes.

"In fact," she continued before she could lose her nerve, "you

weren't that hard to forget. Don't make this any more awkward than it needs to be. Just get out of my town."

For the final time that night, she waited for him to lash out. To roar. To strike her. To be a monster. Anger flared in his eyes, yes, but it was a different kind of anger. A kind she knew all too well. Anger that existed solely to mask hurt.

"Right then, Slayer," he said, his voice shaking, his eyes steely. "You want me to be the Big Bad? I'll bloody give it to you. Just remember at the end of this that you asked for it."

The words were a hollow victory, for they weren't emphasized with a lunge or a scream. Instead, he turned on his heel took off at a fast clip across the cemetery. The thought occurred to her that she ought to follow, keep him from unleashing his hurt on someone who didn't deserve it. But she saw, when he turned, that he wasn't headed toward town, rather farther from it. Deeper into the graveyard, among the headstones and the rest of the dead.

A cat slinking off to lick its wounds.

Wounds that she'd given him just to watch him bleed.

So who's the real monster, Buffy? Are you satisfied yet?

Buffy forced herself to start walking. When she got home, she told herself, she could cry.

DROWNING IN MISERY

BUFFY KNEW she was in for a sleepless night. At first, she thought she could use insomnia to her benefit—catch up on homework or get a couple of chapters ahead in her English class. Give her a good chance to shock the hell out of Willow.

But she couldn't focus on anything, and it was her own damn fault. Every nerve in her body screamed at her to track down Spike and apologize for...well, she had quite the list.

Spike wasn't making things easy, though. He was being purposefully unvampire-like when she very much needed him to be a monster. If he wanted, he could come to her house and kill her while she slept. There was no reason for him not to. She had rejected him, talked down to him, essentially told him he was the last thing she wanted. His eyes had burned with anger and he'd spat out a threat, but he had not acted on it and she knew he wouldn't. Why? There was nothing keeping him out of her house. He'd made no promise to her. He was a vampire. She was the Slayer. In twisted vampiric logic, he had every right to lash out. To act like the demon he was.

More so. He was William the Bloody. Slayer of slayers. The fact that he *hadn't* tried to kill her after that argument left her more than

dazed. Rather, it *should* have left her dazed. It didn't. And that hurt worse than anything she could have said.

It further solidified the difference between Spike and Angel. What a difference a soul really made.

So she was unable to sleep all because of the random appearance of her one-night stand. Spike just *had* to show up with his stupid eyes and his stupid hands and his stupid voice and his stupid humanity that he wasn't supposed to have because he didn't have a stupid soul...

Buffy groaned and flopped on her bed in defeat.

*All those stupid parts add up to a stupid vampire who will never touch you again because you had to open your stupid mouth. And don't even pretend **that** doesn't bother you. They might have been stupid lies that shouldn't have hurt his stupid feelings in the first place, but look at where that presumption got you.*

It was too much. There would be no more *taking* of this. She had to talk to someone, get outside perspective, or she'd drive herself mad.

This was a job for a best friend. She only hoped Willow was still interested in the position.



THE ROOM WAS BEGINNING to spin and that was just fine with him.

Spike knew how to enjoy a really good kill. How the blood of a slayer tasted when she was hot off a battle. How the blood of a slayer tasted when she's just plain *hot*. Most importantly, how many shots of Jack Daniels it took to drown out the image of a specific slayer, and surrender himself completely to a drunken stupor.

Well, it didn't necessarily have to be Jack Daniels. It didn't matter what the bartender placed in front of him, just as long as it was strong and washed the taste of Buffy from his mouth. Until thought and reason abandoned him, and the endless echo of her words became nothing more than white noise.

He had just started drinking, though. The night was young.

Spike had tried for anger. After all, he'd never had trouble holding on to his rage. Not until tonight. Why was it that the one emotion he needed was so far out of range? He reached and stretched and tackled and wrestled it, but it escaped him all the same. So bloody frustrating. Even with everything she'd said, he couldn't muster a real good burning fury. The sort that leveled pissant town like this one.

But there was nothing but hurt. He was rooted in hurt. Born there. God, this had to stop. First Drusilla and Angelus, then Drusilla and Chaos Demon, and now the Slayer with...her Buffyness. Love's bitch all the way. He had an odd approach to proving himself right.

And he had seen it coming. From the moment he'd run his precious car into the bloody welcome-home sign, he'd known she would be like this. He knew that every wall he'd broken down that night would be up again. She'd be guarding her precious self from feeling things that no *decent* slayer should feel.

And even before that. Lying with her that glorious night. Listening to her talk, knowing that her plans would never come to fruition, even if she believed what she'd told him. The promise that what they had had meant something to her. That her relationship with Angel wasn't what it used to be, and she had acted on something *she* wanted rather than an oddly developed case of Stockholm Syndrome.

Spike had offered that morning to end it. He'd offered because he knew that when he came back, this would be his welcoming committee. He'd offered but she'd declined. She'd nearly cried at the notion that he'd never return, and the knowledge had filled him with such relief that for a minute, for a *split second*, he'd thought that all might end well.

Not bloody so.

However, despite all the nastiness, there was something there. Something that spoke for every word she *hadn't* said tonight. Buffy had spent the last few weeks deliberately talking herself out of some-

thing, else she would not have let him as close as she had tonight before the name-calling began.

“Stupid bint thinks she’s better than me,” he snarled before downing another shot. “Just because she has friends and family and people who love her and...and...all right, so she’s better than me.” He glared at his glass. “What gives her the bloody nerve to be better than me?”

Another shot. Another drink. A grumble. Damn. His thoughts were still coherent. He needed more alcohol. No, the bartender looked to actually have a conscience about this sort of thing. For the first time that evening, Spike questioned the wisdom of scheduling his pity-party at a pub that wasn’t Willy’s, but knew overall that it was better this way. When he got good and drunk, he tended to talk. A lot. It wouldn’t be good if word got out to all the Sunnyhell demons that William the Bloody—Slayer of Sodding Slayers—was pussy-whipped by the very creature he was notorious for destroying. He briefly considered finding a new stool, but decided it would be better just to steal a bottle of whatever-looks-good and conclude his binge in solitude. He had a reputation to keep, after all. And without Buffy at his side, it looked as though his reputation was all he was going to get.

But still, it was damn annoying that the bartender had a conscience. It was damn annoying when *anyone* had a conscience, but this took the bloody cake. Maybe he could vamp out and scare him just a bit. Bloody well *make* him keep pouring. Or better yet, snap his neck and drain the bastard. Not like he hadn’t been bottling up every strand of rage that was unfortunately unBuffy-related with every pedestrian or bystander that he deliberately chose not to kill. The incessant mantra that assured him *the Slayer wouldn’t like that* had him faithfully perched at the verge of madness, contemplating when best to jump.

But he wouldn’t, and though he knew why, he decided to blame it on the alcohol.

“Bloody ‘ad enough, have I?” he demanded, wrestling off his stool. “Why’s that that you care...mate? I’ll...sod...I’ll...”

The bartender arched an eyebrow and shook his head. Bloody perfect. Goddammit, this was the *Hellmouth*. The populace wasn't supposed to have ethics and the lot of that do-gooder crap. Wasn't enough that he was at a place where he didn't have a tab.

The rational part of his brain told Spike that this was the part where he paid for the drinks he'd downed. Bloody git. Couldn't he tell he was in pain, here? Wasn't enough to cripple a chap financially. Honestly, pubs and brothels should be public service establishments. Like free therapy for those who didn't give a fuck. Dim the pain until something else came up.

There had to be someone in this god-awful town that he could pin it on. Someone with as much a reason to drink as he had. Someone who knew the Slayer and was well aware of the headaches being around her caused.

"Put it on Rupert's tab," he instructed. "Giles, right? The...librarian. The drinks are on 'im."

The bartender seemed content with this and nodded, moving to serve his next customer. Some lucky ponce who *hadn't* had enough. And what was that, anyway? Who actually told people to leave when they were right cooperative, paying customers? This wasn't bloody *Cheers*, it was...

Spike stumbled out of the bar like a drunken buffoon—which he supposed was the point—into the quiet downtown streets of late-night Sunnydale. It didn't surprise him that the uglies weren't lurking about; he knew enough to know their regular haunts. Which was why he'd come here. Away from anyone who might get an earful of William the Pathetic.

He didn't make it far down the sidewalk. He ran into someone.

Quite literally.

Oh, bloody hell.

It was actually amusing for a second. Either that or the alcohol was getting to him. The girl dove to the pavement to collect the things she'd dropped, all the while muttering a thousand hurried apologies. Spike was vaguely aware that any decent man—tipsy or not—would be helping her with her plight...then remembered he was neither

decent, nor, by society's standards, a man. But it was his fault and bugger these gray areas. The Slayer couldn't expect him to remain all proper and domesticated, could she? Especially with the—

"SPIKE?"

Yeah, that was his name all right. Did she really have to shout it?

"Ello...ummm..." He struggled for a minute, waving a bit as gravity tugged at his balance. What was her name again? He really should remember. After all, he had made a pass at her once in his attempt to quench weeks' worth of pent-up sexual frustration. There was also something about a broken bottle. Bugger if he could remember anything once the slobbering drunkenness went away. "Willow. 'S that it? 'Course tha's it. What's cookin', love?"

There was nothing for a long minute.

"SPIKE?!"

He winced. "Bloody hell, could you not shout? Yes, it's me! Spike. The one an' bloody only. Who'd you think it was? Carol King?" He took a step backward, pressing a hand to his forehead. The coherent thoughts he'd tried to block out were running in spades, now.

This was the Hellmouth. A poor sap couldn't even get nice and properly drunk without something intervening.

Maybe he just hadn't had enough. He considered Willy's again. Sod all worries of other nighttime nasties hearing of his miserable plight. Spike cared bugger all about society's rules—be it demon or otherwise.

But there was that reputation to maintain, and that was something he was not willing to endanger. Not with the Slayer acting all high and mighty on top of her not-so-white stallion. Bugger. That.

Something grabbed his hands. Powerfully. Oh, right. Willow. He'd forgotten she was there. He yanked them. "What're you doin'?"

"Checking for a bottle. I'd like to avoid the 'in-face' incident."

Damn. She remembered.

"If I were you, I'd run," he advised in a voice that was not-at-all intimidating. "Creature of the night here. I might do somethin'...creature-ish. Why don't you jus' sod off like a good little witch?"

There was a second when she actually seemed to consider the

suggestion. “Well,” she said slowly, “no. ‘Cause you’re all drunk-like and...well, you know what they say. Friends don’t let friends drive drunk...a-and even if the commercials don’t specify, I’m sure that extends to mortal enemies and stuff. Not that you’re *my* mortal enemy. More like...mortal enemy by association. Besides...there’s some stuff I’d like to—”

“*Stop talking* so damn fast.” Spike stumbled a bit. “And listen to a bloke when he tells you to scamper off. Or have you forgotten jus’ like *she* bloody well forgot? I’m dangerous. I’m a nasty, nasty killer and...” He trailed off, considering, then choked out a sob. *Damn good thing I didn’t go to Willy’s.* “Oh god. That’s it, innit? That’s why she...” Another beat and anger replaced blubbering sorrow. If he had been on higher awares, he would have noticed Willow jump about a foot and a half in the air when he roared, and her subsequent surprise when he failed to burst into game face. “God, that stupid bitch! I’ll drain her dry jus’ like I should’ve. Bloody show *her* who’s all easy to forget.” Empty threats that did nothing to make him feel better. He slumped over. “God, I’m so unhappy.”

Damn. The girl was still there. It was obvious that she wasn’t going to pay attention. Since when had the little redhead developed a backbone? Perhaps he was too drunk to come across as threatening.

“Does Buffy know you’re in town?” she asked softly.

Hearing the Slayer’s name nearly shocked the hell out of him. As though he hadn’t been thinking about her—raving about her—all night. As though she weren’t the bane of his existence. Buffy. Spike frowned, smiled, then frowned again.

Brutal bitch.

“Fuck the bloody Slayer,” he snarled. “She th-thinks she’s all better than me jus’ because she’s all perky and noble and has that thing she does with her...” His mind dragged him to a pleasant memory for a second, before he remembered he hated her. “Well, she can fuckin’ rot, for all I care. Show her who’s better than who. Stupid, worthless bitch.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

“Take what as a what?”

“Buffy knows you’re in town. You’ve seen her.” When his eyes narrowed, she shrugged. “It’s kinda obvious...with the bitterness and the drinking. She tends to rub that off on people, a-at least of the recent, anyway. Well...more since you last left town.”

At that, his gaze sharpened, his surroundings coming into focus for the first time since stepping out of the pub. It finally occurred to him that he was standing in the middle of the street, chatting with the Slayer’s best pal. Chatting, as in not threatening. “Huh’s’at?” he asked. “You say the Slayer’s been more than her plain bitchy self since...since then?”

Willow met his eyes, and the wisdom he saw there was enough to give a sorry sack like him some hope.

“Thing about Buffy,” she said, her voice oddly conversational, “she’s good at lying to Giles, her Mom, even Angel, but she’s always told me the truth. I mean, about *everything*. So, these past few weeks... I’m guessing that I finally met the not-so-truthful side to Buffy. I *know* something’s up...and it’s pretty obvious that it has something to do with you.”

“You...you know?” Spike stumbled forward and grasped hold of her shoulders, flinching when the girl squeaked and twisted herself to freedom. “Sorry,” he mumbled before he knew what he was saying. “Whas’it you know?”

“Well,” Willow continued after a minute. “Not a lot. But enough to know that the freaky mood swings didn’t start until after the birthday/locked-with-Spike-for-hours-at-a-time thing. So, survey says... Spike related.” A frown. “Kinda sad. This is the most I’ve, well, been able to talk about her...and you...without getting my head bitten off. And really, no offense, but minor wiggins that it’s *you* I’m talking to and not—”

“Course,” Spike sneered, forcing himself a step away. “Bloody well figures she wouldn’t talk about me. ‘Cause I’m so easy to forget, right? I’m easy to forget. Me! William the Fucking Bloody!”

Willow flinched, but made no attempt to run. Like she knew he

wouldn't hurt her. If he were a mite soberer, that could have been embarrassing, but he didn't much care anymore.

"...where the bloody hell does she get off calling *me* forgettable?" He was pacing now. "I'll show *her* who's forgettable. If she thinks I'm forgettable, she's about to forget what she forgot." He blinked and looked at the witch. "You followin' me, Red?"

"Buffy said you're forgettable?"

There was another sob at that. One he couldn't help. God, this was pathetic. The Big Bad reduced to a sniveling crybaby, relinquishing all of his woes on the shoulder of the Slayer's best chum. Fan-fucking-tastic. If only Drusilla could see him now. "She said she hasn't thought about me once. But she had the tape. She had—"

"What tape?"

"Monty Python."

"Monty Python? What does that have to—"

"Bloody told the stubborn bint that she'd like it all right if she gave it a try," he explained, reaching for his cigarettes. "The lot of it prob'ly went over her pretty little head. Just like everythin' else. Wonder if *that* was bleedin' forgettable, too!"

Willow's eyes went saucer-sized. "Oh! S-so that's why she's been renting Monty Python movies like mad these past few weeks. God, and I thought Giles was having her undertake some bizarro training ritual or something. I mean...yeah, I haven't talked to her in a few days—well, willingly, that is—but I couldn't get her to watch *anything* but Monty Python. And dammit...if I have to sit through *The Holy Grail* one more time, I'm gonna have her arrested for violating the Geneva Conventions."

Wait, huh? Spike lurched forward. It was unwise to allow himself to hope, but there it was. A smidgeon of hope. "What are you saying?"

"Well, that whatever you said obviously wasn't as forgettable as she tried to make you believe." Willow nodded. "Trust me, I know Buffy. She wouldn't make with the overdone British humor for just anyone."

Huh. It occurred to him that he and Willow could become relatively good pals in some distant, parallel existence.

Then he snapped back to himself.

"Willow..."

"Yeah?"

"What're you doin' here?" He waved to the street dazedly, then pointed to himself.

"Me? What am *I* doing here? Hello!"

"S a free country."

"Yeah, but last time I checked, it wasn't—" She took a breath. "Okay. From the beginning. I was on my way back from the magic shop. Supplies for a truth spell for... Why am I telling you this? Why are *you* here?"

Spike offered a smirk. "Cause I wanna be, tha's why. Stupid bitch can't tell me where to go. I'm a rebel. I'll show her..." A pause. "Shouldn't you be toddling off? Evil vamp an' all. I'm dangerous. I could kill you at any minute."

Willow blinked as though just then realizing where she was, and whom she was talking to. "But...but you won't. I know you weren't going to...I mean, you won't hurt me."

Her innocence charmed him. He didn't know whether to be pleased or disappointed at the display of trust. "Think you're forgettin' what happened last time."

"Yeah, and I already checked. Remember? A few minutes ago? You're officially bottleless." She nodded. "A-and even if you did...have a bottle...you wouldn't use it."

"How do you know? I'm evil!"

"You wouldn't...because of Buffy. I mean, what happened with you and Buffy."

Spike froze. "What do you know about me and Buffy?" he demanded. "Did she tell you? What has she told you? What—"

"Well...like I said, not a lot. I was kinda reaching, but judging by your reaction, I'm thinking I reached in the right direction." Willow inhaled deeply, then took a step forward. "I know enough to know that you won't hurt me."

A rush of anger shimmied up his spine for no reason other than instinct telling him that it belonged there. No vampire should

have to listen to such a ridiculous accusation. What burned even more was the knowledge that she was likely right. He wouldn't hurt the Slayer's pal. He couldn't hurt anyone else, after all. Buffy wouldn't like it. It wouldn't do well to fall off the wagon with someone as connected to the object of his affection as Willow Rosenberg.

But she didn't need to know that. Well, she already *knew* that, but he didn't need to go do any fool thing like verify it.

"Course I would," Spike spat. "I'm bloody evil!"

Bugger, she didn't look convinced.

"I-I know you're evil," she agreed. "And I'm not saying that I'm thrilled knowing what my best friend did with you in order to merit having this conversation in the first place. A-and by *knowing* I mean *pretty damn sure*. You're all weepy and all, but not about Dru, so...and I don't know why she would've done it. I mean, she totally loves Angel and—"

He couldn't help himself—he growled. Only it was more like a whimper. Willow winced.

"Sorry," she amended quickly, and her eyes went wide again as though she'd just realized what she'd apologized for. "Ummm...right. But something of the important nature did happen. And she's been so...doom and gloom ever since. I think she misses you. Not that I approve, but...I guess you deserve to know. And I'm pissed enough at her for being so non-best-friendly to really...really not care what I say. I kinda have no room to judge until I know the whole story." There was a scowl. "Even if I *am* bitter about that entire bottle-in-face thing."

"Sorry, pet."

"It's okay." Another pause. "Bah! Has anyone told you how wiggy you are when you're not trying to kill everyone?"

"Yeah. A lot, in recent memory." Spike scoffed and shook his head, mouth curling around his cigarette. "'S not as if I didn't try, y'know. I've tried a lot. A good, clean kill. Right quick. Drown the memory of her into someone's throat." He eyed Willow's jugular for a long minute, then averted his gaze when he saw her begin to squirm in

discomfort. "Bloody hasn't worked, though. Stupid bitch has ruined me. Ruined me then tossed me aside. Ain't love grand?"

There was a long, pregnant silence as that last statement rang through the air. Willow, astonished. Spike, horrified.

"L-love?" Willow stuttered.

"I didn't mean that," he said hastily, running a hand through his hair. "That's bloody rubbish, so don't go preachin' it to your little Scoobies. 'S just a sayin'. You got me?"

Despite her nod, Willow did not look convinced. "Right. Right. Be-because if that...I mean, if you did love—"

"I don't!"

"I know. Totally on board the Spike-Not-With-The-Buffy-Lovin' train. Got it." She bit her lip. "But if you did, that would mean that you—"

"It doesn't bloody matter what it *would* mean!" Spike started pacing in earnest now, looking everywhere but at the redhead and smoking himself into a heated frenzy. "I don't love the stupid Slayer, all right? It's bad enough that she's got Angel wrapped around her little finger. I bloody hate her, got it? Can't stand the sight of her. That sodding holier-than-thou attitude and her bouncy hair. Says *I'm* forgettable, does she. Not bloody likely. Bet I could rip her throat out and get another chosen bird ready for the takin', and things would get back to the way they oughta be. See how fast I could forget her *then!*"

Willow took a deep, collected breath. "...But you won't right?" she all but whispered. "Not after what happened!"

"You're basin' a lot of your assumptions on a night that you claim to know nothin' about, pet."

"Okay—yeah," she admitted. "For the last time, you're right. I don't know what happened. Buffy's been Miss Distant for...well, since it happened. She hasn't told me anything. Hasn't talked about it at all. But I know that there was something there, between you two."

Spike arched an eyebrow, blowing out a stream of smoke. "Oh, do you, now?"

"Well, yeah! And, I might add, duh! Even if I didn't suspect a thing

before, just listening to you has pretty much released the full kit and caboodle. And Buffy...she gets all jittery and defensive every time someone brings you up! She's been giving Angel the *mega* brush-off without explanation, and not in a guilty kinda way."

It was amazing watching a human light up—almost as such as watching a vampire. Spike cocked his head. The Slayer had done much the same while they'd been locked together, once she found a topic that she was passionate about. The same with Willow now. A sermon in the making. He wondered if she knew just how alive she was.

"And I totally don't get it," Willow continued. "I don't. It's gross and icky and...she loves him, for crying out loud!"

He couldn't hide his wince if he tried. "Been there already. Got the message right clear the first time."

"Right. Sorry." Another pause. "Ah! Stop doing that!"

"Doing what?"

"Acting like...well, not a vampire!"

Spike blinked, unsure whether or not to be insulted. "Oh. Sorry."

"You did it again!" Willow cleared her throat and glanced upward. "Were there smoochies?"

"What?"

"You. Buffy. Were there smoochies? Twisted, wrong, cabin-fever-induced smoochies? Is that what happened?"

There was nothing for a few seconds, then he burst out laughing. For the next few seconds, Spike could do nothing but guffaw. He'd straighten, catch her eye, and falling to bits all over again. When at last he did find his voice, it took every ounce of restraint not to lose it again. "You're lily white, aren't you? Thinking all this is over a bit of snogging."

A beat.

Another.

"*More* than smoochies?!" she shouted, then lowered her voice when he winced. "Y-you...you two...there was more than smoochies? Was there groping? Did you two have sex?!"

“Oi! I’m not tellin’ you anything. ‘S my business, innit? Besides, if the Slayer hasn’t piped up, I wager she doesn’t want you to know.”

“But if you hate her,” Willow replied, “why do you care what she wants? I wouldn’t think that’d be a priority.”

A long beat as he wrestled with that thought. Then he scowled.

“I’m not talkin’, all right! Just sod off. Find another vamp to pester. I’m through.” With that, Spike pivoted and began in the other direction, tossing his cigarette to the pavement.

“You’re going to have to do better than that to get me to go away,” the abandoned redhead warned before taking off after him. She wheeled to block his path, eyes set with determination. “See this? It’s called Resolve Face. No one backs down from Resolve Face.”

Spike stared at her blankly as though she had grown another head. “Go home, Willow.” A simple side step and he was on his way again, knowing full well she would not pursue. There were certain boundaries one had to consider while conversing with a vampire. Despite how brave she was, the little witch knew better than to chase him down. It was dangerous.

“She misses you!”

He stopped dead in his tracks.

“Listen,” Willow went on, “I don’t know what happened, or what she told you...besides the stuff about being forgettable...which I think you know is ridiculous. She’s done everything *but* forget you.”

Spike didn’t trust himself to look back. “You mean it?”

“Yeah. In a sick, perverse way...yeah, I really mean it.”

A moment ticked by.

It had been all talk then? Was that possible? Spike released a long breath, not sure his heart could take it but knowing he had no choice but to risk it anyway. He turned to face her and risked a step forward.

Willow’s eyes went wide and she moved hastily to retrieve the space he’d consumed. “I don’t condone it! It’s wrong and icky and *really* gives me the wiggins—”

“Then why tell me this?”

“Because I hate seeing her miserable, even if we are fighting. She

already has the Slayer thing. Adding...whatever's driving her to be so unBuffy like...it's not good for her."

"Miserable?" he whispered. "You said she's miserable? She's been miserable without me?"

"Well...I dunno if it's you, but she's been like that...like *this* since you two...since you left. I just..." Willow sighed. "I just want to see her happy. I want things to be better for her. Even if I don't approve...'cause if it's...if...and eww. Still not wanting to picture everything. But if it means that...then I'm not..."

A small smile tickled Spike's lips, and he nodded. "Thanks."

The air grew oddly comfortable. Almost as if they were nothing more than old friends, catching up after a chance run-in. Familiar in the strangest sense of the word.

And then he felt oddly protective. The Slayer's best friend had provided what the Slayer herself had denied him. He had to see her home. It was dangerous for a girl to walk around this town at night, even if said girl was a witch.

"Well, you oughta be runnin' off. Probably got some sodding thing like bookwork waitin' for you," he observed before frowning as something else occurred to him. "Course, there might be a lotta nasties between here and where you live. The Slayer wouldn't want you getting yourself killed. Hell, the stupid chit would probably blame me."

Willow blinked. "Are you offering to walk me home?"

"What? No! Don't be ridi..." Who the bloody hell was he kidding? "Yeah. I guess so. But not for you, and not for the Slayer, either. I just—"

"Then why at all?"

Yeah, Spike, good question.

"Cause the girl's ruined me, y'know. Lookit this. The Big Bad reduced to a sodding night watchman."

"You don't have to if you—"

Another sigh. This one of defeat. "No, no. Lead the way, Red."

He didn't blame her for hesitating. Hell, he would, were he in her shoes. The girl had a decent head on her shoulders. Her awkward

reservations—that which he was used to seeing—reminded him of himself at that age. God, what a bloody nightmare that had been.

“You can’t come in, you know,” she told him as though he were expecting it.

“Well, that’d be a problem if I was lookin’ for a soddin’ invite. I don’t *want* to come in. What’s the bloody point? It’s bad enough that I made the offer in the first place. What, you think I’m gonna kill you now?” He chuckled and reached once more for his cigarettes. “Hell, if I wanted you dead, I coulda killed you a long time ago...as you have delighted in remindin’ me over and over again.”

Willow stared at him for a long moment, trying to determine whether he was serious.

“God, what happened to you?”

Spike sneered around his fag. “What do *you* think? You don’t reckon I know that the world would make a whole lot more sense if I could kill the bitch? Trust me, I tried. Didn’t work. Couldn’t.”

“You tried?”

“Course I did. Had her all to myself, didn’t I?” A fond smile crossed his lips. “Couldn’t do it, though. I have no idea why, but I couldn’t do it.”

And to that, she had nothing to say.

They walked in silence for a few minutes—not a comfortable silence but comfortable enough. If anyone had told him that he would be playing escort to the Slayer’s pals come nightfall, he would have laughed, then ripped the accuser’s head off. Such allegations had no place near an evil thing.

There was still something, though. Something he needed to know before he said good night. That crumb of hope he had been clinging to. That Buffy was miserable without him.

“Red?”

Willow started slightly at the break in their quietude, but neither made mention of it. “Yeah?”

“What you said about Angel. Did you mean it?”

“What?”

“Angel. She really been...giving him the cold shoulder?”

“Oh. Right,” she replied with a small smile. “Yeah. She really has.”

He swallowed and blinked his stinging eyes. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.” A beat. “No, really don’t mention it. She’d probably kill me for telling you.”

Another long silence. Then he laughed.

“Course,” he guaranteed her. “Mum’s the word.”

The funny thing was, it looked like she believed him.

Funnier still, he was pretty sure he did.

JUST CAUSE

IT FELT SO STRANGE, dreading a talk with her best friend. Not even one word had been shared and Buffy already felt like she was trapped in a worst-case scenario. Like she was preparing herself for a confrontation with her greatest foe.

But she had to face Willow at some point. She had to get this off her chest. She needed advice in the worst of ways, and there was nowhere else to turn.

At least, that's what she told herself all through her trek through the hallway as she approached Willow's locker, where the redhead and Oz were talking.

Buffy cleared her throat, feeling awkward and intrusive. Even if she had been rather forward last night on the phone, with every step, she felt her nerves failing her. "Hey."

Willow glanced up and smiled weakly. "Hey," she said, closing her locker.

More silence. Silence in a crowded hallway. Not of the good. When things threatened to grow uncomfortable, Oz shifted and placed a tender kiss on Willow's cheek. "I'm going to go meet Devon to discuss the new chords."

"Dingo's learned new chords over the weekend," Willow explained.

Buffy smiled and offered a nod. "Wow...that's...that's really..."

"It was momentous," Oz agreed. "A whole world of sharps has opened for our perusal." He grinned when Willow giggled, regarding her with that never-ending affection that drove even the happiest couples to the furthest brink of envy. "I better mosey on to somewhere that's else. Lunch?"

"Definite lunch."

Then Buffy and Willow were alone, and it was talking time.

The noise around them began to dwindle as students realized that first period was due to begin shortly, leaving the silence even more pronounced.

Buffy fidgeted. "We need to talk."

Willow smiled. "I gathered that. There are some things that—"

It was quite possibly grounds for the Worst Timing Ever Award. Xander's trademark lateness had been approaching embarrassing proportions as graduation grew nearer, as had his penchant for cheesy excuses. Teachers in the school were almost as antsy as the students. Summer needed to arrive and fast. Before Senioritis completely took over.

"Xander!"

"You know," he gasped in greeting, keeling over to catch his breath. "Cars are a funny thing. You wait for years to actually get the little card that says you can drive one, wait even longer to get one that runs and could possibly make other people jealous, and still end up running for it when the damn thing doesn't start five minutes before you're supposed to be somewhere."

"Battery?" Willow asked.

"I dunno. At this point, I'm willing to concede that Xander Harris will never own anything that doesn't die within three weeks." He frowned. "Kinda depressing. Anyway, what's with the selective tardiness? You two finally taking a chapter out of my book?"

Willow's eyes widened comically as she realized the hall was vacant. She immediately shifted her backpack and flashed Buffy an

apologetic glance. "Oh god. I have a test in English...and I'm all...ahhh! See you later, guys!"

She was gone the next minute—a human cannonball without the cannon.

Xander looked to Buffy, frowning. "I'm sensing an ill-timed intrusion. You two were about to potentially stop fighting, weren't you?"

She sighed and nodded. "White flag raised. It's nothing that couldn't wait."

Except that if she didn't tell someone soon, she was going to burst. And odds were progressing slowly to that option. It didn't look like she would be getting Willow's opinion for at least another two hours.

Well, damn.



BUFFY DIDN'T SEE Willow again until lunch, thankfully seated at an unoccupied table. Xander and Oz were nowhere to be seen, likely by design. Hell, the whole school seemed to be rooting for this reconciliation.

Best to get started.

"Hey," Buffy said, taking the empty seat across from Willow.

Willow glanced up and offered a weak smile. "Hey."

"Thought you and Oz were doing lunch."

"He decided that I needed to talk with you more than be with him while he's being quiet."

Buffy bit her lip. It was beyond odd attempting to make chitchat with the one person in the world who knew all her secrets. She felt like she needed to segue to her point even if they both already knew what it was she was going to talk about.

She sighed, exasperated. When had this become so difficult?

"When I overcrowded you," Willow answered. "When you stopped talking to me."

She blinked, then grinned. "I said that out loud, didn't I?"

"Either that, or I'm getting really good."

"Well, you are, according to Giles. More than you know."

“Well,” Willow answered, her eyes drifting to her lap. “I think he’s exaggerating. I mean, floaty pencil. Not a big level. Not a big deratting-Amy level.”

“Will, you’ve only been practicing for...well, not even a year.” Buffy smiled. This was good. This felt right. Talking on a level that she had missed more than she could have fathomed unaided. “And yeah, some of your spells go wonky, but wow! This is me impressed.”

Willow laughed. “You must really be intent on this ‘making-up’ thing,” she observed. “The last time you and I talked magic, you were all worried about the potential ‘kablooeey’ factor.”

Buffy nodded, her smile fading as her mind turned to the herculean task ahead. There were things to be said. Big, serious things. Things that she could not avoid. And yet, the longer she waited, the more certain she was that this might be the last legs of their friendship. She didn’t think that she could stomach looking her friend in the eyes and seeing disgust.

And yet.

“Will...I’m sorry.” The words escaped her before she had time to consider. “God, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry for—”

“I know. Really it’s—”

“No. Don’t.” Buffy sighed. “It’s not. Things have been...really sucky as of the late. And it’s my fault. I’ve been...” But there were no words for what she’d been—none she wanted to consider, anyway.

This was really hard to say.

“It’ll get easier when you actually say it,” Willow said helpfully.

Buffy paused. “I said that last part out loud, didn’t I?”

“Kinda.”

“That’s two for two. I gotta stop doing that.”

“It happens. I know it’s overwhelming. You’ve been through so much. I—”

She shook her head hard. “It’s more than that, Will,” she said. “I’m so...I’m so afraid that you’re going to be just...disgusted with me. But god, I need to talk to someone. I can’t do this by myself anymore. I just...I can’t...”

Willow pursed her lips and leaned forward. “Whatever it is,” she

said carefully, "I promise that I won't judge you. You're my friend, and...hey...we've all done things that we're not proud of. I seem to remember a recent smooch-fest with Xander. It can't be all that bad."

Buffy arched a brow. "You wanna place a bet on that? In the land of screw-ups, I take the cake. I'm the massive cake-taker. I think I closed the entire bakery. I—"

"Stop. Just stop. You're excusing yourself without... You're making it worse. Just say it. You'll feel better. I promise. But first you need to get it out."

She released a long breath and nodded. "You're right. I know you're right. It's about Spike."

Willow nodded, her face unreadable.

"Promise you won't hate me," Buffy blurted. "I've been so alone and I can't do it anymore. But...please. I—"

Willow sighed. "I can't do anything until you tell me, Buff. And I wanna help. I really, really do. But I can't say it for you. You have to get it out. Like I said, I won't judge you. I won't. I'm not Xander. I'm not Giles. I'm Willow." She frowned. "As long as you're not running off to Los Angeles. But since that happened, I've had time to think about your reasoning, and while I stand by the 'you were wrong' verdict, I can get why you thought there were no other optio—"

"I slept with Spike."

"You whated with what?"

"Me. Spike. We did the wacky. We were trapped...and there was talking...and yelling, then smoochies. Massive, toe-curling smoochies. Then..."

Willow was staring at her. "And then you slept with him."

Was she was supposed to be this calm? Perhaps she was in shock. Buffy blinked but didn't think to question it. Anything was better than disgusted yelling and a call for another intervention. "Yeah."

"You slept with Spike."

"Geez, Will. Little louder next time. I don't think they heard you in Cambodia."

Willow's eyes widened. "I'm sorry...I just...it's Spike. As in you and Spike. Together. In the...oh, bad thought! Bad, bad thought."

Buffy released a low moan and looked down. "Kinda got that part."

"I knew, you know. I knew you were all jumpy 'cause of something that happened between you two."

She snorted. "Hell, I think the whole world knew. I just...I couldn't..."

"I just...I guess I don't get why. I thought Spike equaled hurl-worthy wiggins. Not smoochies. Not...more than smoochies." Willow smiled a bit when Buffy ducked her head in shame, but the look was gone when her eyes turned up again. "A-and what about Angel? Do you suddenly not like him anymore?"

"I don't...I don't know." She sighed and ignored the part of her heart that screamed in protest. The part that hated the thought of letting go. "I don't think so. Oh god, please don't judge me for this."

"I'm not judging you. Hello with the not-judgyness of me. I can't without knowing what happened."

"Well, there's a shocker," Buffy said, her tone harsher than she intended. "When I came back from LA it was all your-fault this and your-fault that. And you guys had absolutely no idea what I had been going through."

"That was different, Buffy," Willow replied calmly. "That was different as in way. You bailed without even trying to let anyone in. I can understand the bail part. Really. When Oz and I...well, you know...I wanted to. I needed to just get away and stuff. Go bury my head under a rock. I can't imagine how it was for you. But you not only bailed, you didn't let anyone know where you ran off too. That's where the guiltage came in. It wasn't that you ran...it was that you ran and hoped that everything would fall magically into place with absolutely no repercussions of the negative variety."

Buffy smiled weakly, even as her insides turned in the memory of it. Willow made good points. but there were some things that she would never understand. That was the way it was. "And that differs from this, how?"

A pause as Willow considered. "You're not really helping your case."

“So it’s a case? This is case-worthy?”

“You tell me! You’re the one who’s getting snuggly with the undead...again! A-and not the safe...er...kind of dead. We remember that Spike is soulless, remember? And evil.” At that, an odd look crossed Willow’s face—like she was trying to convince herself of something. But it disappeared the next second. “And he’s tried to kill you about a bajillion times. And are we forgetting the bottle-in-face incident, ’cause some of us are not ready to make with the forgiveness and pretend everything’s all honky dory!”

“What happened to not-judgy?”

Willow’s expression softened. “I’m not judging you, Buffy. Really, I’m not with the judging. I just want to know why.”

Why? A dry chuckle reverberated through her tired body. “There’s the question of the hour.”

“Not to repeat myself, but I thought you loved Angel.”

“I did,” Buffy heard herself murmuring. “I did love him. More than...more than anything.”

“So, what? You sleep with Spike—”

“Willow!”

She plowed right through the interruption without batting an eye. “And your Angel-lovin’ is suddenly of the past?”

“I didn’t say that!”

“So it’s just a physical thing? You...” Willow managed to look sheepish for a minute as she surveyed her surroundings. “You did... that with Spike just because you and Angel are restricted from dancing to the tune of the funky monkey?”

“No! God, Will. I told you. This has nothing to do with Angel.”

“Funny. ‘Cause if Oz was boinking someone else, I’d think it has something to do with me.”

“I didn’t...” Buffy paused. “There has been boinking? There has been Oz-induced boinking?”

Willow’s cheeks turned deep red. “Really not what we’re here to discuss, Buff. Angel has to be a part of why you did...what you did... or else there would be no doing.”

“No. It’s more than—”

"Was it a mistake?"

"What?"

Willow arched a brow. "Did you wake up after having all the sex and go, 'Holy figolies, what have I done?' Did you wallow and get all defensy and bitchy out of self-disgust...or..."

"Of course I felt bad about what happened!" And she did, just not for the reasons that mattered. "But it was... I don't know. He was different. We were different. And it just sort of happened. And I don't know what to do about it—how to think or feel or what it means. Because yeah, I cheated on Angel. And it shouldn't have been as easy as it was."

"Would you do it again?"

It was not a question. Questions implied the need for answers, and both already knew what hers would be. "I want to say no, but... I think so. Even knowing what I know now."

"Are you...do you love Spike?"

"What?" Buffy reeled back. "No! God, no. I spent one night with him. One night where we had nothing better to do than—"

"The horizontal labamba?"

"Talk," Buffy finished. "We talked. A lot. Played twenty questions. We...got to know each other. And then he started in on the reason that Dru left him. The real reason."

Willow frowned. "Why Dru—"

"It was because of me."

"I thought it was because she wanted to date a Chaos Demon."

"Well, she apparently wanted the Chaos Demon 'cause Spike wanted me. That was...he killed the vampire I was supposed to fight that night so he could prove to Dru that I meant nothing to him."

"Didn't work, huh?"

"A world of no."

Willow nibbled on her lip. "Then...okay. So Dru left him because of you. But he...is that why you...and he... Did his sudden case of feeling-having mean that you—"

"No!" That word was growing really popular. "It was more than that."

That was it. Without warning, Willow's patience seemed to run out. "So, let me get this straight," she barked. "It was more than a one night stand and less than a one-time thing that meant nothing to you. You feel bad for what happened, but you don't regret it. You don't love Angel but you're still with him. And you slept with someone you claim to hate. That does not scream 'happy camper' in the relationship department. Moreover, you slept with someone who told you that he has feelings for you. I know Spike is...well...Spike...but you've seen how he can get when he's all heartbroken and mopey. Again with the bottle-in-face!"

"I know! God!" Buffy dropped her face into her waiting hands, tears stinging her eyes. It all came storming back. The look of utter heartbreak on Spike's face the night before. The spiteful disdain that had colored Angel's eyes. The knowledge that she was responsible for both. "God, I don't know what's wrong with me! What I... I told him to come back. He offered to leave forever, and I couldn't stand the thought of it. I almost... And then last night...I..."

"Spike's in town?"

Buffy nodded. "I told him to come back because I needed time to think. I told him to go away and come back. And... God, the things I said. And I still don't know what I...what he wants from me. And he's a vampire! He's the real thing! I can't... But I can't not. There's definitely... Every time I think about what happened, I just...I can't believe that I didn't make him stay here. He wasn't *Spike* then. He was..." She glanced to Willow, fully expecting disgust or disappointment, but all she received was calm understanding. It was times like this that made her suspect that she didn't deserve friends. "He was sweet and loving and attentive and funny and...a vampire. He was still a vampire."

"The bite marks."

Buffy instinctively reached for the aforementioned marks, relishing the slight shiver of excitement that sprouted across her skin at the contact. "He's a vampire. I can't... If not Angel then definitely not another vampire. Another vampire who—"

"If he wasn't a vampire, what would you do?"

“What?”

“Spike’s a vamp, sure. He’s a scary, evil—”

“If you make another bottle-in-face reference, I’m going to fine you.”

Willow smiled. “Yeah, well that’s pretty much my one Spike story. I gotta tell it as often as possible. Listen, I know it’s crazy. And yeah, the scenario wigs me out. But I know that if you...you had to have had your reasons. If you let Spike that close...then...”

“I have feelings for him.” It was barely a whisper, as though the notion itself was enough to push her over the proverbial edge. “And it’s gross and obscene, but real. I have feelings for someone that I...I can’t have feelings for. I can’t—”

“Already defied that logic.” Willow held up a hand. “Buffy, based on everything you’ve told me, the best I can tell you is to talk to him. Even if I can’t see the words ‘loving and sweet’ when I think of Spike, he... I guess it’s safe to say that you know him better than I do. Don’t go to him thinking that it’s wrong or what we’ll think. You don’t even know what you want yet. Maybe you’ll decide to not be with either of them. Who knows? But if you’re the one that did the asking for him to come back, then you at least owe him a civilized conversation.”

Buffy glanced down, unwilling to admit that her skin was numb with relief. There it was. It was over. Everything was out. She had spilled the beans to her best friend and they were still best friends. Willow wasn’t disgusted or disappointed...a little wigged, but that was to be expected. But it was over now.

Why had she waited so long before confiding? Oh yeah. Idiocy.

“Thanks,” Buffy said truthfully. “I...I really don’t know how to—”

“Then don’t. I’m just glad we’re...I’m glad you told me.”

“Me, too. So with the gladness. I needed to get that out.”

“I could kinda tell.” Willow flashed an unrepentant grin. “So, you gonna go Spike-hunting tonight?”

More than anything.

Buffy nodded and breathed a sigh of relief. “Yes. After I talk to Angel.”



HE HAD BEEN present for all of three minutes and could already tell that the art of wanker-watching hadn't grown any more interesting than it was two months earlier. And yet, here he was. Watching through eyes half-hooded with envy as his would-be sire went about the mansion. If Spike hadn't been utterly convinced that Angel was the dullest vampire on the planet before, he most certainly was now. The big git could lull a rock to sleep.

The very fact that his jealousy had led him to a day full of spying on the wanker had him beyond annoyed with himself. He knew it was pathetic. He knew that if the Slayer happened by and sensed him near, he would be dust in two seconds flat. But he couldn't help it. He couldn't draw away. The little witch had juiced him with hope the night before. Spike was convinced that such had been the furthest thing from her intention, but she'd done it all the same.

Whatever Buffy wanted him to believe was a lie.

He just had to see it for himself.

Unfortunately, that meant watching Angel. The only vampire that could not rival the company of a lamppost. It was beyond amazing that a firebird like Buffy could tolerate the dolt at all. His day was occupied with reading, brooding, doing that wankerish Tae Bo, and more brooding. He slept a bit, leaving Spike to congratulate himself that he restrained from the ponce during times of vulnerability.

The Slayer wouldn't like it if her honey went *poof*.

A century and a sodding half of hating Angel, and he schooled himself to patience based on what the Slayer would want.

Something was definitely wrong with that picture.

It wasn't just that. Oh no. That would be too simple. Every action done since leaving this hellhole of a town had been executed with the mindset of What Would Buffy Do? On occasion he had managed to break free from that line of destructive thought, but never the easy way. He wondered briefly if Buffy would be more bothered by murder or infidelity. Not that he had anything to be faithful to, of course. She had made that perfectly clear.

And even so, it wasn't as though he hadn't screamed her name when trying to drown out her memory with faceless floozies, thus defeating the purpose of trying to forget her.

The day continued dully. Spike was almost certain that Angel sensed someone was near, but the ponce never bothered to investigate. That was annoying. True, things would get ugly if Spike was caught, but at least it would be interesting.

Nothing happened for a long, long time. Not until an unfamiliar scent lit up the walkway. Spike didn't actually see the woman enter the mansion, but Angel reacted immediately. And he knew—he knew without question that he was looking at the face of the new slayer.

At that, Spike narrowed his eyes. There was something off about her. Something very off. She carried herself with confidence that he could appreciate, even if she was trying to come off as meek and lost. No, this was a girl on a mission. He could feel power rolling off her.

And yet, there was something in her eyes that made him uneasy, and it took him two seconds to decide what it was.

The girl was out to hurt Buffy. She was there intentionally to hurt Buffy, and that was enough to make him hate her.

A low, protective growl tickled his throat. If this bird harmed the Slayer—*his* Slayer—in any way...

Spike quirked a brow as the scene unfolded. The new Slayer was approaching Angel. Now, that he could approve of. Stupid chit could mess with the ponce all she liked, especially since he appeared less than enthusiastic about her arrival.

But she was up to something. That much was clear.

"By the pricking of my thumbs," Spike murmured, reaching for his cigarettes. He had gone all day without a fag and it was beginning to take its toll. "Something wicked this way comes."

At first, Angel appeared more thunderstruck than anything at the sudden presence of his uninvited guest. With a long blink and a dutiful nod, he said, "Faith."

Faith. Spike all but snorted. Interesting name for a slayer.

"Hey," she replied. "Sorry to bust in all uninvited."

“What do you want?”

The trade grew boring after that, but Spike wasn't too interested in their conversation, rather their tense body language, which—unlike the spoken word—rarely lied. That didn't mean he wasn't listening. He picked up a mention of Buffy's name and smirked when Angel flinched and turned away.

That much was enough to confirm that Angel wasn't interested in discussing Buffy. The other bird, Faith, pressed on regardless. Talking about how she was out of line with all the presumptions she made and that whatever problems they were going through were none of her business. When Angel grew antagonistic, she immediately switched gears and began on some long-winded spiel concerning how she was sorry for something she had done the previous night.

She silly girl was lying through her teeth. And badly. So badly that Spike found himself frustrated at Angel for not seeing through it. Rather, the wanker dropped his frustration and apologized for his hostile behavior. Started spewing some rot about how he understood whatever it was that she was going through, and that he wanted to trust her.

It wasn't until Angel closed his hands around Faith's shoulders and she twisted in his embrace that things changed.

The next flash of events was so sudden and unexpected that Spike briefly entertained that he had lost his wits. Whatever the Slayer had planned, he had not expected this.

“Chump,” she spat at Angel.

Not that Spike could argue there.

Then the girl was in motion. She splashed a bit of pig's blood onto the enormous brooding sod and some robed git came out of nowhere, chanting.

Then there was yelling. Then...

Spike's eyes widened as he realized what was happening, thunderstruck. “Oh bollocks,” he muttered. “Now this is interesting.”

DANCING ON THE SIDELINES

“YOU WON’T BELIEVE the news I have for you.”

Buffy grinned and glanced up, meeting Xander’s eyes. There wasn’t much that could be said right now that could surprise her, but she decided to keep that to herself.

“Does news involve food?” she asked. “I could go for some pasta.”

Wesley emerged from the bookshelves with interest at that, adding, “I must admit that I am starved.”

“I would have recommended doughnuts if I didn’t think someone would confiscate the jellied,” Giles offered, closing the cage door and regarding Xander with perked brows.

“If everyone is finished making dinner arrangements, I’m going to continue.” Xander waited until he saw he had everyone’s attention. “Life is just a big bucket of funny. Always mocking with jokes that—unsurprisingly—go right over my head.”

Buffy blinked. “Huh? What’s the what?”

“I have information coming out of my ears, that’s what.” He stopped suddenly, holding up a finger. “First off, I found your demon. Though that’s gonna seem kinda not-so-important once I’m done.”

“My demon?”

"Yeah." Xander glanced to Giles, who shuffled uncomfortably. "The one with the books? Of Acieration?"

"Ascension," the Watchers corrected on wordless command.

Buffy's face fell. Then her eyes widened. Oh. That demon.

"You found him?"

He nodded and held up a slip of paper which, she saw once she took it, contained an address.

Huh. Well, that had been easy. *Need a demon? Here's the coordinates.*

Wesley cleared his throat. "As timely as this does appear, we cannot be sure that it is authentic. Demons have every motivation to hide—"

"Oh no, it's real." Xander grinned proudly. "Willy gave it to me, and even though he has been known to change alliances at random, the information he gives is good. He'll sell you any bit of gossip once you flash the green. Or beat him up."

"You beat him up?"

"Well...okay, I bribed him. And he must be close to hitting rock bottom, 'cause he told me a lot for the price I quoted. Which brings me to point two. You won't believe—"

"I can't believe it was that simple to locate a demon. As invaluable as this one," Wesley declared with a huff. "You'd think he'd go to great lengths to remain hidden."

Buffy tossed the wannabe Watcher a grin. "Fashion tip, Wes," she said. "Mouth looks better closed. And, I know you're still trying to fit into the groove, but this is Sunnydale. Finding demons is not exactly something of the hard."

Unless they're Slayer-obsessed vamps who don't want to be found.

"You'd also think," Giles mused, studying the address over Buffy's shoulder, "that he would set some higher standards for himself. This place by the bus station? It's awful! Demons by definition should at least attempt to invest in a pit of filth or a nice crypt. No one has any bloody standards anymore."

"I'll have to remember to mention that."

Xander nodded, not bothering to conceal his irritation. "May I continue, please?"

Buffy was still studying the provided address. "I didn't even know you were looking for him."

"Well, I wasn't. Not until Giles called me last night. And as helpful as I'm sure that is...and no, I don't expect any reward, though I wouldn't say no to a gratuitous lap dance, that's not the big news."

"There's big news?" Buffy asked, wide-eyed. "I mean, bigger than the 'I know where the demon is' news?"

"In so many ways, yeah. Brace yourself." Xander expelled a long, dramatic breath. "You know the vampire that specializes in coming up with creative ways to get your girlfriend to dump you?"

A round of blank stares. Buffy blinked at him, dumbfounded. While clarification was not required, she did need a minute to let it sink in. There was no doubt in her mind that Xander was talking about Spike, even if he hadn't felt the need to segue his meaning in with a round of subtle hinting. If Willy was on the up-and-up of that new gossip, then Spike was obviously not attempting to remain discreet.

"Umm..." Giles started, not bothering to mask his confusion. "What?"

"Spike," Buffy said softly, avoiding the foray of astonished glances she received at mention of the name. It had been somewhat verboten in her vocabulary the last few weeks. "He's talking about Spike."

"Spike?" Wesley asked.

Giles nodded as he dove into his pocket for his polishing handkerchief. The glasses perched on his nose soon followed. "William the Bloody," he replied. "Of Angel's line. He has gone by the moniker Spike since before the turn of the century, I believe...though it is not well documented."

"William the Bloody," Wesley echoed, eyes going wide. "Dear lord, he's in town?"

"Yeah," Xander spat bitterly. "And can you say bad timing?"

Buffy couldn't help but grin. "You should know he's in town better than anyone, Wes." *Save me, of course.* "I think you were the first that he decided to tell."

He stared at her blankly. "What?"

There was a beat, then Xander's eyes went wide. "And I'm playing

a serious game of connect the dots. The vamp that hit Wes—the smoking, blond, leather-wearing vamp—”

A snicker clawed at Buffy’s throat. “The same that was ten feet tall and breathed fire?”

“I hate to say it, but this all falls into the realm of the extremely obvious,” Xander said, shaking his head. “And yes, I’m just realizing it now, too. But Giles! Giles! You’re beyond the not-seeing-the-obviousness of me. You should’ve known it was Spike immediately.”

The look that crossed Giles’s face could silence anyone. His glasses were still mid-polish. Perhaps he liked it better when he couldn’t read the expressions of others. “I did,” he said after a moment. “I just...I didn’t know how to...”

His gaze traveled upward and blindly locked with Buffy’s. And she understood.

He hadn’t wanted to mention Spike in front her. Because he knew. He knew.

Buffy drew in a sharp breath, realizing she was suddenly on display. Hell, from the looks he kept throwing her, even Wesley had his suspicions. Was there no one in this town that didn’t know what had happened that night?

And if everyone did know, why the hell wasn’t Giles angry? Or hurt? Or disappointed? If nothing else, she expected big heaps of stinking disappointment. Nothing less than what she’d received when she concealed the truth behind Angel’s return. But there was nothing—no judgmental glower, no holier-than-thou speech... There was nothing at all.

What the hell was going on?

“Okay,” Xander said, inhaling and exhaling deeply. “What the hell is going on?”

It was mildly reassuring to know she wasn’t the only one thrown for a loop. Moreover, Buffy took whatever comfort she could muster in the realization that her friend was still in the dark. Giles could feign diplomacy about such matters: Xander Harris could not.

Buffy met Giles’s eyes, surged with momentary panic. “Just tell us what you know,” he told the boy, not looking away from her. “If Spike

is in town, chances are he is here for a reason. Past history notwithstanding...we know enough about him to know that his trips to Sunnydale in the past have been fueled by selfish motivation."

Buffy reeled as though slapped. Perhaps she'd given Giles too much credit.

"What has prompted William the Bloody's presence here before?" Wesley asked. It was almost amusing. He had turned rather pale.

"You mean the Council didn't let you in on it?" Xander asked, wide-eyed. He bounced on his heels. "Damn, and I always thought those guys were so considerate. And, for the sake of not wasting your oh-so-English breath, it's just Spike. No point saying more than needs to be said. Which is something the both of you are highly talented at." With a thoughtful frown, he turned to Giles, who regarded him with an arched brow. "Is that a Watcher thing, or a British thing?"

Giles snickered but ignored him. Replacing his glasses on the bridge of his nose, he took a few steps forward, hands worming into the pockets of his trousers. Buffy knew the look well. It was the same he adapted before assuming the role of Mr. Lecture. They were about to have a history lesson. "When Spike came to Sunnydale originally," he began, "it was to restore Drusilla, his paramour. She had been weakened after a mob attack in Prague, where she was thought to be dead—"

"Drusilla," Wesley said. "Ah, yes. Another one of Angel's, correct? She was a covenant girl. Rumor has it that she was dead."

"Oh so very not dead," Xander quipped. "Well, in the final dead sense of the word. She's most assuredly undead. And Spike—man—that boy is crazy about her. Which is sort of ironic, in itself, seeing as she's the crazy one."

A small pain shot up her arm, and Buffy realized that her fists were clenched tight enough that her nails were etching small crescents into her skin.

I'm not jealous, I'm not jealous, I'm not...

"In fact, that's what brought the bleached wonder around the second time." Xander nodded. "And, unless Willy's mistaken, that's why he's here again."

“What?” No. That didn’t sound right. Buffy stared at Xander. “Spike’s here because of Drusilla?”

“Well, he didn’t say that in so many words. In fact, it seems that Captain Peroxide has been avoiding the demon hangs. Guess he wanted to keep a low profile. Though, I gotta say, if that’s the case, he’s not exactly doing a bang-up job. Word is, he’s hit practically every bar in town except for Willy’s. Moping and drinking himself into a frenzy. Worse than last time. I can’t think of any reason other than Dru, can you? I’m thinking this time for good, and he doesn’t know how to handle it. Ass decided to come back here.” Xander clenched his teeth as though to restrain himself from lashing out. “Not only does he have the worst timing ever, but I can’t think of one person who would hesitate before...well, I’m still pissed about the entire Cordy thing, as I’m sure Willow is...even though she and Oz came to that understanding. And Buff... Well, you were trapped with the guy for hours on end. A matter Angel would likely...” He trailed off when he saw that he had lost her. “Buffy?”

But Buffy was swimming through a sea of new, unwanted thoughts. While she wasn’t about to completely believe some off-handed report from someone like Willy, she couldn’t help but wonder how much of what he’d said was based in truth. Her time with Spike time together, however brief, had convinced her he did have feelings for her, but he’d made it perfectly clear that he wasn’t thrilled about those feelings. It was something he didn’t understand, didn’t want to understand, and sure as hell didn’t want to obey. And yet it had brought him back, and he fell helpless to its call.

Had he returned to Drusilla after he left? Could he have done that? Simply experience what they had experienced and go back?

The notion made her gut clench. She ignored the voice that reminded her that she had done the same, but dammit, her situation was different. Angel lived in Sunnydale—he was unavoidable. Locating Drusilla required seeking her out. Would he have tried to find her? Had she rejected him again? Was that the real reason behind his return?

God, that hurt. It was deserved after what she had said, but damn, it still hurt.

“This is Commander Harris paging Spaceship Buffy. Buffy, do you copy?”

She blinked and looked at him. Then she was on her feet.

“Wait! Where are you going?”

That was a good question and she had no answer at the moment. She just had to get out of there before someone came close to guessing the truth. The slip of paper in her hand rubbed at her skin, and she invented a quick excuse. “Demon. Books. Gotta go.”

At that, Giles took a step forward. “Buffy, there’s something you ought to know about—”

“Later.”

“But it’s really most important—”

“And I’m sure it’ll be just as important when I get back.”

“But—”

“We’ll talk later. No rest for the wicked.”

Wesley cleared his throat. “But you should wait for Faith—”

She flinched and shook her head. “That’d be a no. I can handle it. Really guys. Chill.”

“Buff.” Xander again. “What if you run into Spike?”

There was a pause. Her back was to them. “I’ll handle it,” she answered softly.

Then she was out the door.

UNFORGETTABLE

IT WAS A GOOD PLAN. Straight, one-track, and left little room for error. The only problem was it went up in smoke the second she arrived.

The apartment door was open, swinging partially in the apartment building's weak ventilation system, and presented a creepy film noir sequence of a gangster break-in. It was odd feeling her heart constrict with worry for a demon, but it did at that.

Two things were immediately clear: the break-in had been a hit, not random, and whoever had done it had had fun.

Buffy drew in a deep breath and crossed the threshold.

A lot of fun.

"Friend of yours?"

Buffy froze in place, her heart leaping. Good god, she hadn't expected him to seek her out so soon. Not after the way they left had things last night. And yet he was there. When she turned, he was there. Standing inside the dead demon's apartment.

"Spike." She licked her lips. "Uhm...h-how...how did you get in here?"

There were a few seconds of silence, during which time he looked her over from head to toe, his eyes shining with something she might call... Well, she wasn't sure. No one had ever looked at her like that.

As though she was the cutest thing he had ever had the pleasure of seeing. Not until him.

Then it was gone, and the mask of indifference was back. Spike arched a brow. "Demon's flat, pet. Don't exactly require and invite. And two, in case it escaped your notice, he's kinda dead."

"Yeah, noticed the dead part," Buffy retorted, trying to sound neutral. It wasn't going to work if he came closer...like he was doing. Albeit it was only one step, but dammit, it was still distracting. "Your handiwork?"

Spike stared at her. "Right," he said slowly. "Cause since I bagged a slayer in the full-out physical sense, I must be a pussy-whipped demon-killer now."

The words were the icy shower she needed. Buffy hardened her jaw. "Well, if that's the case, what the hell are you doing here?"

Spike snickered and shook his head, reaching for his cigarettes as he took another step forward. "Dear me, aren't we defensive? Noticing a pattern with this, love. Seems every time I see you, you're in a snit about somethin' or other. Lemme guess, you and Angel are on the outs again. It makes sense, especially after last night. Big sod's even broodier than usual, from what I've seen."

"Broody's better than insane," she snapped, crossing her arms. "How's Drusilla these days?"

Spike arched an eyebrow, lighting his cigarette. "You'd have to ask someone else. Haven't seen her."

"Not how I hear it."

He stared at her, frowning. "Huh's that? What's not how you hear it? Did I miss somethin'?"

"You tell me."

If anything, he looked even more confused. Spike drew a long hit off his cigarette and shook his head. "Buffy, start from the beginnin'. What does Dru have to do with anything?"

Buffy. He used her first name as though it was the most natural thing in the world. The way he had *that night*.

"Funny. I was about to ask you the same thing," she replied with

confidence she didn't feel. "Xander dropped by the library today. Said that the word is out that you're back in town."

"Damn. And I went to so much trouble to keep it quiet," he grumbled with obvious lack of concern. "Yeah, and? I suppose there's a point to this highly unsurprising turn of events. Please don't keep me hanging."

Buffy scowled and crossed her arms. "Apparently, everyone thinks that the new and improved mopeyness that you've made absolutely no point to hide is because of Dru. They think you got dumped again."

Spike just stared at her. "Hold up," he said, raising a hand. "You think that's it, don't you? You think I'm back here because of her. Because—"

"What? I suppose you're going to tell me that you aren't?" The words sounded ridiculous enough unspoken; breathing life into them made her want to beat herself to death with her own shoes. That small voice harbored deep inside simply wouldn't let up—wouldn't allow her defenses to fall. If she stood before him unguarded, there was no way she'd walk away unscathed. And Buffy couldn't hurt again. Not after the trauma that was last summer. No way. Huh uh. "Come on, Spike. Five weeks is a long time. I'm sure you—"

"Are you completely daft? God, you're a piece of work, Summers. I come all this way and you have the bloody gall to..." He trailed off when he saw the look on her face, and seemed to lose his fire. Softer now, he lowered his head. "What part of last night didn't you understand? I came back for you, pet. Just like you asked me."

At that, Buffy fidgeted nervously.

"Seems as I recall, you were the one who thought it right timing to rip a bloke's heart out," he growled. "Now you're makin' with this cockamamie story as though it gives you...what? Grounds? Buffy, I've been in town for less than a week. Don't really think the demon populace is on the up and up of what revs my motor these days. Not unless you've done your share of broadcasting to the world since our...thing."

"Of course not!"

"Then don't get your knickers in a twist."

"Kinda impossible when you're around." The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them, and by the widening of his eyes and the grin that spread across his lips, he wouldn't let it slide. "Oh stop it. You know what I meant. God, do you really think it's something I'd brag about?"

A flash of hurt streaked across his features, but was gone the next instant. He shrugged. "Know I would."

"What?"

Spike rolled his eyes. "*Would*, pet. Other way of saying: haven't. God, the way you carry on, you'd think you didn't trust me."

"Oh, score one for Mr. Perception!"

"What have I ever done to make you not trust me?"

She narrowed her eyes/

"I meant since what happened, and you bloody well know it," he growled. "Don't get all tight-assed on me."

"I'm not—"

"Save it, Summers."

"Just level with me. Did you go back after Dru?"

He stared at her incredulously. "You're off your wagon."

"Oh, come on, Spike," she retorted. "You've been gone for weeks now. And it wasn't like you bothered to hide how much of an inconvenience you thought it was that you had feelings..." Buffy trailed off when he started taking steps toward her once more, his glower in full affect. Anger. Heat. Desire. Everything he wasn't supposed to feel—not for her. The full ridiculousness of her accusation finally slammed into her, and she knew then that he had done anything but go back to Drusilla. There was no way. Not with him looking at her like that.

"Or what?" he growled. Oh, god, he was so dangerously close. "You really think I'm capable of something like that? That'd I'd...I'd bloody well turn my world, my whole sodding existence upside down, halfway lose my mind because of what you did to me, then go weepin' and crawlin' back to Dru? Maybe you're capable of that, Slayer. Maybe you can do what we did, feel what we did and go crawlin' back to your ex full of guilt and anguish and regret. Not me."

It's not in my make-up. What happened between us was a bloody revelation. I couldn't go back to her if I wanted to. Not after you. I'm not like you in that, pet. I don' have that sodding luxury." A growl, then he was pacing. "And yeah, I'm right brassed off about it. You think you can do that to me? Just feed me up, tie me down, gimme what you gave me, and bloody well shut me out when I come back here? I did exactly what you wanted me to do, Buffy! God, and here I thought I was pushing it returning when I did. Thought it was too soon. If I'd've thought that you'd forget everything, I never woulda left town. I never..."

That was it. Her heart was breaking and she was too stubborn to do anything to prevent it.

Her silence had him looking up. The blaze within his eyes intensified, then softened. As though he could see how torn she was.

"Buffy," he said softly. "I know you've...I know it's gotta be bloody confusin' for you. Okay? I'm not a complete jerk. I know that you've been giving Angel the cold shoulder...and that's gotta be difficult. I bollocks things up, pidge. All the time. I know that...I didn't mean when I said that you'd...that it was easy for you to..." A sigh and he broke off, unable to look at her a second longer. "Just...I didn't mean it, all right?"

"Yes you did."

Spike shook his head, eyes wide and desperate. "No, baby. I don't wanna hurt you. I didn't mean to..." He was three seconds away from covering the space between them, and they both knew it. Their night together had proven that alone—if he was enamored with a woman, he absolutely hated being the source of her pain. "I gave up wanting to hurt you... Well, it was only that night, but god, it feels like a sodding lifetime has passed since then. An' believe me, vampire here, I bloody well know what a lifetime feels like. Please, I—"

"Spike..." There was resignation in her voice. "I can't do this now."

"I don't think it matters if you can or not, love. We've gotta chat this out."

"I can't. Not..." She gestured to the dead demon. "Not now. Not like...there's important stuff going on now. Really important stuff and

you... I can't have this weighing in on everything else that I do. If you're here, if you keep doing this, I won't be able to... You're getting in the way."

"Oh, is that it? You think you can just put me on hold and expect me to be at your bloody beck and call whenever it's convenient for you?" His brows furrowed. "Did it ever occur to you that we could spare each other all the hurt that this is apparently causing by being honest? I'm tryin' here, love. You can't expect me to make all the effort by myself."

"I don't expect you to..." Buffy sighed and gestured to their surroundings. "Look at this! Open your eyes! I'm the Slayer—I have to be able to focus on my job!"

He nodded at the dead would-be informant. "What? Protecting demons?"

"Yes—no! God, you're ass. He had these books. These books of... whatever. And he was going to sell them to us. To me and Faith and the other Scoobies, but now something—"

"Faith?" Spike retorted, doming a brow. "You mean the nasty bird, yay tall"—he held up a hand in a near-accurate measure of her height—"dark hair, cute, biker chick attitude? The other Slayer?"

Buffy blinked. "Did you call her both nasty and cute?"

That prompted a grin. "There are two kinds of nasty, pet," he reminded her. "You oughta know that one better than anyone in town."

"You think she's cute?"

"Got eyes, don't I? Girl's got spunk." He winked. "I like spunk. Oh, but speakin' of her, I have some news that you'll—"

She wasn't listening. She was too angry. Of all the nerve.

Forget this, she was so out of here.

"I'm gone," Buffy spat. Unfortunately, in order to be gone, she had to bypass a certain peroxidized pest. Said peroxidized pest was not about to let her leave.

She didn't make it two steps toward the exit before he grabbed hold of her arm and pulled her against him.

"Don't do that," he said.

“Let me go!”

“Dammit, Buffy. You’ve gotta—”

“I need to—”

“—listen to me. I came here to tell you somethin’. Somethin’ important.”

When she looked up, painfully aware of how close he was, she was greeted with a look that made every cold part of her go hot. Being close to him, pressed against him, made the rational part of her brain take a hike, and he seemed to be in the same boat, having lost the thread of what he’d been about to say.

Then his gaze dropped to her mouth, and he dipped his head to kiss her.

If he kissed her, that would be the ballgame.

Buffy wrenched away before their lips could touch, seizing the anger she so desperately needed in that moment. “Oh yeah. Real important. God, Spike. Just stay the hell away from me.”

He shook his head and stepped back. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Funny how often you feel the need to do stuff and say things that you don’t mean to.”

“Buffy!” He threw his hands up. “This Faith bird, all kidding aside. She’s bad news, love. She—”

He broke off when he saw the look on her face.

And she couldn’t help it; she laughed.

Spike frowned. “What?”

“Faith’s bad news? Faith? Thanks for the bulletin!” Her laugh turned bitter when she saw the confusion behind his eyes. “I know she’s bad news, Spike. She’s killed a man, and I mean a human. She killed a man not too long ago and all but killed me when I tried to keep her from jumping town, and—”

There was a blur of movement and suddenly he was on her, hands everywhere. “That bitch tried to kill you?” he snarled. “Are you all right? Did she get you anywhere? Did—”

The insane blubbering stopped once she realized that his touches were becoming a bit familiar, even if his eyes were wide with worry. Truth be told, it was in all likelihood that Spike didn’t know what he

had done wrong when she pushed him away, but she couldn't afford to take that chance.

"What?" he asked, genuinely curious.

A sigh coursed through her, and any lingering anger died. It was impossible to remain pissed off when he looked so damn...cute. But there was no way she was going to let him know that. "One," she said, holding up a hand to count off as he had earlier. "I'm a slayer, I heal. It's been long enough that even if I had any scars—which I didn't—they'd be gone by now. Two, why do you care? Three—"

"Why do I—"

"And don't give me that 'because I worry about you' bull—"

"Bull? Now it's—"

"Would you please—"

"Stop. Can I—"

"Let me—"

"Finish my bloody sentence!"

That was it. The wall between them finally collapsed and there was nowhere to run but to each other. It was mutual, almost simultaneous. Buffy was in his arms before she could register that any distance had been covered and all thought of protest abandoned her when his mouth covered hers. As though they had been made to fuse together. As though they understood that there was no motive for winning so they might as well do this instead. A battle as always—they couldn't stop fighting each other if they tried. Through every taste there was a challenge, every nibble an answer. Soon the air was filled with sounds of their whimpers and groans when they got in one another's way of further exploration. Buffy knew then, with her hands in his hair, that there would never be enough of this. Enough of what he made her feel, and how effortlessly he could make her feel it.

"Oh god," Spike moaned, halfway in protest when he finally broke their kiss to allow her breath. His mouth immediately became distracted with the soft flesh at her throat, and he shivered when she mewled her encouragement. "God, I've missed you so much."

Somehow that message fought through Buffy's lust-addled mind

and brought her to a screeching halt. Her hands froze, tightened, and finally released him altogether.

She bolted from his arms the moment she felt him draw in a breath to speak. Better. This was better. Safely on her side of the room where he wasn't touching her. Where his lips weren't getting in the way.

"You ass!"

Spike blinked. "What now?"

"Missed me? Missed me?"

He was still staring at her as though she was loopier than Drusilla. "Well, yeah. This entire forced-distance thing's been killin' me. Ever since... I can't stop... I've missed you."

"No. You haven't."

Confusion was giving way to anger, and that was never good. "What?"

"You haven't missed me, Spike. You've missed this." Buffy motioned between them. "It's not...you're just..."

Spike's expression softened and he exhaled a needless breath. "I'm still not following you, pet."

"There's more to me than sex," she snapped, flushing as though saying the word incriminated her in some fashion. "Hell, I don't have to be here for this. I could be anyone and it wouldn't make any difference to you."

A growl sounded through the air and he paraded forward once more, seizing her by the shoulders and giving her a good shake. "Don't be daft, you silly bint," he hissed. "God, if that was all this was, don't you think I could've found someone a little less *you* to scratch my itch for me? Lord knows I tried. Tried to get you outta my system, and that didn't work. Tried to forget you and that blew up in my face. No matter what I did, I kept seeing you."

Buffy swallowed, her eyes widening. "You *tried*? But you said... I thought you didn't go back to her."

A bitter snicker escaped his throat. "I didn't. Never once went back to Dru. I didn't want her—I wanted *you*. And I knew you'd never want me back, no matter what you said. So I tried. But I never once

went to another bird's bed thinkin' it was anything but shagging. Never once said anything but your name. And didn't that get me nice and slapped too many times for comfort. God, I tried to forget you. Tried to forget you a thousand times over. I—"

"A thousand times?" Okay. Shrill. "You were only gone for five weeks!"

He grinned somewhat sheepishly. "It's just a saying, love," he assured her. "There was a floozy or two. I'll admit it. Nothin' to be ashamed of. But it didn't work. I didn't forget you. I..." Spike released a breath and stepped forward again, deliberate and into her personal bubble. He ran a hand down the length of her arm and made to claim her mouth again, lips hovering just over hers. "I can't. I can't forget you. You're everywhere."

Buffy blinked and broke eye contact. While she was quite certain that he didn't possess thrall, it was easy to believe at times. She exhaled slowly and flexed her hands as though to physically restrain herself from lashing out again. "No," she said. "It's not...you don't... God, Spike you don't even know me. I don't know what you missed, but it wasn't me."

"I know you, Buffy."

"Stop calling me that. It's wiggy and—"

"I know you," he repeated softly. "Better than you could ever know. And I missed it all. Missed the way you laugh when you're nervous. Missed how you can light up a room with that gorgeous smile of yours. Probably would dust if I'd ever got a taste of your happiness. I missed your eyes. That look you get whenever you're trying to chat your way oughta sticky situations and. Missed the way you fight with me. Missed that look you get whenever you're seriously brassed. Missed the way we can play twenty questions...even while..." He hovered a hand over her breast. Just enough for her to feel its presence without feeling him. "Missed the way I can chat you up all night and never get bored. Missed your light." At her ear now, his voice was dangerously low. "Those others, they were just warm. Not like you, love. You're simply bursting with life."

Find something! her mind cautioned. Don't...can't...mustn't let him win...

"There were floozies!"

Spike sighed and pulled back. "You still on that?"

"Of the human variety!"

"Well, yeah. Had to replicate you somehow."

"You're telling me I shouldn't be offended?"

"Offended? Love, I was tryin' to forget you. Obviously didn't work out. Besides, I'm sure you've done your share of snogging with Angel since I've been gone." There was a momentary pause as he remembered something. "Unless you were lying last night and really have been giving him the cold shoulder."

Buffy's eyes widened. The stark understanding Willow had given her that afternoon. The surprising lack of surprise. All made perfect sense. "Willow," she said softly, looking up. "You saw Willow last night."

"I did not." A pause. "All right, I did. She ran into me as I was running into a streetlight. Or before I ran into a streetlight." He frowned. "I'm sure there was a streetlight involved. Something got real bright, that's for sure. She talked me right through my drunkenness. Nice girl, Red."

"Why wouldn't she tell me?"

Spike shrugged. "The chit was worried about you. Said you'd been distant. Doing barmy things like...giving Angel the cold shoulder. Hell, the little twig even got it through her thick skull that the reason was you missed me. That I wasn't bloody forgettable after all."

"Spike—"

"Kinda shows what state you've been in, love, when Teen Witch and Big Bad can get together and lick their wounds caused by the Slayer." He glowered at her. "She meant no harm by it. She's just worried about you, is all."

Worried. Oh yeah, Willow was worried. So worried that she had to make like everything she'd heard that afternoon was a surprise. And it was too much. Standing here after such an emotionally

pressing day, talking with the source of her pain while knowing there were places she had to be. Ascensions that she had to stop.

Places other than here that she had to be.

People other than Spike that she needed to see.

This was why a slayer was not allowed a personal life. It got in the way of the big picture.

"I've gotta go."

Spike took a step to the right to block her exit. "Where? You know we need to chat this out, Buffy. Willow—"

"This isn't about Willow. This is..." A sigh heaved off her chest. "I can't. There are things that are about to happen. Big things. I can't add you to the mix right now. I really, really can't."

Spike stared at her for a long, cold minute before his dropping shoulders in defeat. "Right," he said coolly. "I got that. Really. But I could...I could help you. There are things—"

"Help me? This from he who said just recently that bedding a slayer wasn't enough to turn you into some pussy-whipped—"

"I didn't mean that, and you know it."

"Yes you did! God, Spike, you can't just say things like that and expect a clean 'I didn't mean it' to make everything better! Especially if..." Buffy met his eyes, at once exhausted. "This, whatever it is, we can't...it won't work."

He tightened his jaw. "Is that right?" he growled. "Kinda hasty, don't you think?"

"Hasty? No. No more of this. I gotta get out of here. Gotta find Faith, gotta find out who killed this guy, gotta find out if the Mayor has—"

"Wait—"

"No, Spike. I'm through. I—"

"It was Faith who killed the bloke! I thought you..."

His words had her stopping dead in her tracks and turning back to face him.

Spike released a huff when he saw he had her undivided attention. "And there's more. It's why I came here. You got this bloody awful habit of distracting me from—"

“How?”

“What?”

“How do you know that Faith killed the demon? What? Were you here with her?”

Yeah, that was kind of ridiculous.

“No...” he said slowly. “Her scent’s all over the place. Reeks of it... that and somethin’ I’m fairly sure that died in the bugger’s fridge. Some demons just don’t know how to live it up, I’m tellin’ you.”

Faith? Her scent? For whatever reason, that thought did not rest well. “How the hell do you know what Faith smells like?”

Spike just blinked at her as though he’d lost the ability to understand basic English.

“Forget it,” Buffy spat. “I don’t want to know. I don’t have time—”

“Slayer, wait—”

“No. I’ve done enough of that.”

“But there’s somethin’ you gotta know. It’s about Angel. He and—”

“Spike!” She whirled to him again, practically vibrating with anger she knew she didn’t really have a right to feel, but seized anyway. “I. Don’t. Have. Time. I don’t have time to listen to you go on about Angel or Willow, or telling me about your floozies, or your feelings, or any of it. I have way too much on my plate right now to stop and deal with you. You’re going to wind up getting me killed, do you understand? If you cared for me at all, you’d back the hell off and let me do my job.”

“I’m tryin’ to help you do your sodding job!”

“Don’t even give me that.” Buffy focused her remaining energy on not bursting into tears. “Leave. Me. Alone.”

And that was it. With a huff, a toss of hair, and angry spin, she took off down the hall, sprinting for the sunlight. Where he could not follow.



“FINE, YOU STUBBORN BITCH!” Spike called after her, angry as hell and being unable to do a bloody thing about it. Fuck. All. By the time they

were done with this back-and-forth, there would be nothing left of either of them. Mutually assured destruction and all that rot. He wasn't such a wanker he hadn't seen the hurt in her eyes, but that didn't make the vitriol she fed him any easier to swallow. "Just don' come cryin' to me when you wind up dead!"

Except the second the words left his lips, his own anger faded. And if that didn't smart, he didn't know what did. He'd already gone and done the unforgivable by sleeping with the enemy—he should at least be able to remain properly brassed off about it.

But the thought of a world without her in it made some part of him hurt in ways he'd never thought he could hurt. And he hadn't even been able to warn her about what was coming—about the game of musical souls the other slayer was playing. And if Angelus got to Buffy first...

"And you had the nerve to say you're not whipped," he muttered. "Bleedin' wanker."

She would be long gone by the time he reached the lobby. His slayer out there in the sunlight, marching toward her honey's house. Readyng herself to fight a battle that he could have...

The sewers for him. The sewers that he had once mocked Angel for using because he couldn't stay away from watching his girl in the daylight. The sewers because he knew they would get him where he needed to go all the quicker. Lowered to that. Because if his selfish pride got in the way of her duty, he wouldn't be able to live with himself.

It was perverse. It was disgusting. It was unnatural.

And she drove him crazy.

Ain't love grand.

ONE MAN'S RAIN

ON A NORMAL DAY, seeing Xander Harris sprawled on the ground outside what could be considered a Sunnydale slum would have been a bloody hoot. And yet Spike couldn't so much as muster a chuckle. He had spent the better part of his afternoon attempting to track down Buffy and provide all the information he had withheld from their less-than-successful meeting, though the sun had been less than accommodating. By the time he could maneuver freely, too many hours had already been wasted.

However, it wasn't a lost cause until he deemed it so. And William the Bloody was not one to give up easily.

When the sky darkened to the point he could properly call it night, though, he officially began to worry. Or rather, something close to worry, because Spike would not allow himself to worry about her. Not only was it wrong, there was no sense in wasting the energy. She was the Slayer. She could handle herself. She had faced worse. She had faced everything.

But she was the Slayer, and he knew better than bloody anyone how that could attract the wrong sort of attention.

And Angelus was back.

And there was a rogue slayer on the loose.

And it was two versus one. Buffy was talented and quick and he had fought her often enough to trust her instincts, but she wasn't invincible. There was no way she could overpower both opponents. Not if they struck at the same time.

But he wasn't worried. No, of course not. He wasn't worried. Not about her.

He was fairly certain he had overshot worried an hour ago.

Spike prowled downtown Sunnydale three times before acknowledging that the Slayer had likely returned to that school of hers, where he knew better than to follow. He had all but decided to throw in the towel and hit up Willy's when he happened across Xander lying in a heap at the side of the road.

And oh, the possibilities. Spike wasn't too terribly familiar with the boy, aside from the stint when he'd briefly been his captor. He knew, though, that Xander was willing to do outlandishly stupid things to protect those he loved.

It took all of two seconds to piece together what had happened. The alley was bathed in Angelus's scent, as well as the other Slayer's. The rogue. The one he hadn't done rot to warn Buffy about. Curious that Angelus had left the boy alive. Granted, had that annoying, Buffyesque voice not warned him that leaving the boy would cost him even more points, Spike too would have turned on his heel and left without a second thought.

As it was...

Bugger.

Spike dragged Xander's unconscious form out of the road and propped him against the nearest wall. The whelp had a bruise on his face the size of Texas and was dozing so peacefully that it nearly surprised him when he groaned. And then it occurred to Spike that he might not be the most welcome face when Xander opened his sore eyes, but that was a chance he'd have to take.

"Bint better appreciate this," he growled to the uncaring night air. "Oi, mate. You awake?"

Harris groaned and waved an absent hand.

"Mate?"

Another groan.

"Xander!"

Xander jerked forward, his eyes going so wide they about popped out of his ugly face. "Okay, Mom, I'm up. I'm up. I'm..." He squinted, then his jaw went slack. "Spike?"

"No, I'm Spike," Spike replied. "You're a useless wanker on the side of the road. Now get up and tell me where I can find the Slayer."

Another long, incredulous blink. "Spike?"

"Keen observation skills you got there. Pick those up at school?"

"What the..." Either completely unaware or too dazed to realize what he was doing, Xander accepted Spike's proffered hand and allowed himself to be pulled to his feet. "What are you... Angel!"

"Am not!" Spike scoffed. "My hair's actually presentable!"

"No. Angel's all with the...being of Angelus. The Angelus being. He's..." Xander paused and gave the vampire a once over. "And really with the you being Spike. Oh god, I was wrong. This day did get worse."

Spike moved without thinking, fisting the fabric of the boy's shirt and thrusting him hard against the wall. "You saw Angelus? Remember where was he headed?"

"Like I'd tell you!" Xander sputtered indignantly.

He studied the boy for a long moment, then scoffed and let him fall to the concrete. "Probably don't even know."

"Do so!" Xander whined, fighting back to his feet.

"Then bloody tell me! I gotta warn the Slayer, mate. Where was he headed?"

The boy arched an eyebrow. "Right. Because that's oh so convincing. You want me to tell you so that you can *warn* Buffy? Not, oh say, make her even deader than Angelus aims to? First of all, I trust you about as far as I can throw you. And even though I am well built, that's not far. That's barely to the curb...and the only reason you get even that much trust is because I know you didn't kill Buffy on her

birthday when you could have. But that's the only reason. I'm not about to go make things worse."

Spike sighed and slammed the boy against the bricks again. Not as hard as he could have, but hard enough to hurt. "Listen to me, wanker," he snarled. "The Slayer could be in trouble or dead or god knows what. If Angelus is out there, it's already worse."

"Okay, true. But of the two of you, who's killed the most slayers?"

Spike fought the instinctive urge to preen. Honestly, the fact that Xander would even mention that was just flattering. "Well, he couldn't ever master the right tech... I mean, don' get your knickers in a twist. I won't hurt Buffy."

"Sure, yeah. That's believable."

He rolled his eyes. "You said so yourself! If I wanted her dead, she would be. Remember? The birthday-incident?"

"I remember her saying that you only kept her alive because it was that or boredom."

Spike narrowed his gaze. "Are you really that thick, or do I need to pound it into your skull? Come on, mate. We both know that wasn't the reason."

"Oh really?" Xander retorted skeptically. "Is there some big, universal reason why a vamp would go out of his way to..." He stopped, shook his head, and started over. "Forget that. I don't even wanna go there."

"Just tell me if you've seen her! I've looked all over bloody downtown and—"

"So you could...what? Take that shot that you threw away before?"

"God, is this how you and your mates live your lives? Wander around and wonder why I didn't drain your Slayer?" Spike shook his head and took a few steps back, laughing harshly. "It's the same bloody thing all over. The little witch has all these wonky ideas about actual feelings and the like. Slayer thinks I used her for..." He trailed off when he realized Xander looked more than a bit lost.

It was just as well. Buffy wouldn't want him sharing all of their dirty little secrets. Hell, she would likely stake him if he so much as hinted as to what truly happened that night.

Xander was still staring at him. Finally, he said, "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Nothin'."

"Did you see Willow last night?"

A pause. "No."

"So you were talking about a different witch than the one you kidnapped to make you a love potion for your psycho ex. I am so not buying that."

"Like I give a fuck what you buy."

"Who all knows you're here?" Harris demanded. "Am I the last... again? This is so typical. First with the crashing through sign plus beating up Wes—which, by the way, bonus—and now with the... God, no wonder everyone looked all *duh* when I announced you were in town. It's not really a mystery, is it? Can't let Xander know anything, now can we? Sheesh, then I might actually be useful."

Spike sighed, bored. "Are you gonna prattle on all night like a useless wanker or am I gonna have to torture you for information?"

But the statement didn't earn so much as a shiver, which had to be the final nail in the coffin that was Spike's reputation. When he couldn't strike fear into Xander, he was a lost bloody cause. Even more so than falling for the sodding enemy.

If that wasn't enough, the whelp had the stones rub it in.

"Please." Xander snickered and began counting off fingers. "You didn't kill Buffy when you had the chance. You didn't kill Wes when you came into town. You didn't kill Wills last night, so I'm thinking you probably won't kill me."

"Sure you wanna test that theory? Don't make a habit of keeping around blokes who annoy the stuffing outta me."

"Wesley," Xander pointed out. "He's alive. And way more annoying than me."

"You really wanna wager on that?"

"Please. You haven't even tried to bite me. And we've been out here for ten minutes. Not to mention, you found me unconscious."

Spike sighed at that, rolling his head back. "No need to rub it in. But you're just wastin' time. I need to know where the Slayer is."

“Why would I help you?”

Spike’s jaw tightened, and he balled his hands into fists to keep from lashing out. “Because,” he said slowly, deliberately. “If you don’t, Buffy’s gonna end up with a severe case of dead. Her honey’s out there, ripe and willin’ to tear up this bloody town, like you said all of five minutes ago. I’m your best shot, what with your back-up bird bein’ right there along with him.”

When he trusted himself to look at the whelp square again, he saw that Xander’s conviction had started to crumble. Progress at long bloody last.

“Look,” the boy said at length. “I rather seriously doubt that she’s there, but I called Giles at the library and he hadn’t heard from her since I gave her the lead on the...whatever, but she was definitely planning on heading to her house afterward for supplies. Since there has been no news, I’m guessing she got distracted or something happened with the books.”

“The Books of Ascension?” Spike echoed.

“Right.” Xander paused. “How’d you know that?”

Spike batted the question away. “Ask later. When was this?”

“No, I think I’m asking now.”

“Do you want to see her dead or not?”

An uncomfortable moment passed. “Couple hours ago,” Harris murmured in reply.

Couple of hours. Right after she left him at the demon’s apartment.

“If she...” Spike trailed off and shook his head. “You better head on back to your chums,” he said. “Maybe she’s called since. If they haven’t heard from her... God, I don’t even wanna think about it. I’ll head over to the mansion and see what’s going on. That’s the only safe place for him...Angel and his new dish. If they have her, it’ll be there.” He swallowed. “And he’ll be torturing her.”

Xander cleared his throat. “Well,” he began. “If that’s the case...”

“Right. I’m off.”

Spike didn’t make it ten paces before the boy called after him.

“Spike?”

He didn't even bother to turn around. "Yeah?"

"Just out of curiosity, and in no way means you're not a thorn in my side—or indeed, all sides everywhere—but why do you care?"

He smirked at that, looking every-so-slightly over his shoulder. "Cause the world's a wonky place, mate. I'm just followin' my blood. And right now, my blood's telling me to protect her."

"Good. But if that *protect* turns into *eat*, you know I'm gonna have to take you out, right?"

At that, he couldn't help it; he spared a bark of laughter. "Bit late for that," he replied, and made his way off before the boy could piece together what he meant.



THOUGH GILES WAS USED to worrying about his slayer, he'd thought he'd managed to conquer the part of him that shot to the worst-case-scenario when she didn't show up on time, Buffy was efficient, but hardly reliable when it came to such idle concerns as reporting in. However, the past few weeks had been different. She had been behaving oddly, but with more caution than he could usually expect. Nightly patrols concluded with calls and reports—usually a check-up on Faith's behavior. He had grown accustomed to it. Now it was nearing twilight, and word had yet to come in.

He knew he should not worry. After all, it was Buffy.

But being that it was Buffy was precisely why he worried.

Giles busied himself with books to keep his mind occupied, trying to block out Wesley's shrilly observations and complaints. The younger watcher had been going on for the better part of a half hour about how both slayers were negligent of their duties—that was, when he took a break from demanding to know what this 'Spike' business entailed, and pouting like a child when no one bothered to answer him. Particularly Cordelia, of whom he kept sneaking covert looks.

Giles was saved from lashing out at the git by Willow and Oz's discovery that Mayor Wilkins had been alive for more than a

century. This revelation brought all other activity within the library to a halt.

At last, a bloody break. Something to distract him from the fact that hours had passed and Buffy had not checked in.

"I hate to spoil the mood," Xander said as he made his way into the library. "But this is so much worse than you think."

Willow furrowed her brow. "Xander, what happened to you?"

"The question is more, what didn't happen to me?"

"Is this about the Mayor?" Wesley asked, maneuvering around the book-laden table with interest. "Did you find something?"

"Oh no. When I say worse, I mean worse." Xander's eyes wandered back to Willow. "You know how some people hate to say I told you so? Not me. I told you so. Angel's back in the really bad sense, and uh, I told you so."

A long silence through the library.

Wesley stepped forward. "Angelus has turned? Xander, this is terribly serious. Are you sure?"

He rolled his eyes and gestured to the growing swell on his face. "Gee, let me think. Kind of hard to tell. Last thing I remember was his fist. And then Spike."

"Spike?" Willow asked in a small voice. "He was there, too?"

"No. He came later. Was off spurting a bunch of nonsense about... well, I guess it's not exactly nonsense. The guy seemed really wiggled about the potential 'impending slaughter that is Buffy' department." Xander paused. "Call me crazy, but I think there's something going on between the two of them."

Cordelia made a face. "Buffy and that peroxided moron? Oh, gross. Her lack of taste is becoming clinically serious. At least Angel knows the basic essentials of hair-care. I shudder to think of how that bleach has—"

"Okay, slightly more serious than the accessorizing part of Buffy's new love-life." Xander tossed Willow an annoyed glance. "How about the soulless part? The evil 'he's tried to kill us, let's list the ways' part. How about the 'murdering half of Europe' part? Or—"

"He's different now," Willow murmured.

"Is that right?"

"Way! He's so completely..." She flushed and glanced down. "I mean... I wouldn't know."

"Kinda blew that cover, Will," Oz informed her with a gentle smile.

She paled and shot a nervous glance to Giles, who could only arch his eyebrows in response.

"Okay, so I ran into the guy last night," she confessed. "I was on my way back from...well, it doesn't matter. And yeah—we talked. Quite a bit, actually. He was all drunk and mokey and—"

"So you naturally assumed that he's an all right guy now?" Xander demanded.

Willow shook her head. "No! Oh God, no! No, I was very much on my toes. Of the really. I've seen drunk, irrational Spike before, remember? He said about a thousand times that he was all evil-like and didn't care about Buffy, but...I dunno, the vibes he was giving off were really...ummm, not evil? He was in pain of the massive sort. I think it's because Buffy gave him the brush-off. But he is different. I know that much. He even walked me home."

"Okay, rewind," Cordelia said. "You let drunken Spike walk you home?"

She shrugged. "He kinda insisted. Thought there'd be some baddies on the way home. Said Buffy wouldn't take it kindly if I got myself all dead." A still beat, then Willow blurted, "He's so smitten."

Giles released a long breath, his heart squeezing. Not that he hadn't had his suspicions, but there was a rather large difference in thinking something and having it confirmed. He forced his suddenly tight throat to swallow. "Spike's smitten?"

"Very smitten. Won't admit it, though. Had a wig attack of the large variety when I called him on his 'I love Buffy' Freudian slip."

Xander looked nauseous. "Okay, so first he's smitten, and now he loves her?"

"I wouldn't go that far," Willow said. "I think he's confused. Hell, I'm confused about his confusion. And it's obvious that Buffy's confused. But at least they can be confused together. Or...there..."

“Sorry if I don’t feel like bursting into glorious song about my best friend going out with another vampire,” Xander replied. “One that doesn’t even need a happy to channel his inner psychopath.”

Wesley stepped forward. “As riveting as this all is”—he cleared his throat—“it is highly irrelevant. There are more important matters abound. Xander, where did Spike go after you two parted ways?”

“To the mansion. He was...” The boy stopped and blinked. “He was worried about Buffy. Thinks that Angelus and Faith might—”

“Faith?” Willow echoed.

“Oh, did I leave out the best part? Guess who’s Angel’s new playmate?”

Cordelia snickered. “Kinda late to guess, Mr. Revelation Man.”

“Faith and Angel?” Willow demanded. “Together?”

Xander offered a flat smile. “Imagine the possibilities.”

Giles knew he could not remain quiet long, though he couldn’t find the willpower to move. There was simply too much to accept all at once. The knowledge that Buffy was in danger. The revelation of her relationship with one of the most dangerous vampires in history. The implications of the Mayor’s age and the certainty of Faith’s treachery. It was all too much to take.

Most importantly, Buffy was in Angel’s clutches. And she didn’t know.

“Angel hasn’t transformed,” he said.

Though his voice was soft, it carried. At once all noise died, and all eyes landed on him.

“People!” Cordelia said, exasperated. “Which is it? Soulless or soulful? Make up your minds, already!”

“I mean, what?” Xander took several steps forward. “How is he not evil? As I recall, claiming me as his personal punching bag was a characteristic of the evil Angel, not the we-tolerate-him-when-Buffy-makes-us Angel.”

Giles shook his head. “The Mayor put a contract out on Angel’s soul,” he explained. “It was his misfortune that he chose to remove it through means of an old acquaintance of mine. My friend came to me and shared everything. Angel is only playing the part of Angelus

as a farce so that he might extract as much information about the Ascension from Faith as..." He trailed off. "I had hoped that Buffy would set the entire thing up with him before...but given the tension between the two of them recently, I took it upon myself. And today, she left before I could..."

"You let her leave here without telling her?" Willow all but screamed.

"It wasn't my fault!" Giles shot back. "She was out the door before I could—"

"And you didn't chase her down?"

"Yes, yes. We've established that I'm a complete and utter git, all right?" Giles couldn't hide how hard he was shaking, so he didn't bother to try. "I really thought she would have checked in before...before..."

"Umm, Giles," Willow said. "This is Buffy. Remember?"

"There is every possibility that this can work in our advantage," Wesley said. "If Buffy truly believes that Angel has turned, her performance will be all the more convincing."

"Yeah," Xander agreed. "And how exactly will she react to the Spike factor? He's on his way to 'save' her right now."

A series of troubled glances were exchanged—except for Cordelia, who looked beyond bored, and Oz, who remained forever indifferent.

"Well," Willow said finally. "Buffy was wondering what it would take to know how she felt about him. Guess she's about to find out."



BUFFY COULDN'T BELIEVE her ears. It was right there, right before her, and she refused to accept it. Every nerve in her body was numb with astonishment. The blood in her veins ran cold, and she was sure every demon within proximity could hear her heart thundering.

She wanted to cry. She wanted to scream. She wanted...

A tiny irrational voice wished that Spike was with her, if only to remind her that she wasn't who she had been a year ago.

Buffy blinked, but no matter how much she begged her eyes, the scene before her refused to change. Angel. No, not Angel. Angelus. He was Angelus. That gleam. That tone. The face that belonged to another. Angelus.

Angelus was back.

She had to not cry.

She had to escape.

She had to escape now.

"You know," Angelus was saying as he advanced on her, the flames from the fireplace making his fangs shine. "I never properly thanked you for sending me to Hell."

"No." The word was small and pitiful, just as she felt.

"Yeah, and I'm just wondering where do I start? Card? Fruit basket?" Somehow, he had gotten near enough to grab her by the shoulders and pull her flush against him. "Evisceration?"

Kick him away! the Slayer within screamed. *Don't turn into a talking doll! Do you want him to kill you?* And yet she couldn't move, and those damn tears came anyway. "No."

"Yeah, I know what you're thinking," Angelus continued. "Maybe there's still some good deep down inside of me that remembers and loves you. If only you could reach me. Then again, we have reality."

For whatever reason, that seemed to break her out of her daze. Buffy felt herself harden, shoving back the panic and reclaiming a sense of control. "Never happen," she spat, calling her superior strength to wriggle away, and was surprised when he didn't put up more of a fight. Then again, Angelus loved the chase. "I will kill you before I let you touch me." She began walking backward, eyes never leaving the shadow of her boyfriend. "Faith, we need to get out of here. Now."

She whirled just in time to see the Slayer in question reclined quite comfortably against the entryway. "Speak for yourself, B. Me, I like it here."

Buffy's eyes widened as the penny dropped. Faith. Angel. Angelus. *Oh god oh god oh god.*

Spike. He'd tried to tell her about this, tried to warn her. And she hadn't let him.

This was the last thing she would remember before the blow came. The world around her collapsed as stars blocked her vision, and she fell to the ground.

All was still.

COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

SHE WAS HAVING the most ridiculous dream.

Spike and Angel were racing each other to see who could get to the edge of the cliff the fastest, giggling like children. It was Spike who prevailed. He turned to Angel and cocked his head. "You think she's up for a round yet?"

"Timing's not nearly right," Angel replied, casting a glance over his shoulder. The scenery melted from the sunny outdoors to the cold of his mansion. She saw herself chained to a wall, Angelus toying with the bonds. "She needs softening before we have our fun."

"Fun's not to be had." Spike again. He sounded more and more distant with every word. "She doesn't like me to have my fun. It's all tease the vamp around the mulberry bush. Not you, though, mate. She's having a gay ole time tryin' to wager which one of us gets the trophy at the end of the tunnel. Fancy makin' another round before she names the winner?"

"Sorry," Angel replied. "I can't. Terribly busy." He nodded to Angelus, then to the wall. "Slayer's all tied up. Gotta play."

Spike pouted at that, fidgeting. "But don't you care about the trophy?" he demanded. "Needs tending to. Won't know who wins unless we race. I promise I won't cheat."

"Take the trophy," Angelus replied, not even sparing a glance in their direction as he admired one of the finer swords in Angel's private collection. "The race doesn't matter to us, boy. You should have learned that a long time ago."

"It's no fun if I just take it," Spike complained. "And you'll just steal it from me."

Angel shrugged, walking toward his counterpart. "You're right."

"We probably will," Angelus agreed, shrugging. "But you can have fun with it until we're ready to put it on our mantle."

"So you just plan to keep her there?" Spike drawled. "Slayer doesn't like to be kept. She's gonna fight you for the title."

"That's fine," Angel replied. "We like it when she squirms."

Something hard shoved at her brain, and the three chatting vamps faded into nothingness.

Someone was kneeling before her. Her arms were tied behind her. Tied but... And then she remembered. Someone. Angelus. Faith. They were at the mansion. Because Angel was now Angelus, and he was with Faith. Because she liked it here.

Oh god.

And no one knew where she was except her mother. But by the time that she spoke to Giles or any of the Scoobies, the worst would have already been done.

There's Spike.

Buffy shook her head inwardly. *He won't come. He doesn't care.*

A cold breath feathered over her stomach, chilling her skin even through layers of clothing. "Now, now," a familiar, voice drawled. "No need to play possum, Buf. Fun can't be had until you're awake."

She clenched her jaw and reluctantly obeyed. He was right before her, staring up at her with the same penetrating gaze that haunted her nightmares. "Morning, sleepyhead," he greeted conversationally, grinning. "You know what I just can't believe? All of our time together and we never tried chains. Well, can't dwell on the past, especially with the future we have ahead."

Buffy was quite certain that she had never hated anyone in her entire life like she hated Angelus right now.

"Bondage looks good on you, B. The outfit's all wrong, but, hey."

Well, it was a close tie.

She turned her glare to Faith. "Don't talk to me."

"Oh, the girl's all feisty!"

There was no way Faith had any idea what she was getting herself into. A partnership with Angelus? He could barely maintain his deals with demon cronies, and unlike Spike, he'd never form a genuine alliance with a slayer. Turning on Faith would be Angelus's first move after he was done with Buffy.

Two slayers in one day. Talk about bragging rights.

And Faith couldn't see it.

Without warning, Buffy dissolved into high-pitched, near-mad giggles.

"What's so funny?" Faith demanded.

"You."

"Big talk for a girl who's all chained up."

Buffy shook her head, laughing still. "You don't know what you're doing."

Faith climbed to her feet. "Really?" she replied. "Weird, because something about all this just feels so right. Maybe it's one of those unhappy childhood things."

Oh god. Was she going to go into some long-winded justification for handing her over to a psychopath?

"See, when I was a kid I used to beg my mom for a dog."

Apparently, yes. Yes, she was. That was so 1960s James Bond.

"Didn't matter what kind," Faith continued. "I just wanted, you know, something to love."

At that point, Faith found it absolutely essential to pull Angelus down for a round of tonsil hockey. If the intent was to prompt a jealous reaction, then Buffy's captors were far behind the times. The reservations she'd had earlier that afternoon hadn't budged much, though for whatever reason, watching her would-be boyfriend mack on someone else was...boring. And sort of gross.

Besides, she and Spike had been doing that very thing only a few hours ago. Only a lot better, from the looks of it. Of course, she didn't

actually know how she looked when she was in full make-out mode, but she knew how Angel tasted, and while it wasn't fair to play favorites...

Oh, thank god. Faith came up for air.

Buffy fixed her face into an expression that she hope translated to irritated and hurt. That seemed to be the role they wanted her to play.

"A dog's all I wanted," the loony Slayer continued. "Well, that and toys." Channeling her full Vana White, Faith lifted a blanket off a small table at her feet to reveal an array of various torture instruments.

This was enough to silence the snarky voice that had taken Buffy's mind hostage.

Torture time with a slayer and Angelus? Not exactly her idea of fun.

"But Mom was so busy, you know, enjoying the drinking and passing out parts of life that I never really got what I wanted. Until now."

Buffy inhaled sharply, deciding to go for rational. If there was any hope of getting out of there alive, she had to reach Faith on some level where they understood each other. "Faith, listen to me very closely," she said slowly. "Angel's a killer. When he's done with me, he'll turn on you."

Angelus glanced up with a grin. "She's right. I probably will."

Faith paused. "Yeah? Hmmm. Guess we'll just have to keep you around for a while then."

That was better than nothing. *A while* meant that her friends had a greater chance of finding her before she became very dead.

Granted, with what she knew about Angelus, maybe dead was better after all.

"Before we get started," Faith continued, "I just want you to know, if you're a screamer, feel free."

In spite of herself, Buffy snickered. "Yeah. That's happening."

"Just thought I'd make the offer."

"I scream for no one."

Angelus cocked his head. "Not how Spike tells it."

She blinked at him, then relaxed. There was no reason to keep it a secret anymore. No reason to keep anyone in the dark. Not with Angel gone—not with Angelus in his place.

Her British vampire, even at his worst, he was never that blatantly...demonic. Though, he would likely resent the notion, that didn't make it any less true. Spike could be damn scary when he put his mind to it, sure, but he'd long since stopped making the effort. She'd held a stake to Drusilla's heart and won the day. She'd made a deal with him and saved the world. She'd been locked with him for hours on end and revealed more about herself than she ever cared to admit. Shared more than she thought she would with someone who wasn't Angel. A vampire who wasn't Angel.

Looking at Angelus now, Buffy couldn't be gladder that Spike wasn't Angel. She just wished he were with her. Or that she'd taken one of the many chances he'd given her to be honest.

"Well," Buffy began, "there are just some men who bring out the screamer in me. So sorry if you don't measure up."

She could have sworn she saw hurt flash across his eyes, and a pang struck her heart. However, before she could dwell, Faith had cackled and clapped her hands together. "So I was right!" she squealed. "You and the platinum sex-pot were doing the horizontal tango all along. Wow, B. Getting your funky on with yet another vampire. 'Course, that one being of the soulless variety, I can see where the attraction is. William the Fabulously Fucking Bloody. Kudos. You have to be the kinkiest slayer in history."

Buffy shrugged. "At least mine's guaranteed to not kill me directly afterwards."

"Oh no?" Angelus replied. "Is that what you think? Silly girl. You really don't know him at all, do you? Granted, poor William never really knew where to stick it, but let me guarantee you, if he's fucking with you, it's because he thinks he can get something out of it. Something beyond slayer pussy. Probably just for the bragging rights that he took what's mine. I did the same to him, after all. But when the novelty's gone, he'll snap your neck just like the rest of them. He

always has had an unhealthy obsession with slayers. Likely just wanted to know what I saw in you.” He offered a low, cold laugh. “Spike just can’t help but flock to my hand-me-downs. Why do you think he took to Drusilla so easily?”

Another barb that was designated to hurt more than it did. Buffy had learned long ago to take everything Angelus said with a grain of salt.

You’ve got a lot to learn about men, kiddo. But I guess you proved that last night.

The churning in her stomach was familiar.

As was the near-instantaneous detour her mind took to another night. Spike caressing her temples with the feather light touch of his fingertips. Whispering into her hair, caressing her skin with his lips. Holding her as she’d never been held.

“Not the way he tells it,” Buffy retorted. “And let’s just say, for the record, that he did not pursue me at all. What happened between us is and will always remain our business. You might have grown out of me, Angelus, but I think it’s safe to say that Spike grew *into* me quite...nicely.”

There it was again—that telling flicker behind the demon’s eyes that made her insides flush cold. The very same that took the fun out of returning his insults with a bit of her own. Again, Buffy was forced to draw herself back from the line. There was no way that Angelus would reveal so much through a simple look. It was difficult enough to get his soulful counterpart to acknowledge when something was wrong. To see him react so negatively to an arbitrary mention of Spike...

Oh. My. God.

Buffy’s eyes went wide, and when she met his once more, she understood.

It wasn’t Angelus. It was Angel. It was still Angel.

There was no sense in looking apologetic. It’d ruin the ruse, for one. Give up the game. And yeah, she was horrified. Beyond horrified. Of all the ways she’d imagined Angel finding out, her rubbing it in his face hadn’t even been an honorable mention. The last thing

she'd wanted was to hurt him, and she had. There was no getting around that.

But beneath all her regret and guilt was something she wouldn't have expected,

Relief.

It was finally out in the open. And the windows in her mind had aligned, giving her clarity where she hadn't had it before. Watching him play the part of her greater nemesis served as one of the more potent wake-up calls in her short life.

Reminded her of what it was to be near Angelus.

The other vampire—her vampire—the vampire that had held her, caressed her, and whispered kisses across her skin was soulless. Spike was soulless. And yet he managed to express more feeling than her so-called boyfriend ever had as either Angel or Angelus.

Buffy had known it for a long time now. A very long time. She'd just wanted to hold on. A part of her had been unwilling to let go. Angel was her past, and letting go of her past meant growing up. Meant becoming a woman.

Meant embracing something that terrified her.

Spike.

"You vapid little vampire whore." Faith sneered. "Course, we really can't be surprised, can we, Angel? After all, she was trapped with him for...how long was it? Not even an entire day? Yeah, she really needed your soulful half bad if that was all it took to—"

"That's enough," Buffy snapped.

"Oh, don't get all holy on me now, B. You're the one who's been a vampire cum-bucket."

"So, what? You turned Angel because you were jealous? Wanted to know what it was like, and didn't take my 'leave it be' speech to heart?"

"Don't flatter yourself. This isn't about you. It never was."

"And yet, here I am all chained up. Huh."

Faith shrugged. "Bonus."

Buffy tilted her head. "Why, Faith?" she asked. "The sudden one-

eighty? Was the first taste of blood not enough for you? You killed a guy and that's it? You're evil now? What's in it for you?"

Faith just laughed and shook her head as though disappointed. "What's in it for me? The real question, B, is what isn't. You know, I came to Sunnydale. I'm the Slayer. I do my job—kicking ass better than anyone. What do I hear about everywhere I go? Buffy. So I slay, I behave, I do the good little girl routine. And who does everybody thank? Buffy."

Buffy began struggling against her restraints, her eyes widening when she realized they weren't as tight as she'd first thought. She glanced at Angel, who was still not looking at her. "It's not my fault," she said desperately.

"Everybody always asks, why can't you be more like Buffy?" Faith continued. "Yeah, Faith. Be more like Buffy. Screw as many vamps as you can. Get a feel for the big long cold between your thighs. Oh yeah, be like Buffy. Seems like a sound plan. But did anyone ever ask if you could be more like me?"

A flicker of anger flashed across Angel's face. "I know I didn't. Though perhaps in hindsight, I should have."

Okay, yeah. That hurt. But it was deserved.

Faith snickered before turning her attention back to Buffy. "You get the Watcher. You get the mom. You get the little Scooby gang. Hell, you get the vamp gangbangs, for chrissake! I do exactly what I'm supposed to, and what do I get? Jack squat. This is supposed to be my town!"

Buffy jerked again. "Faith, listen to me!"

"Why? So you can impart some special Buffy wisdom, that it? Do you think you're better than me? Fuck B, you're more screwed up than I am, and you can still fool these assholes into thinking you're Little Miss Innocent. Psh. Better than me." Faith shook her head and turned around, lifting her fist. "Do you think it? Do you? Say it, you think you're better than me."

At that, Buffy paused. *So that's how we're going to play this, huh?*

There was only one way to answer that. And she knew it.

Helped even more that it was true.

"I am." She had to bite back a grin when Faith, stunned, slowly turned to face her. Buffy didn't waver. Didn't blink. She just continued. "Always have been."

"Um, maybe you didn't notice...or maybe you did, but didn't recognize a good thing when you had one." Faith slipped her arm through Angel's, curling into his side. "Angel's with me."

Buffy opened her mouth to reply, but before she could speak, another voice—the most welcome voice she'd ever heard—cut in.

"Oh, she noticed," Spike drawled, removing the cigarette that was wedged between his lips and blowing a deliberate stream of smoke in his Angel's direction. "Probably just too busy rejoicing on the inside to even pretend to care a lick. And honestly, Pops. I thought you had some bloody standards. Gotta say, I'm disappointed."

The air froze, but Buffy flooded with warmth. Spike was here. Angel wasn't Angelus, and she wasn't in trouble. Not really. But Spike didn't know that, and he was here. Spike was here.

He had come for her.

At the moment, that was all that mattered.

CROSSING THE RUBICON

IT WAS the sort of silence that lasted forever—stretching and spanning beyond the reaches of time. As though the owners of the three pairs of eyes staring at him had forgotten the outside world existed at all.

“Course,” Spike continued, strolling forward. “You did go all bug-shagging crazy about this time last year and started fucking Dru. Gotta tell you, mate, as much as I bless her wicked little heart, it’d take somethin’ mighty powerful to drag me away from such pure warmth. And to think they always said you were the thinker in the family. Spoutin’ this and that and the like about philosophy, the apocalypse, and all that other rot.”

With a roll of the eyes, Faith nudged Angel and quirked a brow. “Does he always talk this much?”

At that, Buffy couldn’t help it. “Trust me. You’re getting the Cliff’s Notes version.”

Spike grinned and finally met her eyes. “Don’t remember you complainin’ much, love,” he replied. “Course, after a while, we weren’t so occupied with the talking.”

“Either that or I tuned you out,” she said, though she couldn’t do

anything to banish her smile. "I don't seem to remember you ever shutting your yap."

"Lucky for both of us I had better uses for it." The grin tickling his lips broadened and he tossed a glance in Angel's direction. "Whatever you said to her, mate, the day after you popped her cherry, I gotta thank you for it. She and I had a hell of a time proving you wrong."

Buffy's stomach clenched, her mind stuck on constant replay, unwilling to accept what her eyes were telling her. He was here. Spike was here. Despite everything that had happened in the past few days, all she'd done to push him away, he was here. He had come for her.

That didn't mean she was dumb enough to believe they wouldn't return to their more acerbic trades, but for the moment, Spike had seemingly forgotten the nastiness between them. Whatever had happened—whatever she'd said—was not enough to erase his feelings for her. And true, she wasn't in as much danger as she'd thought, but he didn't know that.

Buffy released a long breath. She owed him a massive apology. Among other things.

"Right," Faith said, snapping her out of her reverie. "With as fun as it is watching you two reminisce, your timing's a little off, Spikey. Angel and me, we were just about to torture the hell out of B for kicks. You're welcome to join, of course. Prove to us that you're not as whipped as you look."

"You're not getting close to her, pidge."

Angel snickered. "So you're the hero now, is that it? You think it's as easy as that?"

"You're welcome to watch if you want pointers," Spike retorted. "But mate, if you're not gonna say anything interestin', I'd appreciate it if you stepped aside. Got me a lady to rescue."

"And she'll...what?" Angel asked. "Fall into your arms? Gotta tell you, Spike, all that close, personal time we've spent together since you skipped town? She sure didn't seem like she missed you all that much."

Buffy was tempted to call him on that but forced herself to remain

silent. If Angel kept up this charade, Faith would know the truth and everything would be over. They needed to maintain the lie until they had the needed information retracted from her. Angel had earned his ire, yes, but that didn't mean she had to like it.

"Obviously, your sense of smell has been fried by that bloody awful rot you put in your hair," Spike replied coolly. "With as much as I've been following the both of you these past couple days, I gotta say you're not the one getting her worked up..." He leaned forward on his heels. "Mate."

"Has everyone forgotten the torture part of torture sessions?" Faith demanded. "Getting kinda bored, people!"

"Occupational hazard when you work with him," Spike replied, nodding at Angel. "And—think I was clear a second ago—you go near her and you're gonna lose something."

"You're threatening me?" she replied, arching her eyebrows. "You? Oh, please. You're about as scary as Angel was with a soul, and likely twice as whipped. I'm thinkin' that when all's said and done and you put your money where your mouth is, that you know deep down that Little Miss Buff won't touch you if you make one of her dainty humans bleed."

Spike paused at that, allowing his gaze to travel to Buffy once more. "You think?" he said, eyes not leaving hers. "The Slayer doesn't seem too happy. Something tells me she wouldn't spend much time crying over the likes of you."

"Hey, buddy, *I'm* the goddamned Slayer." Faith prowled forward with a stake that seemed to materialize out of nowhere. "B's not the first, last, and only anymore, or didn't you get the memo? And seeing as I'm not the one who's all tied up, I'd wipe that dumbass smirk off your face and realize that you're in way over your head. Your girl's not going anywhere for a while, and unless you're jonesing to join her, I'd skedaddle. Things around here are looking to get messy." She then paused and shrugged. "But hey—if you're looking to join in on the fun, be my guest. We're in for a wild ride."

Spike snickered and shook his head. "Tying up your intended? Not my idea of fun, pet. Besides, I've ample other things I have a right

mind to do with her that's plenty more enjoyable than the good ole fashioned bloodbath." He spared a quick glance to Angel. "Gotta say, Liam," Spike said, moving forward casually as he appraised Faith with a leering eye. "You know how to pick them, don't you? If it's not one extreme, it's the other. This one you've snagged's as pure as the yellow-driven snow. She's got spine, she has. But you've never fancied your birds to have much goin' on upstairs. It's probably why you couldn't keep my slayer happy."

At that, Angel laughed.

Spike blinked at him. "Somethin' funny?"

Buffy swallowed. "Spike—"

"You," Angel replied, shaking his head. "You all over. Lecturing me on how to keep your women straight. Tell me, how is Miss Edith doing?"

"Wouldn't know," Spike replied. "And for the record, I think the bloody doll was somethin' of your invention."

"I'm not the one who spent the better part of a hundred years pampering a lunatic."

At that, something in Spike's jaw seemed to tick. "No," he agreed through gritted teeth. "You're just the one who made her that way." He looked back to Faith. "That's what you have to look forward to if you decide to spread your legs for dear ole daddy. 'Course, I wasn't around for the first couple decades. Waking up to that every mornin' would probably make me go bum-shagging crazy, too." Spike quickly turned back to Angel before Faith could get a word in. "And while we're on the subject of how one spends his century," he snapped, "why don't we discuss yours. Hmmm? Feeding on rats, stalking high school chits. Oh, crawlin' back to Darla on bended knee back in China?" He flashed a grin and gave him the thumbs-up. "Nice move, mate. Too bad you couldn't off the brat. She might've given you the happy you were beggin' for and spared you a good ninety years of torture."

Angel stepped forward, and for the first time, Buffy could see he was close to losing control. And she didn't know how to stop it.

"Suppose you can tell me you'd be able to handle it, William?"

Angel replied. "A nasty, squirming soul filling your insides with the stench of purity? Screaming out in the voices of everyone you've killed. Telling you where you belong. Doing their damndest to put you in your place. Trying to make you feel...human? You'd be fortunate to last a week, much less a century. And you know what they say...what doesn't kill you—"

"—softens the skin for the next batter who steps up to plate." Spike became a blur of motion, and the next thing Buffy knew, the dry smack of flesh hitting flesh sounded through the otherwise motionless room, and Angel was on the ground. Spike didn't have much time to react before Faith came at him, but she wasn't quick enough, either. In a matter of seconds, Spike had her stake-arm twisted behind her back and threw her to the ground with enviable ease.

"What I think you can't handle, Liam," Spike continued, stalking toward for a dry-mouthed Buffy, "is knowing that your girl chooses one over the other, no matter which face you're wearin'. Baby likes to play—and the good ole toss and tumble's not enough for her." He stopped when he was inches away from her, and the fire in his eyes softened a bit as he ran his curled fingers down her cheek. "Innit so, sweetheart?"

This was so not the time to have a moment, but damn, Buffy couldn't help herself.

Angel had touched her before. Caressed her face just like this and made her feel a thousand wonderful things, but it could not compare. Not with the concern blooming in Spike's blue eyes. Not with knowing what he was willing to do, just how far he was willing to push it. How much he was willing to concede.

Because he hadn't forgotten her. And despite all her attempts, all her self-loathing and hostility, she couldn't forget him, either.

"Are you hurt?" Spike murmured, brushing his lips against her ear. How had he gotten so close? Hadn't he been across the room just seconds ago?

"Kitten," he said, a bit sharper. "Did they hurt you? Can you move at all?"

She blinked, dazed. "Spike..."

"I'm here, love."

"Spike." There was a bit of the old bite in her voice, and she cast a quick eye to Angel and Faith, the latter of which looked about ready to go in for some serious damage. "Hands."

"What?"

"Mine." Simple one-word replies. Surely he would catch on.

He did. Immediately, he sought her wrists, intent on freeing her. When his fingers began to pry at the manacles that held her, his eyes widened and he jerked back as though bitten.

Jerked back and tossed a curious glance to Angel.

And understood.

Then he looked back to her, and what she saw there made her chest tighten. "Ball's in your court, Slayer," he told her softly. "What's it gonna be?"

And again with the surprise. Buffy looked at him, then realized that he was right. The ball was in her court. It came down to a choice. Her choice.

The prospect was not nearly as frightening as it had seemed an hour ago.

"Again with the bored," Faith said loudly. "I think I might hurl if you two get any more lovey-dovey." She turned to Angel. "And to think, you said that vampires don't establish meaningful dialogue with slayers."

"He wouldn't know anything about meaningful dialogue," Spike replied. "Just can't wait to sink his fangs into his next-to-latest conquest. Watch yourself, pet. The big ponce might look like a pushover, but he'll turn on you sure enough...once he's had his fill."

"I tried to tell her the same before you got here," Buffy agreed, oddly conversational. "Faith's not much on the listening front."

Faith looked between her and Angel, and at last, her smugness began to fade. "Did I miss something here?"

"Just several key steps falling into place," Buffy retorted, earning a quick grin from her vampire. "When all's said and done, look at you. Using magic to steal Angel's soul. Must sting to know he wouldn't

touch you in the real world. And then, of course, there's me. You had to tie me up to beat me. There's a word for people like you, Faith: loser."

"You don't look beaten to me," Spike muttered, brushing her hair over her shoulder. "Suppose I could fix that later, if you fancy."

"What, because your blond boy toy is here now, you think it's gonna swing in your favor?" Faith barked a laugh. "Even if you do manage to crawl outta here, there are things in motion that are so far beyond your control, it's not even worth mentioning."

"What?" Buffy snapped. "Your boss's lame Ascension? Like I couldn't stop it."

"You can't."

"I will."

"Dream on." Faith huffed and shook her head. "This is bullshit. All of this is complete bullshit, and it's gone too far." She turned to Angel. "I'll take him if you take her. Or the other way around—whatever revs your motor. We've got better things to be doing than entertaining a couple of has-beens who don't know when their number's been called."

Spike's eyes twinkled. "Just try it. I've done in my fair share of slayers, love."

"That's not going to happen," Angel said softly.

"You're damn straight it's not," Faith agreed, raising her stake.

"You were right about one thing." Angel moved toward her and seized her wrist hard enough that Faith lost her smile. "This has gone too far."

Even still, it took the younger Slayer a second to catch up with the rest of the room. By the time she whipped her head back to Buffy, the shackles were dangling uselessly against the wall, and Buffy stood beside Spike, who had been courteous enough to hand her a stake.

"You played me." Faith shook her head, glaring at Angel. "You all played me!"

"I didn't," Spike said. "I just got here. Nothin' personal, ducks."

"And in fairness," Buffy added, "I didn't know what he was up to

until I woke up. Seemed rather obvious to me. What's the matter, Faith? Not as perceptive as you thought?"

Faith stared at her another second, then an ugly smile carved across her face. "Oh yeah?" she spat. "Just see how long he remains on your side. What, with the boning of blondie here, I don't really foresee the start of a beautiful—"

But Buffy was done listening. She launched herself across the room, adrenaline rushing, blood pumping, and every instinct in her body screaming at her to put the danger down. It took all of two seconds to kick the stake out of Faith's grasp, and then they were fighting for real. Faith was fast but Buffy was faster—and riding a high that made her feel damn near invincible.



FUCK, she was gorgeous. Always, granted, but never more so than now. In her element, a blur of swinging arms and kicking legs. That was his Slayer. She fought with her whole bloody heart.

So entranced was Spike that he almost missed the dramatic Scooby entrance. The door crashed open, and Spike whipped his head around in time to catch Willow's eyes. The redhead stood alongside the whelp and the colorfully haired bloke he remembered vaguely from the previous year. The entire gang was torn between watching the battling slayers and staring dumbfounded at him. And here he'd thought they'd all known he'd be here.

Spike didn't get much time to consider them. As quickly as it started, the battle in the middle of the room came to a swift finale. The slayers froze in virtually identical positions, each holding a blade to the other's throat. Faith was winded and slightly worried—the look on Buffy's face reflected nothing but fierce determination. It was as though she was returning home after a long absence. It was the closest to herself that she'd looked since he'd arrived in Sunnydale, and the expression made him swell with pride, adoration and...

That warm fuzzy feeling. Love?

What an appalling notion. Made him sick to think how easily one

word got stuck in his head. Ever since Willow's more than absurd suggestion, the word had been floating around his conscious and invading his personal space. Moving into the darker corners of his psyche and making itself more at home. Regardless of what happened from here on out, he had a feeling the word was there to stay. It was too comfortable to pack everything up and move out.

But he couldn't think about that now. He needed to focus on the stalemate the Slayers had arrived at.

Faith regarded the blade at her throat. "What are you gonna do, B?" she demanded. "Kill me? You become me. You're not ready for that." She leaned in and planted a kiss on Buffy's brow. "Yet."

Then she was gone. Up and on her feet, and out the bloody door. Spike wagered it might be wise to go after her, but he was too concerned about Buffy to give it much thought.

Still, he wasn't quick enough to get to her first.

Willow fell to the Slayer's side. "Are you all right?" she demanded.

It took a minute, but Buffy nodded. "Yeah. I...we didn't get everything we needed to. Things got a little...out of hand..." She glanced to Spike, her gaze boring through him. Warm and tentative, and she'd looked to him first.

That had to mean something.

"That's fine," Xander said. He, like the rest of them, seemed to have tacitly agreed to ignore Spike's presence altogether. "That's fine, Buff. We'll get to it tomorrow."

"No." Buffy shook her head and climbed to her feet. "It has to be tonight. Before they can move anything, now that we know. If they have the books—"

"They do," Spike said. "Thought I told you that earlier."

A beat at that.

"Earlier?" Xander echoed.

"Earlier?" the mini-Watcher all but screeched. Spike had to refrain from laughing at the purple patch under his left eye. "This really is unacceptable. As your Watcher, I—"

"Yes, earlier!" Buffy snapped. "Look, this isn't the time to scold me for my personal decisions. I saw Spike earlier at the demon's apart-

ment and... Well, he knew that Faith had the books. He tried to tell me but I didn't listen." A sigh coursed through her at that, and she met Spike's eyes again. "You tried to tell me about this, too, didn't you?"

There was no need to clarify which this she referred to.

"Bout your boy going bad? Yeah. Caught that act." Spike tilted his head, finally daring to meet Angel's eyes. "Guess that's what it was, then, wasn't it? An act. You didn't fool me the last time you tried to play the bad boy, but I wager it took reminding you what the prat acts like to pull off the part. Isn't that right?"

Angel glared at him for a moment before casting his gaze to the ground, pointedly *not* looking at Buffy. "Giles... We talked earlier. Said a mage had come to him, hired by the Mayor to retract my soul. I agreed to play the double-agent and get as much information as I could." He trailed off with a sigh, tension dropping from his shoulders. "That went well."

Giles glanced at the Slayer. "I tried to tell you before you left, Buffy—"

Buffy held up a hand. Again, Spike had to school himself to restraint. While all these dramatics were funny, he wasn't about to let his amusement to control the situation, especially when he knew how important it was to her.

"It's all right," she said. "Yeah, it would've been nice to be in the know, but you did try to tell me before I left. I know that." She paused. "If I had known...we could've..."

"That was the plan," Angel grumbled.

Her eyes narrowed. "So sorry if my ignorance spoiled your spy-movie scenario."

Spike's restraint snapped and he all but cackled with glee. He'd been handed a starring role in that three-act show in front of the wanker and now he was getting a front-row seat to a fight? Who knew that God blessed demons? "Ohhh," he cooed. "Lover's quarrel."

At that, Angel and Buffy turned to glare at him. "Shut up, Spike!" they snapped.

Spike brought his hands up. "Hey. Innocent bystander, here."

“Right,” Angel barked. “Innocent.”

“Don’t get mouthy with me, wanker. After all, it wasn’t me who—”

But then he looked at Buffy, and her expression had him biting his tongue. Instead, he swallowed and offered her a nod. They had come too far tonight to be set back because of his big yap.

“They won’t expect us to try anything again so soon,” Buffy said. “That’s why, if we want any information at all, we have to go now.”

“What do you have in mind?” Willow asked softly.

Buffy sighed. “I’m going to the Mayor’s office. He’s bound to have something there—even if it is a small something. Anything right now would be a good. I’m not going to let this set us back.”

“You really think he’d leave his important ‘I’m about to Ascend, ask me how’ papers out for anyone to see?” Xander asked.

“No. I’m anticipating getting my hands dirty. There’ll be some digging involved.” She stepped forward. “You guys have a bad habit of not listening to me when I tell you to not follow me, but don’t follow me. I can’t do this and worry about you, too. I need you to go back to the library and wait for me. Trust me, you’ll know if something of the bad happens.”

“I don’t like this, Buffy...” Giles began.

“Tough. Deal.” Her eyes dropped to the floor for a few endless seconds before finally traveling back to Spike’s

And he took an unnecessary breath. With all his experience, he had never really seen a slayer like this—making plans, working things out, taking charge. The sight of her was enough to steal his heart all over again.

“Besides,” she said, speaking to no one in particular. “I won’t be alone.”

If the words were light, he would have dusted. Sure, she could have meant anyone, but she hadn’t looked at anyone.

“Right then,” he said, extending his hand. “To the belly of the bloody beast and back. You ready, love?”

There it was. All up to her now.

Buffy paused for a long minute. She glanced at Angel, whose

expression was unreadable. She was still long enough that Spike felt his stomach lurch, doubt beginning to creep in.

Then she took his hand. Their fingers entwined, their palms pressed together, and he could dust a happy bloke.

“Yes,” she agreed. “Let’s go.”

Everything changed with three simple words.

No turning back.

Unsurprisingly, he found the notion rather warming.

OF BEDKNOBS AND BROOM CLOSETS

THEY HAD ALMOST CLEARED the last cemetery short-cut when it happened. Buffy abruptly lurched forward, bracing herself on a headstone, and broke down into hard, body-wracking sobs.

“Oh god, oh god, oh god...”

Spike fell to her side, ignoring the pang in his chest. Instead, he caressed her back and murmured a slew of incoherent nothings. He couldn't muster more than that. He knew what this was about. After the high had faded, he'd been waiting for the penny to drop.

Angel.

Just thinking about the git made his insides coil, but he forced himself past it. The fact remained she had chosen. She had chosen him. She had chosen him over Angel. She had chosen him in front of everyone. Spike reckoned some grief was expected. After all, the girl had gone through more than her fair share with the great sod. He had been the great first love—the very same to which she would undoubtedly measure all others for years to come.

All others. That thought almost hurt more than the one that she would spend whatever time they had together comparing him to Angel. Almost.

Sure, the choice had been made, but there was more to it than

that. So much more. More, even, than Buffy understood. Spike was not fool enough to hope. The thrill of being allowed this glimpse into her life was more than he was owed.

Yes. The Slayer had chosen.

She just hadn't specified what her choice meant. And he could live with that.

For now.

In the meantime, these schoolgirl crying jags were of the expected. It was a big deal for her. A huge fucking deal. Mourning was expected.

What was not expected was the sudden lunge Buffy made for him. It took all of two seconds for his surprise to take a back seat to relief, and he curled his arms around her, pulling her to him. Her breasts to his chest, her warmth nearly searing him from the inside.

Yeah. For this, he could go through anything.

"I'm sorry," she whispered against him, tickling the hairs at his throat.

Spike rested his head against hers. "What's that, kitten?"

"For everything I said. Ever since you got back into town." She shuddered and buried her face in the crook of his neck. "You...you came for me."

Astonishment blew him clear out of the water.

Huh?

"What—"

"After the way I..." Another muffled sob. "After the way I treated you... You still..." Her grip on him tightened. "You still...you came for me anyway. I gave you no reason to...and you still..."

"Buffy..." He pulled back, unable to keep from smiling. God, she was beautiful even with tears pouring down her face. "Is that really why you're crying? You thought I'd leave you to the likes of Angelus? I'm not heartless, pet."

Buffy shook her head. "I'm so sorry. I lied to you. You did everything I asked, and I..."

"Hey now. None of that." He pulled her tighter to him, trying hard to not shake like a sodding ninny or break down, himself. He didn't

have much further to fall, and was fairly certain he'd have crossed that distance by the time night bled into day, but dammit all, not here.

"I don't get it," Buffy murmured, calming a bit at last. "Why? I gave you every reason to say 'the hell with it!' and get the heck out of Dodge. Hell, *I* would've killed me by now." She crooned against him, almost kittenishly, and he shivered in turn. "Why didn't you kill me?"

Why can't you kill her?

Bloody good question. The very same he had been toying with ever since he'd left this shithole town, and very definitely since he'd returned. Why hadn't he killed her? Why did the thought of her death make him want to drink until he forgot he'd even thought about that kind of pain? Why had he set out to protect her when the easiest thing he could have done was go straight to Angel and gloat until the wanker cried bitter tears?

I can still see her floating all around you...

Big Bads did not call truces with slayers. Big Bads did not talk with slayers. Big Bads did not befriend slayers. Big Bads did not rescue slayers. Big Bads did not hold slayers as they wept.

Big Bads weren't supposed to want to make love to slayers. Big Bads were supposed to do one thing: kill Slayer.

He did not want to kill this girl.

You taste like ashes.

The same, unbidden thought that had been floating around his subconscious for the past few days surfaced again.

Ain't love grand?

Love. Was that what this was? It was different. It was warm. It was completely separate from the love he had known with Drusilla. It was...

You're all covered with her.

Different didn't mean rot. Different was...exactly that. Different. Different love was still love. Was it possible? Did he actually love the Slayer? The fucking Slayer? The bane of his existence? The very same he had tried to kill, then tried to forget?

I look at you...all I see is the Slayer.

The quivering girl in his arms was a song of strength and light. When she smiled at him, he felt he could dust a happy fella.

Spike released a trembling breath and knew.

Yes.

This was love.

And it scared the piss out of him.

There was no way he was going to tell her this. Not when this closeness between them was still so fresh. Not when he didn't know where they were headed—if they were headed anywhere at all. Not when she wielded the power to break him with the softest glance, the gentlest whisper, the...

Yeah. Definitely love. William the Bloody Awful Poet didn't emerge for just anyone.

"Couldn't," he said at last, his voice thick. "Didn't want to."

At that, she managed to crack a slight smile. "Really seemed like you did there for a while."

"Yeah, for a while. But never again, pet." Unable to help himself, he brushed his lips against the tender skin at her throat, and felt her shiver against him. Then he was speaking, bugger the consequences. "I made my choice, Buffy. I had bloody well made it when I left the first time around. This is where I wanna be. Here."

She sighed. "It's not that easy."

"Why?"

"You know why."

He shook his head. "Explain it to me."

"Well, you're a vampire, for one."

"Well, that would explain the aversion to crosses and the deadly serious sun-allergy."

She didn't crack a smile. Instead, she continued with an old favorite. "You...you don't have a soul."

Dammit. He'd known she'd notice that.

"Turns out they're not exactly easy to come by."

Buffy shook her head. "It's wrong. This is seriously wrong. And you know it."

"Not exactly my first choice in lovers, either." He kissed her

temple. “Course, that stupid rot about freewill and the like gets in the way. I’ve already played this round with myself, Slayer. You can’t change what you are anymore than I can change what I am. Doesn’t mean a bloody thing, though, as to who we are.”

“That’s just it. I am what I am. I’m the Slayer...all the time. I don’t get to just be Buffy.” She sighed again. “I can’t...Spike, I know that there are things about vampires that I know. You need violence...and you need blood. And you don’t have a soul to know why that’s wrong.”

“It’s wrong because it hurts you, dove. I don’t need a soul to see that.”

“But you need a soul to stop yourself.”

At that, Spike arched an eyebrow. “You really think so?”

Buffy sucked her lower lip between her teeth. “No. I mean, I don’t know. I definitely thought so at one time.”

“And now?”

“Now I’m so twisted I barely know my own stupid name.” She shook her head, pressing her palm against her brow. “I keep going back and forth on this—what I know and what you’ve shown me. But trusting it? A world of terrifying. And yeah, one of the Great Romantic Gestures of the times might be to give up something you love as much as you love the hunt for the one person you shouldn’t want, but then, we have reality. I couldn’t live with myself if my... being with you endangered people, Spike. That’s a part of who I am.”

A long pause settled between them. Stifling and uncomfortable.

Then he surprised her by lunging through her throat.

“Hey!”

She likely would have shoved him back with a piece of pointy wood had he not slowed his assault at last minute to favor her skin with a reassuring lick.

Then he asked, “What is this to you?”

“What?”

“This. What we... Whatever we are. What is it to you?”

A beat. “True. We’re true, Spike.”

They both ignored his answering shiver. “And this...” He sank his

blunt teeth into her skin and moaned aloud. Her pulse vibrated against his lips, whispering delicacies of everything he could have if he just bit a little...harder...

"You know what I wanna do now?" he whispered. "You know what my demon's just aching to do to you? Sink my fangs into your throat. Drink your blood until there's nothing left. The essence of the Slayer. The *crème de la crème*. It's there, love. Telling me how good you would taste. How right it would feel. 'Cause that's what I am. That's what I do. Always. Always want blood. Always want the best blood. Always want what I can't bloody well have. You know that well enough, don't you, Buffy? Know what I am. What I'll always want. What I could take. And you know why I don't?"

Buffy panted for a few seconds, not managing more than a whimper. He took that as 'no.'

"Because it'd bloody well kill me if anything happened to you. Had to learn that the hard way. And no...I'm not particularly thrilled with it." Spike pulled back, running a hand through her blonde locks, grinning lightly when her eyes feathered shut. "But I apparently don't have a say. Can't change it. Can't forget you. Can't do anything anymore but be right here. Ans I know that if I wanted to go after a tasty towner, it'd hurt you. It'd hurt everything we...we could have. And I can't stand that." He bent his head once more to nibble at her flesh, eliciting a sharp moan that went right to his cock. She gave him the most delicious moans. "So as long as you care, it'll be who I am. This will be who I am. You can never stop caring, pet. It'd end us both." A pause. "But never kid yourself—it's only for you. Not for them. You get me? I'll bloody bag it if that's what it takes, but it wouldn't be because I want to. Don't have the wiring for that...don't reckon I ever will."

He stopped and held his breath. The world seemed to unravel at her stillness. At her silence. He wanted to see her eyes but feared what he would find.

And he couldn't stop talking, it seemed.

"I'll be someone who doesn't hurt you. Buffy, you have my word."

Something warm pressed against his lips, and Spike all but

collapsed with relief. It was poncy and it killed the sodding cliché, but having her near him—having her like this—made him feel alive. Here in his arms. Here willfully pressed against him. Nibbling at his lips as she sought entrance, filling his mouth with a sweet moan of surrender when he granted it. He felt her fists coil in the leather of his duster, felt his entire body into the most inviting embrace he had never known. The way she kissed him—as though she was forming words against his mouth. A taste of innocence along with the danger of intrigue. And he knew he was lost. If not before now, then definitely with the life coursing through him. He tasted her and she tasted him. Their tongues mated and explored then mated some more. As though the kisses they had shared in the past had not existed. As though this was the first.

And he suspected, in many ways, it was.



“WHAT’S this bint got against you, anyway?” A pause. “Besides the obvious.”

Buffy shrugged. “I guess she thinks that I took her glory away from her or something. The sad thing is, we were getting to being bestest friends before she killed that guy. I mean, yeah, in many ways Faith’s like my evil twin. She’d do things that’d make me feel slightly on the side of wiggy, but we were...working together really well before she went all psycho.”

Spike frowned and tightened his grip on her hand. They had left the cemetery ten minutes ago after Buffy had reminded him that the bad guys still needed to be stopped. And true, while the prospect of playing superhero and saving the day did not rest entirely well with his demon, Spike knew that being a part of the Slayer’s life meant actively...well, being a part of it. He could do this. He could pretend to care.

The determination on Buffy’s face made him wonder how long it would truly be pretend.

“Sounds like you’ve been through a right lot since I split town.”

“Oh yeah.” She shivered. “Aside from the usual woes of being of the Chosen Two, I’ve had to deal with a brooding-even-more-than-usual boyfriend, a tell-me-what’s-bothering-you Watcher, friends who try to help and I shut out for the fun of it, and an evil clone who decided to help the demons in town rather than fight them. It’s safe to say that life has sucked beyond telling of it.”

He grinned. “Poor baby.”

Buffy turned to him sharply, mouth open and definitely ready to give him a lesser fun tongue lashing, then she stopped and stared at him. As he watched, her irritation melted.

And wonder of wonders, she decided to play.

“Uh huh,” she said, giving an exaggerated nod. “It’s just been awful.”

“Anything I can...do for you?” He pinched her ass to punctuate the question. She squealed and scowled and tried to wallop him, but he ducked in time to escape her onslaught, grinning like a madman.

Oh yeah. This was fun.

They ended up on the ground again: Buffy straddling his thighs and holding him with her hands on his chest.

“That was rude,” she said, somehow managing to sound pristine and formal.

“My specialty, sweetheart.”

“Yeah? Well my specialty is staking rude demons.”

“With all due respect, eat me.” Spike grinned and thrust his hips upward. “Please.”

“Dream on.” Buffy scowled, though her eyes were twinkling. The next minute, she was on her feet, offering him a hand. “As much as I’d like to sneak away somewhere right now, I wasn’t kidding back at the mansion. I really need to get the inside on what the Mayor has planned. So come on.”

Spike pouted but accepted her hand all the same. “Did my ears deceive me, or did you just admit to wanting to sneak away somewhere with yours truly?”

“Get over it.”

“Yeah. That’s likely.”

“Spike, if we’re going to try to do this, you’re going to have to accept that stopping the bad guys comes before playtime.”

“But I am a bad guy!” Before she could protest, he had her against him again, tracing a wet pathway from her collarbone to her ear with his tongue. “Don’t you wanna stop me?”

Buffy trembled. “Guess that means I’ll need to take you down.”

“Oh baby. Please do.”

She tried to look irritated—she really did. There were important things happening right now—things that couldn’t be put on hold for smoochies. A familiar reminder it was not a good idea to bring her boyfriend to work.

Then her heart stopped. *Boyfriend? Is that what he is? Talk about jumping the gun.*

Not that she reckoned Spike would have any problem with the title. The notion warmed her more than it likely should, but she didn’t know if she was ready for such a large, significant step. So many others had been taken tonight.

After all, only a few hours had passed since she’d told him to get out of her life for good. Now here they were, with the couply giggles and the straddlyness and the let’s-make-out-athon that had no sign of ending before the next three apocalypses.

“Come on,” she said, continuing toward city hall. “If all goes well, this won’t take long.”

“Well, now you’ve done it,” Spike grumbled, following suit. “Nice knowing you, Slayer.”

She snickered. “You’re coming, right?”

“Not rightly soon enough.”

“SPIKE!”

“Right, right. Here. Tug my leash a little harder. Might get free otherwise.”

Buffy managed a soft smile, waiting for his hand before continuing up the walk. In turn, Spike presented her with a look that melted her even further. Like the gesture meant the world and more to him.

Little things like that were making her realize more and more how lost in this man she really was.

She hadn't wanted this. She had fought it with everything she had left. When Spike had left Sunnydale, while it had been the right thing at the time, he'd taken a crucial piece of her along with him. Unwittingly, he had become the second vampire—man—to leave her the morning after, and despite how much sense it had made or that they'd both agreed to it, she suspected that feeling abandoned had done. There was fault on both sides. Spike had done everything in his power to secure her faith in him, despite the flings he'd indulged in a desperate effort to forget her. And even so, she couldn't really blame him, even if the thought of him with anyone else made her feel violent. Listening to Buffy Summers was one thing. Believing Buffy Summers was an entirely different subject, especially when it concerned matters of the heart. She had a very bad habit of saying one thing while inwardly cursing those who didn't read her mind and opt for the second, unspoken option.

Yet he'd come back as he'd said he would. He still wanted her.

Buffy refused to name the emotion that warmed her insides but squeezed his hand.

"Penny for your thoughts, love?"

"So very overpriced."

He grinned. "Ohhh...so we're in the gutter, again?"

"Spike..." Her tone softened, though a thrill ran down her spine. "I really can't...we have to get this done."

"And I'm not arguing." He gestured to the Mayor's offices. "Lead the way. What's it we're lookin' for? These Books of Whatchamacallit?"

"Ascension," she replied, unthinkingly squeezing his hand again. This time, he squeezed back. They were walking with purpose, now. The building was eerily abandoned—dark in all respects save the middle hallway.

"It's way too quiet around here to be...quiet," she decided. "I doubt we'll find the books before getting the official boot. I just need

to dig up enough to know what it is the Mayor has planned...in all its wonderful vagueness."

He tossed her a skeptical glance. "Buffy, the bloke went through a hell of a lot of trouble getting the sodding text," he said. "I'm thinkin' his being in possession of them isn't something a white hat would encourage."

"Of course. It's not like I'm going to poo-poo them if I see them lying around, but I've gotta be logical about this." Buffy shook her head. "And while I don't think Faith'll be expecting us to crashing in this quickly, Oh, I'm very much set on getting the books. I just think that's a meeting that'll be saved for another breaking-in extravaganza."

"Can I just kill the bloke? Please? I'm sure his being dead will somewhat hamper whatever it is he has planned."

"If you come across him, be my guest to try. This guy packs it with the full out armed guard thing. You'd think he was the president or something. Oh, and it gets better. His secret service is of the undead persuasion."

"Vamps?" Spike rolled his eyes. "Better'n better."

"And assorted demons he tries to keep happy by paying timely tributes. There was this one snake thing in the sewers that ate babies." Buffy made a face. "This was during a random time warp-age by the adults, too. He poisoned all grownups with chocolate and had them acting like hormone-addled teenagers while he stole all these babies from the hospital."

Spike perked his eyebrows, looking somewhat impressed. "Now, there's a man with all his pieces on the board."

Buffy scowled and slapped his shoulder for good measure. "Hey!"

There were no apologies; not that she expected any. Rather, Spike just shrugged. "Well, yeah, pet, I am evil. Doesn't matter how much I love you—that's never gonna change."

They stopped at the same time. Spike stared, wide-eyed, then dropped her hand and stepped back. And Buffy couldn't stop just staring at him.

Then her lips parted and she was speaking.

“Spike—”

Something moved up the hallway and voices drifted down the corridor. There was no time to think. Spike instantly covered her body with his and shoved her unceremoniously through the first door that he saw.

Which happened to lead directly into a broom closet.

After an upsurge of unidentifiable emotions coupled with anxiety-induced adrenaline, Buffy found herself pressed tightly against her vampire, clutching to his shoulders as his own hands found purchase at her hips. She ignored the tinglies that immediately shim-mied up her spine his touch, fighting the urge to lean entirely on his willing body. Instead, she drew in a tight breath and shot him a panicked look as the sounds mingling in the hallway became less adult-from-Charlie-Brown and more distinct.

Her heart was racing, and she didn't know if it was because of the danger of being caught or the thrill of being in Spike's arms. Her mind leaned toward the latter.

“Seems no matter what we do,” Spike mused, “we always end up in a closet.”

“Shut up!” Buffy hissed. “They'll hear!”

“Not if we're quiet. Quit shuffling, Slayer. Or things will get real noisy here in real quick.” He nudged his hips forward, rubbing his erection against her. Bolts of lust ignited through her body but she couldn't betray them. Instead, she slapped his arm again pinned him with a scowl.

“Pig.”

He grinned. “Oink oink, baby.”

“I swear that's all you think about.”

“Well, and I must reiterate: I am a guy. And you can't feel too horrible about it. Knowing what you do to me. How wrapped around your little finger I am, you fantastic bitch.” He leaned in and nibbled lightly on her throat.

“Did...” She crooned into his mouth and gasped when he bit down. “Did you just call me a fantastic bitch?”

“Call 'em like I see 'em.”

“Asshole.”

“You love it.”

And that was all it took for the words to come surging back.

Doesn't matter how much I love you—that's never gonna change.

Love. Spike loved her.

Holy cow.

Her life had somehow become more complicated and more wonderful in the same moment. And she was too damn scared to ask him about it in case he took the words back. If he did, she might fall apart.

So she chose not to say anything.

SPIKE HELD HIMSELF STILL, head buried in her shoulder. For all his talk, this alone was nice. Near perfection. Simply being with her was enough as close to Heaven as he figured a bloke could get. There had never been a time he'd been so relaxed around Drusilla. Not in a hundred years, not even with everything they had shared. Some part of him had known it wasn't forever, it seemed.

He hadn't missed how she hadn't really reacted to his confession, and was relieved. The last thing he had intended to do was blurt he loved her while in the middle of some co-op assignment. Hell, he had only just realized it himself. He was still taking baby steps, and understood that love might muck things up for her. Confuse things more. Might make her withdraw. Thus he was perfectly content to let her feign ignorance.

For now.

Similarly, Spike knew that wouldn't always be the case. With as fast as they were moving, he might be singing a whole different tune come morning. He only hoped what he had to offer would be enough.

“Spike,” she said softly, breaking him out of his stupor, “we better...get going...”

Immediately, he latched onto her neck again, inwardly scoffing at the idea that something as trivial as an Ascension could rob him of

his newfound happiness. It wasn't often he was happy, and if he knew Buffy, it wouldn't last. He wanted to treasure what he could while he could. "People are in the hallway," he reminded her, voice muffled and words forced between kisses. Her pulse throbbed in his mouth, tempting him to take a little taste, but he knew she wouldn't like it. She hadn't protested the bites from their first night together, but things were different now. It wasn't—despite what she wanted to believe—a fling. Not to him, and not to her. "We're stuck here, baby. Might as well make the best of it."

"I..." Buffy crooned and gasped. He growled in turn and thrust his hips against hers, hard cock begging for attention. "Spike...it might be...need to..."

"No one's here, love. It's just you and me."

The voices in the hallway seemed to disagree with that. They stopped rather inconveniently near the closet, projecting loud and clear. Immediately, Buffy tightened her hand tightened on his shoulder and forced him to stop.

"I'm just saying, if blondie hadn't shown up, they might've gotten everything from me." There was a long-winded sigh. "Y'don't get it, Boss. He had everyone duped. Even his own fucking girlfriend. And I bought it."

"You know, it just goes to show that you can't trust even your right-hand man to do an adequate job anymore," the bloke who bloody *had* to be the mayor replied. "Back in the day, if you sent an employee out on assignment, he didn't come home until the product was acceptable. If Mr. Trick had made a sturdier effort to dispatch that Spike fellow the first time he whirled into town—"

"Then they would have the skinny on what you have planned! I don't think you're seeing the big picture here. He. Had. Me. Fooled."

"Oh no," the Mayor replied. "I'm not worried about that, and you shouldn't be, either. Even if they had managed to squeeze a drop of information out of you, it wouldn't amount to anything. After all, my girl got me the books, didn't she? And furthermore, my dissatisfaction with Mr. Trick's performance has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that tonight was nearly a blunder. It's

the principle of the thing. You hire a man, you expect him to do his job.”

“Yeah, I hear you. But why are you going to do about it?” Faith replied. “He’s still some kid’s asthma attack, so problem solved.”

Buffy’s eyes widened and she glanced to Spike. “Those guys!” she whispered. “The ones that you said used to work for you when you came back the first time... He sent them after you!”

The first time. When he’d been chasing a love potion, not realizing that what he wanted was the girl in his arms.

“Caught that, pet,” he murmured. Then, catching her frown, he dropped his mouth near her ear, licked it, then whispered, “Dru’s got nothing on you. Don’t fret a pretty little hair on your head. I’m too lost in you to even wanna think about findin’ my way back.”

“Who’s fretting?” she retorted, but her tone told him what she couldn’t.

He merely smiled at her.

There wasn’t much more of consequence. Inane chatter, this, that, yadda yadda yadda. It wasn’t until Faith mentioned Graduation Day that Buffy seemed to perk once more.

“Graduation,” she muttered, but didn’t elaborate, and Spike didn’t ask.

A few seconds later, the pair outside parted ways—the Mayor insisting Faith get a full eight hours of sleep and that they would arrange a miniature golf date for the next day—then they were gone.

Spike gave them a ten count, listening to the hard breaths rocking through Buffy’s perfect throat before he threw in the proverbial towel and dropped his lips to her throat.

“Mmmm,” he murmured. “Alone at last.”

Buffy gasped and leaned back, her hands grasping his shoulders. “Spike,” she sighed, “we...God...we...we can’t. Not... not here.”

“Gotta kill time somehow,” he replied simply.

“By fucking?” she spat. “I swear, that’s all I am to—”

“Yeah, with fucking,” Spike said softly. “But not just that, pet. Wanna make love to you. So much. I know you deserve more than this. In a closet, of all things. Kinda like our relationship, right?”

Before tonight? In the bloody closet.” He leaned in again. “I’d love to take you out, but it’s still soon. I get it, you know. Besides...you’ve got your do-gooder work to do. Haven’t found the books, have we? So in the meantime...let me...” The hand at her right hip moved suddenly, shifting to part her legs for him. “Please?”

“But—”

“I’m not gonna take you in here,” he continued, skating his lips over her chin. “But, just for a little while, can we...”

“We shouldn’t—”

“I know we shouldn’t...” Spike grinned. “That’s what makes it so much fun.”

“What if...mmm...” A little hearty gasp rumbled through her lips when his mouth found that delicious pressure point on her throat and began to nibble more intensely. “What...if...someone hears...uhhhh...us?”

He shrugged. “They’ll die of envy, how about it?” The hand still at her hip delved under the hem of her shirt and began caressing the skin it discovered. “Mmm, please, baby? Just for a little while?”

SHE SHOULDN’T. God, she knew she shouldn’t. There were so many things she needed to be doing and none of them involved getting felt up in the closet. And she would tell him so. Really, she would.

“Okay,” she said, and instantly found herself swept inside a desperate kiss. His lips were cool against her—soft and perfect. He tasted of cigarettes and alcohol, smelled like leather and something she couldn’t identify, but loved all the same. And he devoured her with his mouth—the kisses in her past, could not compare. There had been a boyfriend or two in Los Angeles before The Divorce—back when she’d been emerging from her ‘all boys have cooties’ phase. And though Angel hadn’t lacked passion, she’d always felt he was holding back. She would have liked to believe it was because of the curse, but even in the pre-Angelus days, he was cautionary. Hesitant. As though he was going to break her.

Spike was nothing like anyone she had ever dated before. In all

fairness, he did not entirely deserve to be compared to the men and—more accurately—boys of the past. He was passionate and demanding, loving and lustful, considerate and greedy, and a thousand other things. When his hand climbed up her side to caress the underside of her breast, she gasped into him, and he seized the opportunity to plunder her mouth with his tongue. Boisterous. Daring.

She loved it.

Had he not pulled back to allow her air, Buffy figured she would have suffocated happily. As it was, she tipped her head back and gasped loudly. Then his voice was in her ear. Rasping. Demanding. Driving her around-the-bin-loony-toons-insane.

“Tell me how much you missed me. Wanted me. Tell me I’m not forgettable.” Before she could reply, he snatched her right hand and guided it to his cock. *Guh*. “Can you feel how much I missed you? Oh Buffy, doesn’t even do it justice.” He returned his mouth to her throat, nipping lightly at his mark. His mark. She had allowed him to mark her. When he spoke again, there was a note of pleading in his voice. “Tell me you missed me, pet. Tell me you touched yourself every night and screamed my name when you came. Tell me you buried your fingers in that hot, tight little pussy of yours and fucked yourself, pretending it was me.”

Buffy had no words. She skimmed her fingers across his denim-clad erection of their own will, eliciting a delicious growl that she felt more than heard. “Oh god...”

“Tell me,” he whispered. “Please. Tell me you missed me.”

“I missed you,” she said. “I missed you a lot.”

“Me too, baby. So much.” He thrust his hips forward, seeking friction. “You feel what you do to me?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “Oh...so nice...so...”

He relaxed his grip on her wrist as his eyes rolled up back. The resounding growl shot whispered promises to her sex, and Buffy shivered in turn. He waited a minute, fingers dancing over her skin, before running his hand up her arm and down her side so that he

could cup her clothed pussy. "Can I feel..." he whispered, massaging her, "what I do to you? Please, Buffy?"

She nodded. "Yes, yes! Please."

He flashed her an unrepentant grin in turn and slipped his hand under the waistband, "Fuck, you're hot," he said, pushing a finger inside her. "You burn me from the inside." He began pumping slowly, stretching her before fitting another finger in. "You're so... God, so wet."

"Mmmm," she agreed, moving against his hand.

"So tight."

"More...more, please."

"And you smell..." He watched her like a man starved, pumping his fingers inside her pussy, stroking that perfect spot within her. "I have to taste you."

"Have...what?"

Spike flashed a rueful smirk. "Don't tell me you forgot, pet. You'll ruin a bloke's ego."

Yeah, there was no way she could have forgotten, but the time since that night had convinced her of a couple of things—one being that Spike had gone down on her out of boredom rather than want. The need in his voice made her legs shake. "You...*have* to?"

"Fuck yes. I love the way you taste."

"You do?"

"Do I have to convince you?" He ran his tongue over his teeth and waggled his eyebrows. "Oh baby, *let* me convince you."

Buffy nodded hard. "Okay. I think I'm okay with that."

"Good." Spike kissed her again, then dropped to his knees. He spared little time tugging her right leg free of her pants. The next thing she knew, her panties were a thing of the past with a quick rip, and she watched, amused, as he stuffed them into his back pocket.

"For your collection?" Buffy asked as he lifted her freed leg over his shoulder.

Spike nuzzled her sex and inhaled appreciatively, planting feather light kisses along her inner thigh. "Don't have a collection," he

growled in turn. "And if I have any say, you're going to remain knickerless for the rest of your days."

A small blurb of laughter erupted from her lips. "Then you're not going to have any say."

He pouted but gave her little time to dwell—lowering his lips to her pussy once more and nibbling a light path to her burning center. Buffy arched her head back and gasped, waiting for more...but more never came. After a moment, she glanced down and found him favoring her with a particularly evil grin.

"Why not?" he asked.

Buffy stared down at him.

One thing was for certain—they would never stop competing for control. She saw it in him and knew herself well enough to vouch for the truth. Oh, he would fight her for it. And she would fight back. And it would be wonderful.

"Wha...why?" she demanded. "Why what?"

"Why won't I have a say?"

"A what?"

"In why I don't have a say in you going around without your knickers."

"B-because..." But she didn't know what to say, so she didn't try. Instead, she rolled her hips forward.

"Explain it to me," Spike said simply, mouth returning to her pussy. He scattered light mock-bites all along her inner thigh, sparkling eyes never leaving hers. "I go commando all the time."

"I remember."

"Knickers just get in the way."

"Of what?"

He grinned. "Of this." He licked a wet pathway up her slit, eliciting an estranged cry from her lips. Buffy's breathing was becoming more and more labored, and her eyes fluttered shut. When he refused to continue, she forced herself to focus on him with a frown.

"You wouldn't want to get in the way of this, would you?"

"Bah! Get in the way of this? If you hadn't stopped to have a conversation, I would've..." For some reason, the word *come* refused

to rise to her lips, so she gestured instead and hoped he understood. "...already."

Spike chuckled, and the motion echoed against her skin—seemingly stretching to every nerve in her body. "Well," he replied, mouth continuing its mission to tease her without mercy. He blew a stream of cool air against her flesh and chuckled when she gasped. "If you would just tell me why knickers are important, I could get to it."

"You...pig!"

"How stunningly original, Slayer." He licked her labia again, tongue penetrating her ever-so-slightly before rushing back for another tantalizing sweep. Another chuckle rumbled through him. "Come on...you can say it."

"Other...than...my personal..." Buffy dropped her hand to his shoulder and squeezed. "Just...personal...some days...out of month...that..."

Spike perked his brows, his eyes glazing over a bit. "Fuck, I forgot."

"Forgot?"

"You... There'll be days..." He glanced back to her pussy, staring at her with such hunger she thought she might lose her balance for good. "Oh, Slayer. We're gonna have so much fun."

"What—"

Spike moaned and latched his lips around her clit, and her mind went blissfully blank.

SHIT. This was going to be so much better than he'd thought. Every bit of it. From how fucking hot she was to how she gasped and sighed and reacted to every little touch. And then there would be a few blissful days each month when she would bleed from her hot, sweet cunt and become even more perfect than she was already.

Why the bloody hell hadn't he been doing this with her the whole time?

Spike ran his tongue between her labia, growling when she whimpered. The sound drove him absolutely insane. There was

nothing to compare it to—it was the sweetest symphony in the world, and it was his. All his. Even at the slightest touch, he had her trembling and moaning and it was a goddamn elixir. He lapped her up in earnest, eyes trained on her face all the while.

“Spiiiiike,” she gasped. “Please...more...”

That was it. He couldn’t stand it anymore. Spike conceded, catching her clit between his lips, sucking and pulling without ceremony. She was so sweet. So terribly warm and sweet. Her clit pulsing against his tongue, long moans twisting off her perfect mouth every time he stroked her. He loved her clit. Could play with it until the end of days and wouldn’t have enough. Loved how tight she became when his fingers slipped into her pussy, drenching his skin with her honey, gasping the deeper he pressed. And still, it wasn’t enough. She was thrusting her hips slightly against him, likely of her own volition, moaning loud moans of encouragement that only served to work him up more. She sobbed softly when she couldn’t form words, and the sound was music to his ears. The taste of her arousal along with the salt that flavored her skin was enough to send him properly over the edge. His cock strained painfully against his zipper, and he ignored it. He ignored every nerve in his own body that screamed for release, concentrating fully on giving his Slayer the best orgasm in her life.

His Slayer.

Buffy fisted his hair, and he growled against her. “God,” he whispered, “you taste good.”

“So goooood,” she agreed.

At last, he let his fingers take over at her clit, slipping his tongue down the seam of her sex until he was probing her opening. And he drowned in her taste. Never enough. It was never enough. Too long had passed, and this was only the beginning. Only. He would never let her go again. He delved. He tasted. He stroked her to perfection, pulled back, and stroked some more. Softer when he knew she wanted it. Quicker, then slower. He rubbed her clit as his mouth made love to her, rumbling his own pleasure at her taste against the heat of her skin. He could stay here forever. Needing her. Worshiping her. Loving her. He found that perfect spot within her and

stroked with fervor until he felt her muscles clamp and her tremors reach their apex. His hands immediately grasped her thighs to hold her steady, and he lapped her up with enthusiasm as she finally cried out her release.

For long minutes, there was nothing but the sounds of Buffy's heavy breathing. Spike licked her twice more before leaving her clit with a parting kiss. He drew back then to drink in the picture she presented. She was a vision. Chest heaving, eyes glossed over, face flushed and sweat glistening her golden skin. Fucking beautiful. His own Aphrodite.

His.

God, he loved her.

BEHIND BLUE EYES

SHE DIDN'T KNOW how long they had been kissing, and truthfully, she didn't care. Her mind had gone foggy as soon as his lips moved over hers. She knew that there was still a job to do, still an Ascension to stop, still a corrupt mayor with a god-complex on the loose, but priorities fell when measured against Spike's sinful lips. How their make-out session even began was somewhat muddled—she remembered dragging him by the collar to her mouth. Remembered pushing him away only to grab him back again. There was nothing about this she didn't love—the way he sighed, the way he gasped, the way his eyes glazed over when they clashed with hers. The way he warred with her lips and fought for custody of her tongue.

The way he kissed her.

It could have gone on forever—it *would* have gone on forever had Spike not pulled away, leaving her lips with a parting nibble. "Slayer," he murmured. "As much as I'm enjoying this...we better go."

She blinked foggily. "What?"

"I'm guessin' the Mayor's gone. Haven't heard anything... 'cept the delicious little sounds you make." He grinned. "At least there hasn't been anything for a good twenty or so. Better get a move on for those books, yeah? Your slayerettes'll worry if I don't see you home soon."

Buffy blinked and searched for words, but her lust-addled mind remained blocked, her lips still tingling from kissage. It was difficult to even pretend to concentrate with his erection strained against her stomach. Amazingly, Spike appeared very calm.

Somehow, she managed to find her voice. "I've been gone longer before..."

"Yeah, but never with an evil vamp lookin' over your shoulder." Spike smiled and pressed his lips to her forehead. "I don't think I've won your witch friend over just yet, and Harris is far from trusting me. If I keep you out any longer, I have a bloody rotten feeling I'm gonna be greeted with lots of stakes and crosses when I finally get you home."

"Who are you, my father?"

He grinned and thrust his hips forward. "Not unless you're really perverted, love."

"Ugh! Gross, Spike!"

"Your words, not mine."

She pouted and he moaned in turn.

"You don't play fair," he said, lowering his mouth to her throat again. "How's a fella supposed to not shag you silly when your lip does that?"

"You're not."

Spike grinned. "Didn't take much to change your tune, did it?"

"You..." Buffy dropped her hand to the clasp of his jeans and began tugging. "Don't you want me...don't you want..."

He thrust his hips forward once again and they both groaned on contact. "Does that answer your question?" he replied. "Bloody hell, woman, I don't think I've wanted anything as badly."

"Then..." She began fumbling with his belt. "Let's...can we...let me...do something for you."

Spike bit back another groan. "It'd be messy, love."

"Since when do you care about leaving a mess?"

"I don't...I just..." He sighed and grasped her wrists. "I told you there'd be no fucking in the closet, didn't I? You really gonna make

me go back on that? You're better than this, sweetheart. You deserve a nice, big comfy bed. Not some quickie while we're stuck here."

"But you..." Buffy glanced down, arching her brows at the rather telling bulge pressed against the denim.

He followed her gaze and smiled. "Yeah, well...it happens."

Buffy pouted and lowered her mouth to his throat, then sucked his flesh between her teeth. Surely there was a way to convince him. So she decided to do her best, in her limited experience, to drive him crazy—persuade him to her way of thinking. She wasn't ready to leave the broom-closet. Not yet. Not without exploring him as he'd explored her. "Let me..." she whispered against his skin. "Please...I want to..."

He released a ragged breath. "Want to...?"

Buffy smiled and dropped to her knees.

Let him figure it out. She wanted to play.



SPIKE BLINKED DUMBLY, skin still buzzing. His chest ached as though he needed air, but that was impossible. The fog in his head didn't lift until she felt her lips caressing his denim clad cock. Until he realized fully what she intended to do. Christ, if he got any harder, he would surely explode. A low moan rattled through his body, his mind—no stranger to this fantasy—conjuring the image of her on her knees with her lips wrapped around him.

And all was lost. The sound of his zipper lowering sliced through the air, and then his cock was in her warm, lethal hands. "Buffy! I...oh, fuck..."

She ran her fingers up and down his length. Then she was speaking, and her warm breath did a number on him. "I have a lot to make up to you," she whispered. "Let me try."

"Try?"

"To make it up to you. I..." Buffy wiggled. "And this. I wanna try this. I've never...with my mouth...on anyone...and I want to with you. Let me try?"

Let her try? Holy fuck. Even though it was nothing he hadn't already pieced together, the words rattled his bones and made his blood surge with new life. He knew she was relatively inexperienced, but only in his wildest fantasies had he ever seen himself as the man to educate her. To teach her what her body could do. To show her how amazing she was. While their night together had healed the doubts she harbored about her sexual performance, Spike hadn't pushed past her comfort zone. He hadn't wanted to pressure her into anything. Simply being with her was more than he deserved.

The Slayer was many things—a girl. A woman. Someone who had already lived a thousand lifetimes while still enjoying her first. It amazed him. Astounded him. And with every beat, he wanted more. He would never stop asking for what she had to offer, but anything she gave him would always be enough.

If she ever did realize it, it would be the end of them both.

At first, she barely touched him at all—slowly running her fingers up the length of his cock. He knew she was working through her own curiosity, but it was driving him mad, being the subject of her experimentation. God, he must have done something right to get here. In a matter of hours he'd gone from being so sure she would have nothing else to do with him to witnessing the demise of her relationship with the wanker who had stood between them. And now this.

This.

And it was so much more than this.

Then it came, her tongue swept over his aching head, sucking at the beads of precum gathered there, her lips curling and wandering farther down his length. It took everything not to buckle. The slightest touch, combined with everything that was her—her scent, her curiosity, everything that was Buffy—was more than he could bear. It was being swallowed by the sun. Everything she did shook him to the bloody core. The way she softly nibbled at his tip. The way her hand danced still across his length, her grip tightening as her confidence built. The way she coiled her hand at the base of his cock...right there, moving in time with her body's innate rhythm.

Welcoming him into heaven. Heaven. It had to be. Heaven or as close as he would ever get. Her tongue caressed the underside of his erection and he felt her grin against him when he trembled into a long, unrestrained moan.

Spike's usual verbosity failed him. Feeling her, knowing what it meant for them, rendered him speechless. All he could do was tighten his grip on her blonde mane and hold on. He could never feel enough of her. Never get enough of her.

Not even if they had eternity to wear each other out.

IT WAS QUITE POSSIBLY the most intimidating thing she had ever done. Buffy was certain he could feel her heart pounding. More than convinced that at any minute, he would shove her aside and tell her to quit embarrassing herself. She still had no idea what ultimately persuaded her to her knees, and certainly didn't know why she had taken him into her mouth. The reasoning she'd given him didn't make sense to herself anymore. Conjured by a girl who wanted to prove she was a woman, when it was obvious she was a child in adult's clothing.

Blowjobs had always struck her as degrading, thus she'd long ago sworn she'd never perform one. They were men's way of dominating women, and she would have none of that. She wouldn't be the trophy girl for anyone. Not even Angel.

When she'd changed her mind, she didn't know. All she knew was she was here, not repulsed—eager. Determined. Attempting to worship him as he had worshipped her. There was nothing degrading about this moment, and with that, the prude in her died forever. That didn't mean that her confidence was at its peak. She was fumbling to remember everything Kimberly, a friend from Hemery, had told her about blowjobs. How to put her gag reflex to good use. What exactly to do with her hands. How much pressure to apply. If there was such a thing as *enough* in the male vocabulary. How to croon and pretend she was enjoying herself.

But it wasn't pretend, Buffy realized. Even with Spike's experimental thrusts, she found herself loving every second. She loved the way his skin tasted. How he fit into her mouth—not quite all the way, but she compensated with her hands, which he didn't seem to mind at all. She loved how the silky head of his cock felt against her tongue, and how he moaned and released a string of unhurried, incoherent made-up words when she licked and nibbled. She loved how well his balls fit into her palm. How his grip on her hair tightened when she massaged him. How his hold was not demanding—more desperate. How he gasped when she tongued his balls. Every noise he released, every move he made was delicious to her, and she wanted to earn as much need as possible.

Then his voice broke through the dark. "Buffy," he moaned. It was the sexiest thing she had ever heard. "Bleedin'...feels so good, baby... oh god...I..."

She pulled back at last, lips lingering at his tip.

"Don't stop!" he gasped, jerking his hips forward. "Please don't stop. Oh god..."

"Mmmm..."

That seemed to encourage him even more, and his hips thrust sharply against her mouth, cock begging for reentrance. "Holy fuck."

"Spike..." Then she was deep-throating him in earnest, taking him as far as she could as her hands squeezed the rest. Instinct took over then—she licked, she sucked, she nibbled, she caressed. She did anything and everything that came to mind. His moans trembled through the air, and when she felt his balls clench, she knew he was about to fall over the proverbial edge.

"God," he moaned. "Buffy...sweetheart...I'm gonna..."

She nodded her understanding—her permission—and his whimpers reached precipice as her head bobbed up and down. She felt him tense beneath her fingers and redoubled its efforts. This had to be perfect for him after everything she had said and done—how she'd punished him for her confusion and anguished thoughts. How she'd punished him for intoxicating her then fleeing the scene. He was the perfect combination of sandpaper and silk in one glorious

package. Sounds that escalated without warning. He gave a last, deep groan, then grasped the back of her head and came with a tremulous roar, hips pistoning forward. Buffy hadn't known what to expect, but he tasted salty and sweet and she wanted more. Wanted as much as he had to give her, so she started licking his cock before it had the chance to soften, which had him hard again in a flash. Sadly, he pulled her to her feet before she could go in for seconds.

Spike stared at her for a long moment, looking at her as though she had been handed to him by the angels. And when he groaned and covered her mouth with his, she knew there was nowhere else she belonged.

And god, it scared the hell out of her. This had happened so fast. Too fast, her mind warned, but Buffy didn't care as much as she should. She couldn't stop. Not with how he touched her—kissed her. He was murmuring unintelligible adorations again, and she knew if she understood any of them she'd go weak at the knees. He meant it. She knew now. Now that she really saw him, she knew it was true. What he had said. What he had not intended to say.

He loved her. Spike, William the Bloody, slayer of slayers, loved her. And his love was so overwhelming she felt she might explode. He loved her in a way that was foreign, in a way about which she had only read. He loved her as she had loved Angel—completely, wholly, without prejudice. With reservation, yes, but knowing the ends would justify the means. He loved her the way she wanted to be loved. In the way Angel never had.

Did she love Spike? Could she? Buffy had once thought that love after Angel was impossible, and while she saw now the stupidity behind such thoughts, she didn't know if she was ready. She had told herself so often over the past few weeks it wasn't possible—but that had been then, and now she had chosen Spike. She had chosen Spike over Angel, despite hesitation, but that didn't mean she was ready to completely open up. To love.

To love Spike.

But at that moment she wanted it. Love. Love for Spike. She wanted it so desperately. Perhaps it was too early to know if the

warmth she felt was love, but she hoped it was. Buffy wanted to love Spike the way he loved her. The way she felt it in his touch. The words he had not meant to say. The warmth blazing from his cold mouth as he worshipped hers. Softness that a killer should not possess. Softness that he gave her in spades. The promise of everything he was, no masks, but in turn with everything he would be. His vow in the cemetery notwithstanding—he was willing to do it. To go the extra mile. To be what he could be for her. A man she could love.

“God,” he whimpered when he finally pulled away. “Buffy, you bloody astound me.”

She smiled and he growled in return. “So I was okay?” she asked, hands sliding up his arms until they were hooked behind his neck.

The look he gave her was incredulous until he realized she was serious. Then a small, kind smile tickled the corners of his mouth and he leaned forward to give her a kiss. “Slayer, you were...I have no words. That was fucking amazing. Christ, I’m gonna start composing poetry again if I don’t watch my step.”

A childish giggle bubbled off her lips. She couldn’t help it. She was feeling very giddy at the moment. “You composed poetry?”

“The worst stuff you’ve ever heard. It’d make your ears bleed.”

“Oh! Can I see it? That might be a very helpful tactic against scary demons.”

He smirked. “Ha bloody ha.”

“That’s the idea.”

“Evil vixen.”

Buffy flashed a coy smile. “You love it.”

“Yeah.” He reached out to brush locks of hair from her sweaty face, his eyes soft and warm. She would never—could never—tire of seeing him like that. “I do.”

The words rolled off him with such ease Buffy nearly fell the rest of the way. She was so relaxed she didn’t care if she ever moved again. For someone who didn’t give off heat, in Spike’s arms, she felt warmer and safer than she ever had.

God, that revelation shook her to her core. She’d never felt this. Never. Not once. Not even with Angel. Angel was always tense, and by

gum, he'd made sure she was, too. Spike simply was, and there could be no more to it than that.

He was. There was no finale. No recap. Nothing to bottle the potential. She wouldn't cripple him with words. He simply was.

The possibilities were endless.

IN ALL THE OLD FAMILIAR PLACES

“SO THAT’S all we’re looking for, then?” Spike asked as they edged into the Mayor’s darkened office. “The Books of...”

“Ascension,” Buffy agreed with a nod.

“And then we can get the bloody hell outta here?”

“That’s the general plan.”

“And where to after that, pet?” He probably couldn’t help the suggestive way he worded the question, but the teasing look he delivered was definitely intentional. Buffy flushed and glanced away. The sooner they got out of here, the better. She wanted to be alone with him again. Wanted it more than anything. Alone in a place that wasn’t Evil Incorporated.

It had taken several persuading promises to convince her to move things outside the broom-closet. Spike had estimated the building had been empty for a half hour. More than likely, the Mayor and Faith had moved along just seconds after Spike had ushered them into their hiding place. Therefore they had wasted a good chunk of the evening by fooling around, though Buffy wasn’t about to complain. She was too damn giddy to complain.

And her mood was shared. While he hadn’t declared his love again, Spike’s behavior spoke volumes. He didn’t let her stray too far

out of arm's reach, caressing her skin at every opportunity. However, his tone and mannerisms remained aloof. It was an act, she knew. Spike had not been coy about that. Despite how things changed, he would remain what he was. A vampire. A soulless, inherently evil vampire. If she decided to throw her hands up and declare people on the menu, he would comply with a song in his heart. That was his prerogative. He was a being of destruction—he'd been made to make the darkness scream. He was a monster.

But he was a monster who loved her. A monster who would do good by her as long as she asked it of him. What made him different? What made him...this? What made him Spike?

Now was not the time to mull it over.

Spike was studying her when she looked at him again, his head cocked and his expression worried. "Buffy? Pet? Somethin' wrong?"

Buffy shook her head. "No. Nothing."

"Look, if you're...if you're having second thoughts about—"

"No. I'm not." She smiled, "I'm really, really not, Spike. I was...I was just thinking."

He nodded. "Right." Clearing his throat, he returned his attention back to the creepy neatness on Wilkins's desk with a frown. "Don't know exactly what you're looking for, other than the books. Mind filling a bloke in, here?"

"Just anything, really," she replied. "Anything that mentions the Mayor, his dealings, a pamphlet on becoming...whatever it is he's looking to become. Or do. I'm not sure. Ascension, I'd think, would mean—"

"Don't use the word *become*, please." Spike made a face. "When Angelus was all keen on waking up Acatla, he made a big fuss about he was about to *become* something great. Just another reason why I hate that wanker. With him, it's always about Angel."

Buffy distanced at that, arms falling to her sides. "That's what he said about me," she all but murmured. "That night. That night you came to me and we called a truce. He told me that I thought it was always about me."

Spike snorted, glancing back to the desk. "Coming from the prime sod himself? We're all a little ego-centric. It's human nature."

She narrowed her eyes at him. He rolled his in turn.

"Right, fine. It's nature, pure and simple. Vamps are all about the Id. That's where the lack of a conscience comes in handy." Spike glanced up. "I know you pretty well, Slayer, if I don't say so myself. I knew you well before calling a truce that night. Before coming back the first time around, which was why I could tell you what you didn't particularly wanna hear. And definitely after we...after we were trapped together." He cocked his head. "Why do you think I spent half the night playing a round of twenty questions with you?"

Her heart skipped. "Why?"

"Cause I wanted know you. I wanted to know you better than I already did, even if I didn't know it then." He flashed a grin. "And yeah, you can make it about yourself. So can all your sodding Scoobies. Hell, even ole Rupert. But no one, in all my years, has ever been more self-centered than Angelus. That includes yours truly, and I'm not modest."

Buffy couldn't help the grin that tickled her lips. "Nope."

"Not that I don't have a lot of encouragement, or anything." He smirked, then sighed, his shoulders dropping. "There was just a difference. Angelus had fame...more than me, much as I hate to admit it. And he let it go to his head. Thought his bloody existence was the reason the earth rotated."

The memory hit her from nowhere. A sodden Angelus grinning at her when she raised her stake. The eve of her birthday after the Judge had been blown to bitty pieces. She had gone to kill him, she really had. But it had been too soon and she couldn't. And he'd known it. He'd known it and he'd played on her insecurity. Knowing that she loved him. Knowing that she couldn't kill him because she loved him.

The vampire that was currently reading through the Mayor's papers was equally soulless as Angel had been that night. The vampire that was perusing passages of daytime planning and meeting arrangements was allegedly as evil as the one who had

snapped Jenny Calendar's neck. The vampire whose cock she'd had in her mouth had killed more people than she could even begin to fathom. The vampire who had held her when she'd needed it, had pleased her with no thought for himself, had opened doors and aligned windows within the span of just a few hours.

"Hmmm, this is interesting," Spike was saying, holding up a weekly planner. "Entry from a couple of months ago. Your Mayor's contracted to the Powers through a law firm in L.A. Ever heard of Wolfram an' Hart?"

She frowned. "No."

"Bloody powerful lot, pet. Been around about as long as the Powers and alters form every couple centuries or so to keep up with the times. Deals with black magic and the like. Powerful evil. If Wilkins is one of their clients, he has more than just two-bit vamps and a wacko slayer guarding his goods." Spike tossed the planner aside in favor of an older one he found buried in the last drawer of the Mayor's desk. A few seconds later, he reached a conclusion. "Yeah. He had to have...representation in selling his soul. I'm also willing to bet that an association with Wolfram and Hart helped him in more ways than one to get in office."

Buffy's mind was racing. She nodded, feeling very much like a bloodhound that had just picked up the scent. "How old was that entry?"

A pause. "You don't wanna know."

"Spike?"

"Well, for a bloke who used be human and hasn't been introduced to the world's only known age-defyin' solution, I gotta say he's in good condition, all things considered." He met her eyes. "You didn't know he was over a century old, did you?"

"A century?"

"Gotta say, this Ascension's sounding more and more interesting." He placed the book where he'd found it. "Though I don't know a bloke with that kind of attention span. Even Angelus at his most diabolical would get bored after a hundred years or so."

"Why do you keep doing that?"

He frowned. "Doin' what?"

"Bringing up Angelus? Or Angel? I..."

The frown deepened and Spike tilted his head. He didn't try to deny it, which was something.

"Dunno, pet. I guess I...I just wanna make sure that you know who's here with you. I'm no sodding Angel substitute, Buffy. I'm me. William the Fucking Bloody. I'm just as soulless as he was, like you were so eager to observe not a bloody hour ago. Only—"

"—only you're not him. I get it, Spike. I do."

"Do you? Do you really? You think this is some game? You were bouncing me back and forth not—"

"I know. I know." It was hard. How could he go from making her feel like a goddess to crap in a matter of seconds? Except that wasn't fair and she knew it. He needed something—of course, he needed something. Despite his promise to her, even despite the quick fix in the broom closet, he had nothing concrete. He had told her that he loved her, and she had not said it back. She hadn't even acknowledged it.

But he wasn't looking for that. For some reason, there was no doubt in her mind bringing up the Three Little Words was of the major bad. If he hadn't meant to say them, there was no way she was going to use them as her argument. He could always play dumb, and the confession had meant too much to her to have it taken away in the heat of the moment.

"It wasn't fair to you," Buffy began. "I'm going to be making up for it for a long time. For how I acted. Treated you. And not just you, either. I was a monster to Will and...and Giles. I didn't speak to Giles for weeks because he... And now I'm going to have to clean everything up from scratch and..."

The distress in her voice had his eyes softening. "I didn't mean to go off on that," he said. "Love, you've given me more than my fair share tonight. More than I thought you'd ever give."

"But it wasn't enough, was it?"

"I didn't—"

"You wouldn't. You're here. You're really here." A small smile

tickled her lips as her own words came back to slam her. "You came back."

He grinned as well. "Course I came back. Said I would."

"But I—"

"I pushed you, Buffy. It wasn't fair to—"

"Don't go off with the noble crap," she said. "I haven't been... I haven't told you what you need to hear yet."

At that, his eyes widened. "Don't—"

"You're not forgettable."

Spike froze, argument lost.

"You're not," she continued. "Hell, you're so *unforgettable* that trying to forget you distanced me from everyone. They all saw it. They all knew it was you, in one way or another. You who was driving me crazy. I couldn't focus on anything. I was... I was so pissed that you'd left me to clean up the mess, but I knew it was... You said it yourself. You did exactly what I asked you to do, and I blamed you for not reading my mind, even if I didn't know what my mind was saying at the time."

She stopped talking, partly because she worried about repeating herself, but mainly because of the way he was looking at her. In that wholly *Spike* way that she felt she'd never tire of. So full of soul it was hard to believe, really believe, he had none.

And so much easier to imagine herself falling the rest of the way.

CHRIST, he could feel her heat even from across the room. Words. Words gave him life. He thrived on them. Drank, digested, and produced them. Her words were burning him alive with more fire than anything she could have given him before. His arms ached to hold her. He wanted to bury his face in her hair and hold her until time ended.

He was. God, he really was in love with the Slayer.

If desire were substantial, they would both be drowning in it.

Before he could stop himself, Spike had thundered across the office, closing the needless space between them. One arm snaked

around her waist and the other pressed against the back of her head to steady her for his kiss. Fortunate—she buckled in impact, whether in surprise or at the feel of his mouth moving against hers, he didn't know. His teeth nipped at her lips, his tongue begging for entrance and he moaned when she granted it. Then they were mating with their mouths, clutching at each other as though losing hold meant falling off the edge of the earth. And it wasn't enough. He thrust his hips furiously against hers and when she thrust back, it was all he could do to keep himself from throwing her against the desk.

Spike broke away from her mouth so she could breathe, then made play up and down her throat. "Tell me more."

"What..."

"Tell me more." He nudged his erection against her pussy and she crooned again. God, if they weren't careful, he really *would* fuck her here. Right here. In the Mayor's office. On top of the old sod's desk. Papers flying, pens falling to the floor, her legs astride his shoulders as he slammed into her over and over and...

If possible, his cock hardened even further. They needed to get out of here.

"Not," she managed to gasp before he assaulted her mouth again. "Forgettable."

Another sharp thrust forward.

"Oh god. Not forgettable."

"We done here?"

Buffy's breathing was labored and her eyes glassy, and she nearly mewled when he pulled away from her just enough to catch her gaze. "What?"

"Are we done? Books not here, that the general verdict?"

"Books not here," she agreed with a hasty nod. "Ascension on Graduation Day. Big stoppage for a later date."

"Right then. Let's be off, then."

"Where?"

"Well, we got three options, way I look at it," he said, trying very hard to pretend he didn't want to shove her against the wall and have his wicked way with her. "You do your do-gooder work and run off to

the Watcher. Tell him what the rogue bird said to her boss and that the books weren't found, but you'll come back when you think there's a better chance of them being here."

"You really think they're not here?"

"Likely not, pet. If I were running this show, I'd have some lackey working round the clock on cracking the language barrier."

"How do you know it's not in English?"

He grinned. "Because, despite your self-involved world view, older texts rely on languages that aren't Westernized. You expectin' the Cliff's Notes version?"

She scowled, and he continued.

"There's option number one. Number two is I see you home and leave it at that. We don't go any further than we've gone tonight." Spike grinned again when she frowned. "Don't get me wrong, love. There's nothing I'd rather do than take you somewhere and fuck you till you can't walk, but I can be patient about this."

She trembled, arching an eyebrow.

"Yeah, I can. I know it's worth the wait."

"Were you even here a few minutes ago? We practically had sex against the wall!"

At that, Spike let his eyes travel the length of her and ran his tongue over his teeth in the way he knew she liked. But he wouldn't cave. Despite his own body's hunger, despite the fact that he could smell how wet she was, he wouldn't cave. This was worth patience. Worth anything and everything. She had given him more than enough tonight. "Don't make this about me not wanting you. You know that's rot. Buffy, I want this to be real. For us. Not somethin' we do just because we want each other."

"I've said—"

"I know you've said. And I know it's true. I know." He stepped forward, cupping her cheek. "An' it'll be true tomorrow. And the day after. And the day after. We have all the time in the world."

Buffy blinked but seemed to accept that. "What is the third option?"

“Third option...” He leaned inward, his lips practically caressing hers but not. “We go back to my hotel—”

“You have a hotel? Not the factory?”

“Not the factory. Bloody hate being predictable, and I was found out too quickly there the last time.” Spike’s mouth descended on her throat and he placed a feather-light kiss over her throbbing pulse. “Got a room. A nice comfy room, with a lovely bed, a mini-fridge, and a telly to top things off.” He moved away suddenly and grinned when her eyes fluttered open. “There. That’s the third option.”

“That’s the third option?” she replied. “After that little speech about how waiting is a good thing?”

He shrugged. “Well, just wanna be sure you got your cards in line. If you fancy a shagathon, I’m your man. I bloody well hope so, anyway. Rip the spleen out of any other wanker who touches you.”

“Okay, gross.”

Another shrug. “All in a day’s work. This is me, Buffy. Take it or leave it.”

“Oh, I’m definitely taking. Taking is me. And the hotel’s sounding good right now.”

A beat.

“But,” he finished for her, “option number two’s likely the smartest, right?”

Buffy nodded, looking somewhat pained. “Yeah, the smartest,” she agreed with a small smile. “I’m all for the smartest.”

“Right.” He extended a hand for the taking. “Let’s get you home, love. Before your mum worries and all. Besides, it’s probably better that you tell your precious Scoobies about what you found here...and that the Big Bad didn’t make you his supper.” He stopped to smirk. “Well, in any way you didn’t beg for, anyway.”

She flushed. “Okay. Scooby meeting. Also a good. About the conversation we heard and the books... Well, sort of the books. Seeing as we didn’t look all that much, not about what actually went down here, right?”

His grin broadened. “That being the both of us, I’d hope not.”

“Spike!”

“What? It’s what you meant, too, and you bloody well know it.”

Her cheeks went red. “Yeah, well, you don’t have to rub it in.”

“Slayer, when it comes to you, I wanna rub everything.”

The blush deepened. “So I’ll see you tomorrow, right?”

“Bloody right you will.” Spike edged behind her and nudged his still-persistent erection into her ass, just barely. It was enough. The gasp that flooded the air echoed through every vacant corridor. “As it is, I’m turning in with a nice long wank.”

“And what will you be thinking about?”

He chuckled. “After tonight? Lemme count the ways. Namely... that magic mouth of yours.”

He knew to expect it this time but still swelled with pride and more of that love he was growing keener on when she trembled.

For the first time since he’d blown out of this pissant town, he couldn’t wait for tomorrow.

A MIDNIGHT TÊTE-À-TÊTE

IN AN IDEAL WORLD, walking her home wouldn't turn into a massive thing. It was taking her from Point A to Point B, preferably with a kiss goodnight, and promises about the days to come. After all, they had decided to wait. Waiting was a good thing. It made all kinds of sense and tickled the hopeless romantic within. All go for waiting. Waiting had been taken to committee, voted upon, and passed. It deserved its own foam finger.

That didn't explain how she'd ended up pressed between Spike and a mausoleum in the cemetery, doing everything but waiting. It didn't explain why his arms were wound around her waist, why she was thrusting herself against his hard cock, or why she was nearly crying into his mouth with the need of furthered friction.

Rational thought eventually managed to break through her lust-addled mind, though she had no vote on whether or not it was welcome. Buffy pulled back, panting, attempting to piece together Spike's face through a blur of color. "I." Gasp. "Thought." Pant. "You were...walking...me home."

"Oh, we'll get there, pet," he promised heatedly before running his tongue along the roof of her mouth. "It's your fault you smell so bloody good."

That argument lacked logic. "Right."

"It is!"

"Keep telling yourself that."

Spike smiled and pulled back, his fingers playing across her collarbone. "What are you gonna tell them?"

Right. The real world. A sigh rolled off her shoulders. There was thinking to be done. Thinking in mass amounts. There was also a conversation with Angel waiting in the future. She would eventually have to talk to him. To settle whatever was left between them in a manner that could be considered civil. She hoped he would be civil, even if she did not expect him to understand.

The last thing she wanted to do was hurt him, but with as far as things had gone, it seemed inevitable.

"I don't know," Buffy replied. "Willow, I'm guessing, is all 'all aboard' on the Spike train, isn't she?"

"Is she now? Seem to remember chattin' with her, though last night's kinda blurry. I was sloshed for a good part of our conversation."

Buffy pursed her lips. "I'm sorry," she said softly. "About whatever I said. Truthfully, so much has happened that I don't really remember it...but it wasn't of the good, I know. I was trying to be vindictive and—"

"It worked, let's just leave it at that. And you better bloody quit apologizing. Think we agreed that you've done more than make it up to me." He waggled his eyebrows and thrust his cock against her, which made her whimper. "You were confused is all."

"To put it very mildly."

"Hell, I half didn't know what I wanted when I came back, either." Spike leaned forward, burying his face in her neck. "Just that I was tired of looking for you and ending up disappointed."

Buffy half-flared with jealousy but forced her thoughts away. Whatever was done was done. He had left on an empty promise neither had expected her to keep. That he'd tried to forget her with other women hurt, yes, but she couldn't really blame him. She'd tried to forget him, too. And there wouldn't be any more of that.

"Damn right there won't."

"What? Did I talk out loud again?" There was no need to ask the question; his eyes said it all. "I've been doing that all day."

"They weren't anything to me, Buffy. Know why?" He waited but she didn't reply. He hadn't truthfully expected it. "They weren't you. I don't dally around on my women, all right? Was bloody faithful to Dru for over a century. I'm here now, and as long as you'll have me, I'm yours."

"As long as I'll have you?"

"Well—"

"Spike, this is serious." She sighed, her eyes falling shut. "I know I'm young—but I'm also the Slayer. I'm the Slayer with a very permanent expiration date stamped on my forehead. I had to grow up fast. And yeah, maybe I was a little hasty, but there was a time when I was sure whatever I had to offer this earth other than the occasional savage would be dedicated to Angel." Her vampire stiffened against her but didn't object. There was a definite past-tense in her voice. "I'm not with Angel...well, I guess since we haven't had The Talk yet, I technically still am, but I'm...I'm here with you. And that's pretty much the it. The big it for me. I wouldn't have done what I did and made the choices that I made for anyone. You get me?"

A very still silence settled between them. And for the millionth time that night, Buffy caught herself thinking about how intense, sometimes overwhelming Spike's attention was. As though she awed him.

"I get you," he murmured hoarsely. "And love, I...if we're in this, then you gotta understand I'm gonna cover your back like there's no end."

"Promises, promises."

He flashed her a devious smirk but it melted away quick enough. "I mean it. You might be the Slayer and what all but you're going nowhere without a good fight from yours truly."

"Considering your vocation, that's pretty ironic."

"I'm not makin' a vow to protect a slayer, you silly girl." Spike ran a hand through her hair, and she was surprised when she realized he

was trembling. "I'm makin' a vow to protect you. Your being the Slayer is just a side note. I'm in..." Deep breath. "Buffy...I'm in love with who you are, not what you are. We just likely wouldn't have been acquainted if you weren't in the field of demon-slaying."

There it was. Spike loved her. He'd said it twice now. Twice. No room for error. Out in the open. Said again with intention.

"I know," she replied. "I just...how do you know?"

"Know what?"

"That you...that you're—"

"That I love you?" She still couldn't say the words herself, thus merely opted with a safe nod. "Cause I do. I've been around forever, and despite whatever your books tell you, I know how to love. And what I feel... God, don't ask me how this happened. Part of me is still reeling. What I felt for Dru I thought no one could come between. You did. And maybe it was infatuation at first, but I've seen you, Buffy. I've seen you fight and try. I've seen you do things I can't imagine. You sent your boy to Hell 'cause you knew it was right. You fought against the person you loved and knew that there was no good way for it to end. You were determined and... God, just so..."

She didn't realize she was crying until he caressed her cheek, thumb rolling lazy tears.

"I wasn't prepared for you," he continued softly. "You bloody well blew me away. You're more than me, sweetheart. So much more than this pissant world you've been assigned to guard. You got stuff in you that people only hope to touch. And the fact that it's good... that it's everything I'm supposed to... It's crazy. It's bug-shaggin' insane. Wonkier than Dru ever was. But I see who you are and I can't help myself. God save the man who can't help but love you, Buffy, and damn the man who doesn't."

The breath suspended between them drew to an agonizing halt. No one had ever said anything so beautiful to her. Made her feel so much with just words. And there was so much she wanted to tell him in return but couldn't, so she poured everything she could not say into the union of their lips. She kissed him thoroughly, praying that

he could decode her silent message. That he would understand her, vagueness and all.

Everything she had shared with Angel notwithstanding, she had not known that it could be like this. And she feared that it couldn't last. He said it was real, and she needed it to be. She needed it to be real so badly. She needed to trust that it was.

When at last they pulled apart, Spike murmured, "What about your other pal?"

Buffy blinked. "What?"

"Your chum. How'll he take to me? The poncy one that—"

"Xander?"

Spike's eyes narrowed. "Didn't take much to out the contestants, did it?"

She smirked. "Don't read too much into it. Seeing as Xander's the only other guy I hang around, it was more a process of elimination. And what's it going to take to get you to remember his name?"

"It comes and goes," Spike retorted airily. "I remembered it earlier tonight, thanks ever so."

"Is that right?"

"As the proverbial rain. You would've been proud."

Her grin spread. "I don't doubt it."

There was a short, albeit comfortable silence.

"What's going to happen next?" she heard herself ask.

He frowned. "Next?"

"Is this...is this going to be..." Buffy heaved a deep breath. "You really think the non-evil thing is something that you can do?"

To her relief, he didn't assure her automatically. His brow furrowed and he fell silent, eyes drawn far away. He was considering the question for her sake, and she appreciated it more than words could express.

"I would never do anything with the intention of hurting you," he decided after a few minutes. "And that includes hurting others. But we're not meant for absolutes, Buffy. It could happen. I won't fancy up what I am, and I'll never pretend. I've told you as much."

"You have," she agreed.

“But I’ll do my best by you. If anything happens, I’ll go to you right away. Let you know what I did...or didn’t do. You have my word.” Spike sighed heavily. “I don’t ever wanna hurt you, love, but I know it doesn’t always work out like that. I’ll do my best to be someone that... I told you this earlier. I’ll do my best to be your someone. That’s all I can offer.”

“It’s enough.”

“Is it?”

“Yes.” She swallowed hard and cupped his cheek. “I trust you.”

A blink.

“You do?”

“Yeah.” Buffy smiled. “I do. And I don’t trust easily, Spike.”

“I know.”

“It took me forever to trust Angel.” A sigh heaved off her chest. “And when I did, it took his soul away.”

“You didn’t trust Angel?” Spike repeated, notably stunned. “You two had the sodding ‘star-crossed’ melodrama goin’ on for what felt like—”

“I loved him, don’t get me wrong. But it wasn’t enough. Love without trust wasn’t enough for me, and I don’t think it ever can be again.”

“But you trust me.”

“Yeah. I trust you.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I just do.” She shook her head and placed a hand on his chest. “I do. But I’m afraid.”

“Of what, baby?”

“Of you...of this.” She shuddered and he went along with her. “God, it’s all so...”

“Overwhelming?”

Buffy nodded sheepishly. “Yeah.”

“You have no idea.”

It was. It had to be crushing him. Turning around an entire pace of life. Going against his value system. All for...what? What she had to offer?

He was sure, though. There was no doubt or hesitation behind his eyes, and she knew he wasn't acting on impulse. No. Spike knew what he wanted. He had weighed the ins and outs. He had been granted the opportunity to wander and taste the sinful pleasures his demon craved, but he was denying it. He was denying himself so much.

He rejected his nature for her. That meant more than anything. And she wanted to tell him so.

The words, however, never touched the air. Other words beat her to it.

Odd. She hadn't even felt him approach.

"Well," Angel said, voice neutral and eyes equally distant. "I suppose we can call off the search party."

Buffy froze awkwardly, trapped between Spike and the mausoleum, her hands resting on his forearms. She felt her companion go rigid against her, his hold on her tightening. Had she wanted to wiggle free, she could have without struggle. He was not keeping her against her will, just reacting on instinct.

But she didn't move for all the world.

To his credit, Angel didn't bat an eye. His hands were buried in the pockets of his trench coat, his expression void of emotion. "Buffy," he began shortly, "Giles and the others are looking for you. We were worried."

Breathe. In and out. Calmly... God, how long has he been watching us?

A smaller voice interrupted at that. One to which she was still growing accustomed.

Does it really matter?

Yes, it mattered. Despite choices made, despite everything else that had happened, Angel deserved her honesty in the very least. He deserved more than to be casually brushed aside. He deserved more than to watch her and Spike flaunt their newfound relationship in front of him. Spike would have no qualm in gloating, of course. She could nearly feel his revulsion for Angel stretching through his muscles and set in the tightness of his jaw. Yet he managed to keep his mouth closed.

"Well," she said softly when she remembered she had a voice. "I'm fine. As you can see."

"So you are." The words were practically spat. "But you can't blame them for worrying, bearing in mind the company that you decided to keep tonight." He was glaring at Spike. "Buffy, I think we need to talk."

Spike's hold on her tightened. It was the only thing that could have brought her back to him at that minute. Her heart thundered so hard even she could hear it, and her temples throbbed. Spike's eyes softened when he noticed her distress and he stepped back, hands going to her wrists so he could caress the skin there.

"You'll be all right?" he asked.

Buffy smiled her appreciation. "I'll be fine."

"I don't have to—"

"You heard the lady," Angel growled, prowling forward.

At that, Spike's eyes flashed yellow and he snarled with equal fervor. "Back off, you overgrown boy scout. I was addressing the Slayer, not you. An' in case you didn't notice, you're not exactly walking in on me ripping her throat out."

"Spike..."

"I'll leave when she—"

"Spike." Buffy placed a hand on his cheek and directed his gaze back to hers, and his anger instantly dissolved. "Spike, Angel and I need to talk. Alone."

The words hurt, she saw, but she also saw he understood.

"Right," he agreed with a huff. Then his voice dropped. "Sunnydale Inn. Room nine. If you need...if you...I'll be there if you need me."

"Room nine," she repeated.

"I love you."

She smiled. *Those* words sent her into orbit. "I know."

He nodded, pulled back and finally put some space between them. "See you 'round, Slayer," he said. "And good luck." He began to walk off, stopped and turned back. "One more thing."

. . .

SPIKE WOULD HAVE bet money that Buffy didn't know what hit her until it was over. He shot a hand out with speed even a slayer could not anticipate and grasped her wrist, tugging her into his embrace as his mouth sought hers. In all likelihood, their kiss only last seconds, but it was enough. Enough to recapture everything shared, everything the future promised, everything he felt. Funny how the simplest thing meant more connection than practically any other art. He tasted her, savaged her, loved her, and pulled back when he knew he was at heightened risk for decapitation if the scorned lover took another step forward.

A flush of pride over washed him when he saw how she looked. Reddened cheeks, glassy eyes, swollen lips, and breathlessness that tempted him to give Angel a real show.

Boundaries had already been overstepped. He knew better than that.

"Don't forget, Buffy," he murmured.

The Slayer's eyes widened as she fought to return to herself. "Spike...you better go before someone gets seriously hurt."

He didn't know if she meant him or her soulful honey. Judging by the pain in Angel's eyes, he reckoned she was referring to the other vampire.

"It'll be okay," she told him, and he couldn't tell if she was angry with him or not. There was nothing to suggest either. "But it needs to be done." Before he knew what had happened, Buffy's grip about his wrist tightened and pulled him forward. She did not ravage his lips as he'd hoped but rather tickled his ear with the warmth of her breath. "Please trust me."

Trust. The same that she had given him.

"Please."

"Right." One syllable that could not begin to measure the amount of faith riding on its back. The same that whispered, *Please don't make me bleed*. He had bled too much already. But there was something in her eyes that told him not to worry. That all would be well somehow.

"Don't forget."

Buffy turned back to him once more, and he saw what he needed.

It was there. Burning. Etching. Whatever could convince him to leave her be in the cemetery. Alone with the man that had so long been the only glimmer in her eye. And himself—alone with the promise of what he was to her, and how she thought him as unforgettable. Intention he reckoned she didn't recognize herself. Intention that meant more to him than anything that had happened thus far. She had taken his hand earlier and meant it. Now she was taking care of loose ends. And she wouldn't disappoint.

"I could never forget," she said.

She had believed him. She had placed all her eggs in one basket, and she trusted him not to let her shatter.

He had to return the favor.

And walk away.

BITTERSWEET SYMPHONY

THERE WERE times Spike annoyed himself with his own impatience. Like now. All the distraction in the world couldn't draw his mind away from the night's events, or the twist at the end that had separated him from Buffy's side before he was ready. She had said nothing to make him worry, but when it came to Angel, he couldn't help but worry. The man whose death had wedged a rift between her and her friends, and whose return had nearly torn them all apart.

Spike's relationship with Buffy was too fresh to fuck with, and Angel would do his best to rip them apart. He would tear her to pieces and offer to patch her up. That was what he did—gleefully shredded the hearts of others but gave the wounded puppy routine if anyone decided to return the favor.

Of course, were Buffy here, she would remind him it wasn't Angel who made her life miserable. It wasn't Angel who had driven Drusilla away. None of it was Angel. Angel and his bloody Get Out of Jail Free card.

If only she knew how truly Angel mirrored Angelus, it would tear her apart.

He was going mad.

There was nothing on the telly and he was running out of bagged blood. Bagged blood. Christ, what was she doing to him?

His own promise haunted his ears. And he knew exactly what he was.

He was in love with the Slayer.

He was in love with the Slayer, and he missed her. Now. Now more than ever. They had been apart less than an hour and somehow, this distance was worse than the weeks he'd spent trying to forget about her.

He was worried. He was terrified. Twice in recent memory, he had come within a hair's taste of perfection, and twice it had been ripped away, and it had broken him. He hated that Angel had that much power over her. He hated his own misgivings. He hated the knowledge all could be snatched from under him without so much as a blink. It had happened before. No matter the circumstances, despite the consequences, it was always Angel they chose. Angel to whom they ran. Angel they really wanted.

But Buffy had chosen Spike. Buffy had chosen him over Angel. Buffy had taken his hand and led him outside. When she'd broken down in the cemetery, it was not Angel she'd cried for. When she'd kissed him, it was not Angel she'd imagined. When he'd pleased her, it was not Angel that had made her moan. When her mouth enveloped him, it was not Angel she'd tasted. When all was said and done, it was not Angel she trusted.

But Angel had been there first.

This was so fucking maddening.

There was nothing he could do tonight, not when he'd already set the rules. He wanted to mark Buffy all over, but knew his earlier conclusion had been right. If what he and Buffy shared was real, she would feel the same way tomorrow. She would come to him tomorrow. She would be tomorrow exactly who she was today.

She wouldn't forget. She had promised. She had promised him to never forget.

And she would be hurt if he didn't trust her.

Pacing around the hotel room wasn't doing anyone any good.

Spike sighed hard and jerked a hand through his hair. Nothing on the telly, nothing to do but wait. Better head to Willy's. Or that pub from the night before. He reckoned he had charged a walloping load to the Watcher's credit, but still couldn't find reason enough to care.

Spike shook his head heavily and marched toward the door. There was no problem a trip to Willy's couldn't fix.

Except a pissed off Angel waiting outside his hotel room.

He hadn't truly seen the man since beating him senseless with a crowbar last spring. Sure, he had caught glimpses here or there—had broken into the Magic Box and stolen rats eyes along with a few other goodies. Had been nearly pummeled to a pulp by the ponce the morning after Buffy's birthday. Had watched his non-soul-losing show with Faith and all the wackiness that had ensued. Had seen the devastated look on the git's face when Buffy had grasped Spike's hand.

But there had been no quality time with Angel alone. Not since last year. And he reckoned that such was a situation that the git meant to rectify.

In all fairness, Spike had more than enough time to prepare. While Angel skipped pleasantries, there wasn't a person alive or undead that couldn't suss out what he was doing here. So when Angel stomped toward him, closed a hand around Spike's throat, and shoved him unceremoniously against the wall, Spike could have ducked away. For some reason, though, he didn't. Instead, he watched as the sod's eyes turned yellow and his fangs descended.

Maybe because if Angel was this brassed, it meant things had gone Spike's way after all.

"I don't know what you did to her, Spike," he snarled, "or what you're planning to do. But know that I'm going to—"

"What? Gonna what? Watch her enjoy herself for a bleeding change? Honestly, if you can't tell when your own girl's unhappy, you don't sodding deserve her."

The pressure around his throat increased. "Like you do?"

"Maybe."

Angel rolled his eyes. "Please, Spike."

"I was there for her, wasn't I? When you couldn't be? When you were off planning the end of the world and shagging Dru to your merry delight, I was there for her." The bones in Spike's face shifted, demon raging forward. He tore free with a roar, landing a punch from last Tuesday that sent Angel crashing into the television set, which promptly shattered.

Sparks flew and wires fried. Spike winced and released a weary sigh. *Good move, mate.* "Fantastic. There goes my entertainment for the night. Somethin' tells me the bloke at the front's not gonna be happy."

Angel pushed himself, brushing away bits of broken glass. "I don't know what you're trying to pull," he said. "But rest assured, once I find out, you're going to find yourself blowing away in the wind, one particle at a time."

"You know, you were much better at making threats when you were soulless."

"I'm not kidding, Spike. You hurt her, you'll wake up on fire."

"Now, why in god's name would I hurt the girl when there are much more...pleasurable pursuits?"

Okay, not the smartest thing in the world to say. In a blink, Spike found himself on the floor with an enraged Angel pummeling him into next week, but it didn't last long. His own strength came surging back and before either could fully react, he'd kicked his usually stoic elder into the far wall.

The wall behind the bed thumped. "Would you knock it off?" the bloke in the neighboring room shouted. "There are people trying to sleep here!"

Neither vampire replied. Rather, they pulled themselves to their feet, glaring at each other. Daring each other. Waiting for the other to speak.

"This is about what I told you, isn't it?" Angel finally spat.

Spike blinked. "What?"

"To kill the girl, you have to love her. Is that what you think you're doing?"

Of all the egocentric...

"Are you out of your bloody mind?" Spike screamed. "Or how many times do I gotta spell it out for you? I. Don't. Want. To. Kill. Her. And if I did, I certainly wouldn't go about it your way, you ninny. Think I'd take a slayer down without a proper fight? You're off your rocker."

"So I'm supposed to believe that you really..." Angel broke off, eyes darting to a corner. "She says that you're in love with her."

"She's a clever bird. Try listening to her."

"I'm not buying that."

"Surprise, surprise. Ask me if I care."

"She also says you promised to change..." Angel stepped forward. "To give up what you love best. I think...she doesn't know you that well. She's only had a glance of what you are. What you've done. What you can do. And that's why she believes you."

"So, what? We're gonna rassle it out?" Spike spread his arms. "You're forgetting, mate, that I know you pretty bloody well, too. You think the Slayer'd be interested in how much alike you and your personable half really are?"

There was a menacing growl. "I am nothing like Angelus."

And a scoff to answer it. "Oh, cry me a sodding river. You've never been anyone but Angelus, but at least he had personality and didn't try to hide the fact that he was a universal prick. It's the same sob story with the both of you. Losing your marbles over some hot little blonde. One had a hankering for carnage, the other protects the world. You were a pup with Darla and you were a pup with Buffy. Bent over backwards to give 'em everything they wanted."

"You're talking to me about bending over backwards?" Angel replied. "Are we forgetting Drusilla?"

Spike snorted. "Remember me? Love's bitch? Man enough to admit it? Still do. You think I asked for this gig? You think I wanted to fall head over for a slayer? God, it ripped my innards out and stuffed them back in. It's more than wrong, and I know it. I bloody well know it. There's a part of me that's always gonna be asking what the bleeding fuck I got myself in to. But it doesn't change anything, mate. I love the girl. I love her more than you and me are worth. Only knew

it tonight but I've felt it forever. Since before I knew where to look when it came to her. That's why I came back at all, you stupid sod."

"Funny," Angel replied, stepping forward. "Seems as I recall, you came back whining and moaning about Dru, and how she had dumped you for...what was it? A Chaos Demon?"

"She left me because of Buffy. Because she knew how I felt." Spike shook his head. "She knew how I felt before I did. Before, even, that bloody amazing night caught in the house those Watcher wankers set up for her to die in." He stopped with a sigh and moved to take a seat on the bed. "If it's any consolation, I didn't come here originally to shag her and make your life miserable...though I gotta admit, that was a bloody fantastic perk. And it's not like she fell into my lap. I fought for her. I'll fight for her until I'm dust."

"You're in over your head," Angel said softly. "Far more than I originally thought. You think this is going to be easy? That you can fight for her? She's human. You're not. She's a hero. You're not. She—"

"Sounds like someone's had time to think up this tune up before he started singing it," Spike replied, eyebrows perking. "You weren't having second thoughts about the girl you went so gaga over just last year, were you? Find another tarty blonde to chase around by the tail?"

Angel's eyes darkened. "Buffy is not like Darla," he snarled. "In more than the obvious ways. With Darla, I knew it was forever. Or it was for me at the time. It was forever to me because *she* was forever. She was a vampire, so was I. She liked the chaos, so did I. She was of my mold. Buffy is light in itself. You can't expect to touch that for too long without crumbling to dust. She is everything you are not." At that, he sobered, sighed, and took a seat on the dresser. "Everything *we* are not."

A few ticks of silence settled between them. "Is that defeat I hear?"

"She's young. She's only eighteen, and at times, that really shows." He sighed again. "And at other times, she..."

"Blows your bloody mind away."

"Right."

Things fell quiet again. Then Angel asked, "You really think you're in love with her?"

"No *think* about it."

"How can you know?"

"Because it's stronger than whatever I had with Dru." Spike swallowed. "When I'm with her, there's no one else...anywhere. She looks at me and I know I'm about to burn from the inside. Her touch...her scent...surrounding...all around..." He hissed a breath through his teeth. Never had he imagined sitting in his hotel room with Angel and having this conversation. Just went to prove how nothing came of planning things out anymore. "She's so pure."

"And you want to spoil her."

Well, that had been fun while it lasted.

"Bloody no!" Spike jerked to his feet. "It's her purity I love, you stupid git! I can't get enough of it. She makes me wanna...makes me wanna..."

"You might wanna be careful on how you finish that sentence."

"She makes me wanna be a better man."

"You're not a man at all."

"And you are?"

"I'm closer than you." Angel also rose to his feet. "I have a soul. You don't. I know the difference between right and wrong. You don't. I can be a—"

"And here we are again." Spike rolled his eyes. "You wanna know how you're like Angelus? You're bloody well screamin' it from the rooftops. So fucking full of yourself. And for the record, I do know the difference between right and wrong. It was just recently that I decided to give a fuck."

"So you care now."

"I care because she cares."

"And what happens when you stop caring about her?"

"I won't do that, Angelus. I'm not you. What's she gonna do? Shag a bloody soul into me?" Spike scoffed and shook his head. "Right now I'm as bad as I'm hankerin' to get. I was faithful to Dru for longer than

any sodding married you've come across, demon or otherwise. I was ready to spend eternity with her."

Angel quirked his head. "But you fell in love with the Slayer."

"Didn't leave Dru, though. Wouldn't have. Didn't know I was in love with the Slayer until after she'd left me."

"What happens when Buffy leaves you?"

"I piss myself into a blubbering fool, make half a dozen attempts to get her back, and end my torment by kissing sunlight." The thought alone made Spike's insides freeze, but he remembered what she'd told him and it gave him peace. Buffy had chosen Spike, which meant he was the one she wanted. "And I won't delude myself into believin' it's not possible. But she trusts me, and I don't aim to take that lightly."

"She trusts you?"

"Yeah," Spike replied slowly. "Trusts me not to hurt her...not intentionally. I gave her my word, and if you knew me half as well as you claim, you'd know my word's not somethin' I take lightly."

Something dark fell over Angel's face. "You really think you can do this? Love her? Be good for her? You don't know what love is, Spike. You don't have the networking for it."

Oh, that was below the bloody belt. A roar tore at Spike's throat. "What the bloody hell do you call Dru?" he shouted, eyes blazing yellow. "What I had with her was—"

"Not real. It was infatuation. Like what I had with Darla. It was—"

"Oh, so if it's true for you, it has to be true for the rest of us." Spike caved and started pacing. It was inevitable. The floor simply looked too calm to sit there unwalked. "Again with you and your ego. What do you know, you lousy sod? How do you know that it wasn't true with Darla? Or does the fact that it might've been the real thing scare the piss outta you, because that means that there's a bit more monster in you than you wagered?" He snorted. "Or does it just eat you away that I can be what you're not? Somethin' good for her?"

Angel's eyes narrowed. "Good for her? She's the Slayer!"

"Didn't stop you, did it?"

"I'm—"

“—different. Yeah. Keep telling yourself that.”

“If you keep this up, it’s going to end up hurting her,” he said in a low voice. “And I will kill you if you hurt her.”

“I’m not gonna hurt her. If I did, I wouldn’t be around for you to kill me.” He paused. “And how exactly do you define *hurt*, Angelus? Like you hurt her? Telling her that rot that she wasn’t worth a second—”

Somehow, Spike didn’t see the punch coming, which was all on him. All he knew was his jaw was throbbing and then he’d landed against the dresser, panting useless gobs of oxygen.

“That. Was. Not. Me.”

He didn’t bother to glance up. “Looked like you. Talked like you.” He shook his head. “And lemme tell you...Buffy and me? We had a helluva time proving you wrong about her. Second, third, fourth...I lost count, she felt so good.” He twisted his lips in a particularly vile smirk, ducking another flying fist, which allowed him an opening to pop Angel good in the nose. “You’ve gotten to thinking you’re better than the rest of us. You’ve forgotten your place, mate. I’m no worse for her than you were, only she’s guaranteed that I’m not gonna rip her throat out at night.”

“She—”

“You think I’d let a slayer this close to me if I wasn’t serious? I love her. I love the girl. I’d no sooner hurt her than I would’ve Dru.”

“You did hurt Dru, though. Toward the end.”

That made no sense. “So we’re just making stuff up now, is that it?”

“Seem to remember you clocking Dru. Knocking her out during the Acatlha fight.”

Spike just stared at him for a moment before barking a hard laugh. “Oh, gettin’ petty are we? So we’re counting me hurting Dru while helping Buffy save the world. You really got nothing.” He laughed again, shaking his head. “And as far as anything else goes, I don’t really see what any of this has to do with you. If she’s spoken her piece to you about how...” A pause. “What’d she say that got you so riled up, mate? Couldn’t be just that I love her. I wagered you’d

break down my door either way, but your knickers are in even more of a twist than I'd expected."

Angel glanced away. "Like I'd give you the satisfaction."

"Oh, I've had my satisfaction." Spike grinned. "And I look to get more where it came from."

"I ought to rip your head off."

"And I oughta yours, from the way you treated the girl." He took a bold step forward. "You know why she trusts me? Because *you* gave her reason to."

Angel's face contorted with fury, but when he opened his mouth, nothing came out. Instead, he blinked, apparently at a loss. And yeah, that was gratifying as fuck.

At that, Spike's thoughts returned to Buffy. He needed to see her soon. The sooner the better. He had to know how she felt in the aftermath. And before he could stop himself, he heard himself saying, "How is she?"

Angel fidgeted. "She's...I didn't really pay attention..."

"Good going, mate."

"She's not happy, that's for sure. I..." The git at least had the decency to look guilty. "I said some things that weren't altogether nice."

A low growl tickled Spike's throat. "Did you hurt her?"

"What? Of course not! I—"

"There's more than one way to hurt a girl, and we both know it." He prowled forward, clenching his hands into fists at his sides. "If you hurt her, I'll kill you."

A very Buffy voice invaded his thoughts. *Redundant, much? Hadn't Angel just promised the same thing?*

Sod it. He didn't care.

Angel arched an eyebrow and laughed like this was funny. "Is that right?"

Spike, however, had lost his humor. He shoved his elder against the door, not batting an eye at their rather telling height difference. "You think this is a game?" Spike demanded. "What did you tell her?"

"What you are."

"She knows what I am."

"Not like I do."

"You arrogant wanker."

"Her friends, her Watcher, her calling...everything she stands for is against you. If she actually goes through with this, she's betraying herself. Betraying every noble thing she's ever done...for a creature that can't appreciate her. What she is. What she's sacrificed. What she goes through every day."

Spike fisted Angel by the hair and smashed his head against the door again. "You think I don't appreciate it?" he demanded. "You don't think the concept bloody well boggles my mind? She's so much more than me."

"No need to tell me twice," Angel said, righting himself with a wince. "And the word I used is *can't*."

"And you told her this?"

"Of course." The elder vampire shoved him back. "I love her, Spike. I love her very much. So much that I know when it's time to let go. I know she can never be mine because I'm not meant to have her. But hell if I'm going to sit back and watch her bend over backwards for a creature like you. Watch her destroy everything she represents. Every good thing in her life because you decided to take a walk on the wild side."

"What she represents? Is that all she is to you? A bloody icon? Do you even know her at all?"

"I know her," Angel replied, voice low and angry. "Far better than you ever will. She's something beyond you. Beyond your comprehension. You don't deserve her." He stopped. "You're beneath her."

Everything froze. Everything. Time. The ground. The whole bloody world. His bones rattled with rage, black, toxic hatred flooding his veins. That was it. The last straw. Spike's skin tingled and his chest ached. The demon wanted loose. Wanted free. Wanted to show this jackass the sort of stuff of which he was truly made. Stake his claim on the girl here and now and have the whole matter behind them. If Angel didn't make tracks soon, one of them was going to die.

And it wouldn't be pretty.

“Get. Out.”

Amazingly, Angel wasn't so daft he didn't realize that an invisible line had been crossed. He nodded and started for the door. “Right. I've said what I came to say. But remember, if you—”

“If you tell me one more time to stay away from her, you're not gonna be around long enough to tell the tale.”

“Big words. Think you could?”

“Fancy findin' out? I'm ready to rip out your insides and shove them down your throat. Get out.”

A nod, almost cordial. As though they were old friends. His words, though, weren't as kind. “You touch her,” Angel said, opening the door, “a part of you is coming off.”

“You won't get close enough to me to try.”

“We'll see.”

And that was it. Angel was gone. Damage done and all.

He had the nerve to think he differed from Angelus.

“Stupid sod always has to have the last bloody word,” Spike mumbled, combing a hand through his hair. Then he turned and glared at the blank doorway. “Wanker!”

That didn't make him feel any better. Growling, he turned back to the empty hotel room, looking it over as though he had never seen it before. The blank walls. The broken television that had somehow skidded down the dresser and nearly collapsed completely to the worn, green carpet. The bed with a rumpled comforter. It had looked halfway decent once. Then along came Angel to ruin everything. The fucking prick.

Beneath her.

He was going to break something.

Forget what he'd said or what they'd decided—he needed her now. Needed to see her. Needed to make sure she was all right. Needed to eradicate the fear that Soulboy's lecture had managed to change her mind. He needed to know she didn't think as Angel thought—that she didn't think he was beneath her. People couldn't help whom they loved, and he was a shining example. No one had asked him permission or bothered to take his feelings into considera-

tion. But he loved Buffy. Spike loved Buffy and that wasn't going to change. Despite Angel, despite his nature, despite Sunnydale, despite the sodding Slayerhood and all of the above.

He had chosen.

So had she.

And bugger Angel. The sod had no right how to tell her to live.

Spike needed to go to her. He needed to comfort her. He needed her to comfort him. He wanted them to comfort each other.

But they couldn't, and he knew it. Not tonight. If he showed up now it would make things worse. Too much had occurred in too little time, and being cornered was the last thing she needed.

Buffy would have to come to him. She knew where he was and that he wasn't leaving. She would come to him when she was ready. When she knew the decision she made was the one she truly wanted.

They had agreed on tomorrow. Tomorrow.

So despite the need burning him alive, he would wait. For her.

And hope to whatever entity watched out for soulless things that he'd made the right call.

GOOD VIBRATIONS

"SO THAT'S IT?"

"That's it. Don't make me repeat myself. I hate that."

"No need. I heard you enough the first time."

"Good."

"I can't believe you would be so naïve."

"Funny coming from you, wouldn't you say? I loved you first, after all."

"This is what you're telling me? You love him?"

A pause. "I...I don't know. Not yet. Maybe. It's too soon. But I know that I care for him. I care for him a lot. I'm definitely on a one-way road to Love-Ville. I do know that. He's been there. He's done stuff that blows my mind away. He came after me when I gave him no reason to."

"And that makes every wrong thing he's ever done okay?"

"I never said that!"

"You didn't have to."

"This isn't about you, Angel. Why do you think I've kept to myself these past few weeks? It's torn me apart. What I did. The reasons I did it. Why I didn't regret it. What I felt for you was supposed to be invincible. It was supposed to be forever." The silence that followed words was deafening. She spoke again before it drove her mad. "It wasn't. What happened last year

changed things. I just didn't know how much until Spike came back into my life."

Angel sighed, hard enough to make old scars bleed again. Somehow, though, she didn't flinch, didn't react. She was beyond that. "This isn't about me. I get that. We were going to have to face some pretty hard choices eventually. I've...I've been thinking about that for a while. You're the Slayer. I'm a vampire. And it kills me, but there is no future there. I've had to carry that burden longer than I care to consider." He sighed again, shoulders falling. "But that doesn't mean I'm going to let go to have you run to someone who has even less to offer you than I do."

Okay. Now anger. "Okay. Lemme get this straight. I sent Spike away so that I could give you the 'It's not you, it's me' speech. You counter with your own version of 'It's not because I don't love you, it's because I'm a vampire.' And then you tell me that you're letting go but still want to have a say of who I have in my life? Let's get one thing straight, Angel. It's just not like that for us anymore, and if we're really honest, it's not like that for you, either. Things have been of the not since you got back from..."

"Hell?" he offered.

"Right. And if it wasn't Spike, it would've been someone else." She stopped. "But it is Spike. For reasons beyond me, he's...he's who I want to be with."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this."

"Yeah, well, a part of me can't believe I'm saying this. That doesn't make it any less said."

"You don't know him. You never will. You can't possibly know what you're getting yourself into." A dramatic headshake. "You think any of this is real?"

"I know it's real. What he feels...I feel it from him more than I ever felt it from you. When we're together, we're together. No vampires, no slayers. It's just us."

"That's what he wants you to believe."

"God, would you listen to yourself? I think I can tell when I'm being had. You don't think I questioned myself every step of the way? You don't think that I've wondered...I'm the Slayer, Angel."

"No, you're a child. You think Spike gives a damn about a fair fight? He's a demon, Buffy."

Oh, that was rich. "You're lecturing me? Hello! I've dealt with this crap for years! All I've seen is the bad. You were the cause of a lot of that. You were the reason I cried myself to sleep every night last year. You were the reason I pushed myself away. You were the reason I let my friends, my mother, and Giles down. Don't ever coach me on right versus wrong."

"So you think the way to rectify it is to sleep with the enemy? You think that Spike is the answer?"

"He loves me."

"And that makes everything all right?"

"I never said that." She stopped. "He loves me, Angel. And he'd never hurt me. He's had chance after chance and he—"

"How very reassuring. At least you're keeping tabs."

"He wouldn't hurt me!"

"Because hurting slayers is something Spike's never done."

"And yet between the two of you, look who's done the most damage." She held up a hand. "And I'm not talking about your magical mystery tour into the land of soulessness. You hurt me so much without having to have Angelus to blame it on." Another pause. "And for the record, I don't think you know him half as well as you think you do."

"Of course not," he drawled. "You wouldn't."

"If you'd seen him—"

"I saw enough. I lived with him, for god's sake! I've known him a lot longer than you have. Buffy, he's a killer. A ruthless, soulless killer. He doesn't care about what he's done or what he will do. And he can't stop himself. You don't know that kind of darkness."

"Oh, but because you're a vampire, you automatically know how all vampires think and feel. Honestly, Angel..."

"I know a lot more than you do." He shook his head in disgust. "You're embracing darkness itself. You're giving yourself over to something that will never appreciate what you are and what you do."

"What about who I am? Doesn't that matter anymore?"

"If who you are is someone who can love something evil, I don't care to

know you. You're different than this. You're above it. And you're betraying everything—your calling, your friends, your Watcher, yourself."

Silent tears skated down her cheeks, but he didn't comment. And she made no attempt to wipe them away. "How can you say that?"

"Apparently, just as easily as you can do it."

Buffy Summers sat in the dark of her room.

There were many things she hated about Angel—things she had known for a while, things she was picking up as she went along. She hated the way he looked at her with otherworldly knowledge, like he was a walking encyclopedia, a 'how-to' guide everyone should consult. She hated the way he spoke to her as though she was a child. She hated the way he saw Giles's side of disagreements more than hers. She hated his ego-trips. She hated the way he never wanted anyone to forget he was the way he was by choice. He was always tortured. Always on the cross. And she was the one temptation keeping him from salvation.

She hated it more when she felt he had a point.

None of these were questions were revelations. The past few weeks had been essentially this mental conversation on repeat. Wondering how she'd ended up in Spike's arms. Why neither of them had been able to walk away. If certain things hadn't happened, she knew she would feel differently. But things had happened, and Spike had come for her.

Spike had saved her when no one else would. Spike had loved her with no want for himself. And Spike was nothing like Angel.

That was one of the things she currently liked best about him. Right now, his non-Angelness was his biggest plus. She expected the next would be the way he shared filled her in when he was amused and understood what she meant when she went on her most random tangents.

It was wrong. She knew that. It was wrong. Whatever she felt for Spike was wrong. And as Angel had so delighted in observing, it would tear Giles apart if it hadn't already. It betrayed everything she was. Everything the Slayer was supposed to represent. Spike was evil. Despite what he did, how he tried, he would always be evil.

So what did that make her? The lover of an evil thing.

Buffy was tired of mind games. She was tired of battling with herself and losing over and over again.

She didn't realize she had started crying again until tears splashed across her hands. It wasn't fair for a person to hurt this much. To have known such bliss and have it stolen within a half hour.

And yet, she knew it didn't matter.

Not what Angel thought. Not really.

Not what anyone thought.

And somehow, that made everything worse. Worse and better at the same time. Life was funny like that.

She was hurting too much. And she couldn't be here anymore. The rules had changed. She was half making them up as she went along. Breaking a little more and piecing herself back together to see who she really was. Spike was her choice. He had been since the night they'd found themselves trapped together.

He had been her choice every night thereafter.

Tonight was the first night that she had the courage to accept it.

Everything had changed. And distance, despite how smart it sounded on paper, was the last thing she wanted. She needed reassurance. She needed to get back to where they had been earlier, and she couldn't wait another day. Alone was something she couldn't tolerate. Not tonight.

He would understand. He loved her.

And that was all that mattered.



THE MINUTE that he opened the door, she knew she had done the right thing. But she didn't have the opportunity to say so. Before she could even issue a weak hello, she was pulled welcoming arms that held her against an equally welcoming chest as Spike immediately began exploring her skin with his lips. Kissing her like he hadn't seen her in years.

It came slowly. A trembling whispered hush. "Are you all right?"

“What?”

Spike pulled back, hand going to her face. She realized she hadn’t stopped crying since leaving her bedroom

“I’m sorry,” she said, deciding it was safer to ignore his question.

He tensed. “Why?”

“For not waiting, like we decided. I just couldn’t... Not after...”

A long sigh rushed through his lips. “Don’t be silly.”

“But—”

“Are you all right?”

A question asked twice could not go ignored.

“He...what he said...”

“I know.”

“How?”

Spike pulled back so he could see her eyes. It was only then that the details of the room came into view. The smashed television. The rumbled comforter. The rather large indentation in the wall.

“He came here?”

“Left not ten minutes ago.”

Buffy nodded, vision blurring again. God, she hated crying. “I needed to see you,” she whispered.

“Bloody well had to staple myself to the floor to keep from finding you. Didn’t know if seeing me was what you needed or not.” Spike sighed. “I figured it was better to let you come to me.”

She was still trembling, but it all seemed better now that she could rest her head against his shoulder. “Thank you.” Buffy exhaled, rubbing her face against his tee. “He told me it wasn’t real.”

Spike was still for a minute. Then, slowly, he lowered his head to her throat and began whispering kisses across her skin. “Does it feel real?”

“Yes.”

“It’s real for me, Buffy. Always will be.” He pulled back and brushed a soft kiss across her forehead. “Is it real for you?”

“Yes.” Buffy licked her lips. “He said I don’t know you.”

“Bollocks. You know me better than I know myself.”

“He said you don’t love me.”

Spike pulled her tighter against him. "He's wrong."

"I know."

"Do you regret anything?"

Buffy could tell even he was surprised at the ease which came with that question, but not as surprised as she at the ease of her answer. "No," she replied. "He...he told me everything I thought he would." Buffy shivered and buried her face in his shoulder again. "And it just made me want you more. Is that wrong? Am I...?"

"No. Absolutely not. There's nothing wrong with knowing what you want."

She quirked an eyebrow but didn't pull away. "Are you just saying that because it works in your favor?"

"Course not. I'm impartial."

"Right."

Spike chuckled and rested his head against hers. "You know this is it, right? For me?"

"I know."

"And for you...?"

"It's it for me too, Spike. I..." A sigh. "It's only been a few weeks, but I'm tired. I'm tired of fighting you and this. I'm tired of trying to decide what's right and wrong. I'm tired of people telling me they know me better than I know me and therefore know what's in my best interest. And I'm sure as hell tired of being told there's something wrong with me."

His eyes darkened. "Did he tell you that?"

"Everyone's been telling me that, and not just about you. God, I just... I can't do this. I can't pretend to not want what I want and not get what I need and...I can't pretend to not want this, and I don't care what that makes me."

"You are who you are. I can't make you anything."

"I know that."

"Do you really?" Spike pulled back and met her eyes again. "This isn't about you touching darkness, love. I'd know it if it were." He smiled and spread his arms. "I'm the one's that's been corrupted."

She blinked. "Corrupted?"

“Your...you, Buffy. God, I can feel it just bursting off you.”

“What? What’s bursting off me?”

“Everything I’m not supposed to want. Everything that ever made me at all. That’s you all over. I’m the one who’s reaching...” Spike sighed. “And he can’t stand that. That your light touches me when it couldn’t him. Not when he was all muckin’ darkly dressed up with no place to go.”

Realization was a scary thing. Understanding was more so.

“You think that’s what this is about?”

“Not completely, but a big part of it.” Another brief pause. “This isn’t gonna be easy, pet.”

“I never thought it would be.”

“I’m not goin’ anywhere. You understand me?”

Buffy nodded; her tears had stopped. She curled her arms around him and met his eyes. Power for power. “I know,” she replied. “I wouldn’t let you, anyway.”

He nuzzled her throat. “Is that a fact?”

“If you even think of going anywhere again, I’m going to cut something off.”

“Oi. Easy on the goods.”

“They’re only good here, as far as I’m concerned.”

He chuckled and swooped to kiss her again. “So you’re holding me hostage at the risk of my manly parts?”

Buffy nodded, dropping her hand to his stomach, tracing mindless patterns, inching up the black fabric little by little. Her head fell back to his shoulder, fingers easing from his abdomen and whispering up his arms, nails barely touching his skin. A trembling whisper at his throat, then her tongue was exploring him in soft, unhurried caresses.

Spike’s gasp twisted between hesitation and pleasure. “Buffy... What...what are you...?”

“I want you.”

He moaned in protest. “Want you, too. But...sweetheart...” He managed to pull back. “I don’t want to make things... I don’t want you to do this to...to prove somethin’ to me. Or yourself. It’s real now.

I wanna keep it real. Please...please don't turn me into a comfort fuck."

Spike was precise. He used the word fuck rather than love. There would be no fucking in this room.

"This is not about comfort," Buffy replied. "Well, okay, it is a little. A very little. And yeah, I'm vulnerable and needy gal right now. I won't deny it."

"Not really helping the cause, pet."

"But that's beside the point. I knew the minute you left me tonight that I wasn't going to be able to not...to not do this. I want you because I want you. Not because I need to feel better. I came here tonight because..." She sighed. "Angel didn't make me, Spike. It's not because I need to prove anything to you or myself about this being real. It is real. It'll be real tomorrow. But it's also real right now..." Her mouth found his throat, and he crooned at her touch. "I've missed you."

"You..."

"I've missed you. I don't know if I've told you that or not." Buffy reached the hem of his shirt and began tugging upward, waited for him to relax, and smiled softly when he raised his arms and allowed her to remove the tee completely. "You stood outside my window that night...and I knew you were going away. And I...I didn't know what I thought or felt then, but I knew I was going to miss you." A breath before she leaned inward, kissing his shoulder. "You let me be me. Just me. Not Buffy-When-With-Mom or Buffy-When-With-Friends or Buffy-When-On-Patrol-And/Or-Training...just Buffy. A hundred percent."

"Hundred bloody percent," he agreed on a groan.

"And I knew when you walked away that I'd miss you."

"If you'd have run out after me, I would've stayed."

"If I had, do you really think we'd be here?"

There was no response.

"The wanker doesn't let you be you?"

She offered a hoarse laugh. "When Angel gets a look at me—me as I am—he gets snippy. Sometimes I think I'm supposed to be more

than I am when I'm around him. Like being the Slayer plus girl he loves makes me some pedestal, and when my less-attractive personality traits leak through, it soils my image."

"Then he doesn't love you." Spike pressed a finger to her lips before she could object. "Not like he should, anyway. If he only sees what he wants...it's like being infatuated with somethin' because of the image you give it. The stupid sod's never been close to perfection in his unlife—not when he was an alive wanker, and certainly not as a dead one. You're not perfect, Buffy. Not in the way he wants you to be. I wouldn't love you if you were. Flaws make you human, and it's your humanity that I love." He grinned and nuzzled her again. "And other things, of course."

"Mmm...other things..."

His jaw tightened as her hand wandered further south. "Sweet-heart, are you sure?"

"Sure...?"

"You wanna do this now? We're worth waiting for."

"Spike, I've waited. I can wait more if you want to. If you need to have that reassurance that we're real. But I've told you, you're not going anywhere." She deftly popped open the clasp of his jeans. "And neither am I."

Then she wasn't speaking at all. Spike took her face into her hands and brought his mouth to hers, drawing her into a biting, needing, loving kiss that both assaulted and devoured. After a beat of surprise, she was responding in kind. His thumbs moved in soft, sensual circles against her cheek, calming and arousing all within one stroke.

Yes. This was what she wanted. All of this. Never in her life had she been so sure that she was exactly where she was meant to be.



FUCK. He could never touch her enough, but damn, he was willing to try.

Spike grinned as he tugged on her shirt—a black number with

the British flag sprawled across the front. He had noticed it earlier and though he'd forgotten to mention it, he'd felt that perhaps she'd been subconsciously telegraphing where her heart was. At least, he'd like to think so. Either way, the real thing was here now, so no need for the flag. He dropped garment fell to the floor and had her lips against his again before he could miss her taste.

Her own hands were becoming more boisterous, and he grasped her wrist before she could delve into his jeans and free his cock. Funny that despite everything, they had not managed to do this properly. Always stashed away in some closet, shoved aside by the angry world or trying to hide from it. He hadn't even seen her naked—not fully. Their first night had been in the shadows, and there hadn't been anything but each other. No window. No nothing. And it had been hurried. Hard and angry. He hadn't explored the full depth of his feelings then—he had only come to terms with feeling it at all. She had been the tool for exorcising his rage, a thought that now filled him with rage.

Spike enjoyed sex thoroughly—hard, slow, fast, gentle, it didn't matter. The time he'd spent with Drusilla had typically been with her calling the shots and him eager to please. It had been a game to her, and he hadn't minded.

This was new. And he wanted it to be different than the first time. He wanted to show her what she meant to him. That he could be all sorts of things, whatever she needed. That the anger of their past was just that—in the past. Things had changed since then, and he wanted her to see how much.

"Buffy," he whispered into her mouth, coaxing her hand completely away from his cock even as his body cried out in protest. This wasn't about him. "Just...slow down, all right?"

"Slow down? I haven't even—"

"I know. Figured I'd stop you while you're ahead." He nibbled on her lips. "If you start on that, I won't...this is different, love. Just lemme...lemme do this for you properly."

Buffy cocked an eyebrow. "Properly?"

"Mhmm..." Spike dropped his hands again, unzipping her fly as

his lips worked across her collarbone. He drew back to tug in earnest at her clothing and she nearly cried out when he dropped to his knees before her. Without much effort, he managed to rid her of her pants completely, tossing them next to her shirt and discarded footwear. Then she was standing before him, dressed in her cotton white panties and matching bra.

"My underwear sucks," she complained, crossing her arms over her breasts.

Spike tsked. "I'll say," he agreed, running his fingers over her damp crotch. "Thought I told you to never wear these again."

"They're not the same from earlier. You oughta know, seeing as those are ruined and in your pocket."

He grinned at that. "Was I not specific enough? No knickers for my Slayer, understand? They get in the bloody way." To demonstrate, he tongued her through the thin layer of fabric and chuckled when she whimpered. "See?" he asked, ripping them from her body without further warning.

"That's two in one night, you realize."

"I'll destroy all your frilly undergarments if I have to get you to see things my way."

"But—"

"No 'buts'." He was against her again in seconds, mouth commanding hers. "I love you like this."

Buffy rolled her head back. "Like this?"

"Like whatever. But definitely like this." He cupped a breast, grinning when she moaned and swooping down to tease her throat again as he teased her nipple through her bra. "Here in my room, full starkers...where I can see you."

"Spike," she breathed against his mouth.

In two seconds, he had ripped away her bra as well. And she was naked against his eyes. Spike inhaled sharply and stepped back, his eyes running the length of her. The Slayer in the flesh, lips swollen, hair tussled and pretty pussy pink and wet for him. Fuck, she was like looking at the sun. After a few seconds, she began to fidget, and he stopped her before she could cover her breasts again.

“Don’t,” he said. “Please.”

“I—”

“Please.” Spike closed his eyes but opened them just as quickly. “You’re so bloody beautiful.”

“I...”

“You’re beautiful, Summers. Don’t think I’ve ever seen anything as gorgeous as you.” And he couldn’t to not touch her for one more second. He bent and drew one of her nipples into his mouth, moaning into her skin when she whimpered. He cupped her neglected breast, stroking her nipple with his thumb as his other hand, not to be left out, dipped between her thighs and pried her pussy lips apart. He moaned into her skin again when her liquid heat rolled over her fingers. His fingertips slipped over her clit. She was a harp; he her musician, and he played her to climax.

Then took the repeat and did it again.

Buffy panted heavily as she came down. His fingers were still exploring her pussy, thumb teasing her clit, and he leered every time a wanton moan escaped her lips. She clutched at his shoulders desperately, her head rolling back. And Spike could do nothing but stare at her in wonder. Here she was. After everything, here she was. In his arms.

She wasn’t going anywhere. This was real.

His fingers curled inside her and she sobbed softly in pleasure. Oh god. This was real.

“Spike...”

He closed his eyes, dragging his lips across her face with soft kisses. She battled him; of course, she would. Fighting until she found his mouth, sucking his tongue and again pulling to his fly. This time he did not protest. He couldn’t. As it was, he was fortunate she had loosened them as she had before he’d gotten carried away. She withdrew his cock tentatively, but when she began to pump him, there was nothing tentative about it.

“God, you’re gonna be the death of me,” Spike whimpered.

Buffy’s eyes shot open. “Nuh uh,” she replied, squeezing his shaft and teasing his throat with her teeth. Nibbling sweetly on his skin,

squeezing his cock and teasing the head with her thumb. Spike whimpered and hissed, jerking his hips forward in time with her strokes.

“God,” he mumbled against her. “You’re beautiful.”

“You’ve told me.”

“I’m telling you again.”

“Well, so are you.”

He huffed. “Still tryin’ to emasculate me.”

She tightened her grip tightened around his cock, earning a heady whimper in turn. In an instant, she had gone from moaning and writhing to controlling and dominant. It drove him wild. “Now,” she breathed against his throat, pumping his cock harder, “why would I wanna do something like that?”

“Dunno,” he replied. “Seems you’d do yourself a right injustice.”

“Agreed.”

Spike smiled and brushed a chaste kiss across her brow. “God, I love you.”

“I know,” she whispered, fingers dancing over his aching head.

“Keep that up, pet, and this isn’t gonna last but another twenty seconds.”

“Mmmm...but what a twenty seconds.”

He flashed another grin, slipping his fingers from her pussy and lifting her into his arms.

“Where are we going?” she asked breathlessly.

“Where do you think?” he replied, depositing her unceremoniously on the bed.

Buffy bounced and giggled, and his eyes followed. God, her breasts were fantastic. And suddenly he couldn’t get naked fast enough. In hurried seconds, he had divested the rest of his clothing and was joining her. His body covering hers, pressing her thighs apart, his thick cock coming to rest upon her delicious mound.

“I love how you feel like this,” she mused, wiggling her hips. “All that skin.”

Spike grinned, running his mouth over hers. “Skin, huh?”

“Oh yeah.”

"Then you'll love this." He thrust his hips forward, nudging his length between her pussy lips and drenching himself in her juices. His balls slapped against her flesh. "So hot, Slayer. So wet. Love you. God, how I love you."

Buffy gasped and raised her head to meet his kiss, grasping his forearms, leveraging herself against the harder thrust of his hips. But then it was too much, and he couldn't stand it anymore.

Spike reached between them to tease her pussy before he positioned himself. The sounds she made were so bloody delicious—he couldn't help but do whatever it took to make sure she never stopped making them. He only paused when he noted her eyes were squeezed shut, her nails digging trenches into his forearms. And there it was. A being of pure life and light—lovelier than anything he had been fortunate enough to see in his many years.

And it was his. All his. At last, he was finally home.

"Buffy," he said softly as he prepared to push inside. "Look at me."

She opened her shining eyes, looking at him like he was worth something—really worth something. The sight stole what little was left of his heart. "I love you," he said.

A soft smile lit her face. "You've told me."

"Won't ever stop tellin' you..." He began edging himself into her wet, perfect flesh and Christ, she was wrapped so tightly around him he could barely remember he didn't breathe. He wanted everything. Her scent. Her sounds. Her touch. It was too much, yet also not enough. Spike dropped his head her shoulder. "Can't ever stop telling you...stop showing you..." He began moving then, setting a gentle tempo, wanting to savor this. Focus on the feel of her around his cock, milk the sensation for all it was worth. She burned him, set his skin aflame and cooled him all within one delicious stroke. "Christ, baby, you're so fucking tight."

"Spike..."

He lowered his head to her breast, drawing her nipple into his mouth and laving it with his tongue. He moved in slow, deep strokes, his free hand at her hip to pull her with him. Their eyes met once more and then they were moving together, fighting each other,

battling each other, and it was glorious. The feel of her. Hot and tight and wet and everything that was *Buffy*. He kissed every inch of skin he could find, hands everywhere, unable to touch her enough. Her own fingers drew tracks down his back, combed pathways through his hair, holding him to her—as though there was anywhere else he wanted to be. When she answered his thrusts by squeezing those bloody amazing slayer muscles of hers, he nearly lost himself.

“So much,” he mewled into her ear.

“What?”

“Never...so much...oh, Buffy...” Spike closed his eyes tightly as he tried to maintain control. He had to be careful or he’d lose it completely, and by god, he had to make this last. He had to make it about her. “Never been like this...”

“Never,” she agreed.

He couldn’t ask her for love. Not yet. Not tonight. And he couldn’t keep babbling his love for her, lest the words lose power. They were still new and he wanted her to always remember.

But there was still something he needed.

“Tell me I’m...tell me I’m not forgettable.”

Buffy met his gaze. “Spike...” she moaned, arching to recapture him as he drew back his cock. “You’re not forgettable. Could...never...forget. Never forget you.”

“Tell me this is real.”

“Real. So real.” He pistoned deeper within her, and she fed him a muffled cry. “Oh god. So real.”

Spike’s jaw clenched and his pace increased, triggered by the hard slaps of their bodies colliding. The feel of his balls smacking against her flesh. And suddenly, he had no words. There was nothing to say that hadn’t already been said.

The sounds rumbling through her throat were going to drive him over the edge if the needy, awe-inspiring look on her face didn’t beat them to it. Every time he plunged back inside her pussy, her eyes seemed to burn brighter. God, she was the embodiment of perfection. Her breathing was becoming labored and he pulled away completely,

lingering so the very tip of him caressing her outer labia. Her eyes went wide.

“Spike!”

“My Slayer.”

“Oh god...”

He wanted to tease her forever just to get her to call his name like that, but if he didn’t come soon, he might just dust. With a defiant swirl of his hips, he slammed into her again, and if possible, her eyes widened even further. Her head flew back into the pillows and she mewled, working those delicious muscles of her around his cock so tightly it almost hurt. Maybe it would have if it didn’t feel so bloody amazing.

“Tell me,” he gasped, stopping harshly. “Tell me it’s me, Buffy.”

“Yes. It’s you, Spike. It’s... I think it’s always been you. Somehow.”

He started fucking her harder, faster, spurred on by her words, their breaths intermingling. She grew tighter and wetter with each stroke and it was driving him crazy. He was close, so close, but he held back, forcing his orgasm aside. One hand strayed, brushed her hair from her eyes, and traveled the length of her body before slipping between them. His mouth returned to her throat and mimicked its course, drawing southward until he had a nipple sucked between his teeth.

“Oh, god...I’m...”

“Love you.” The words came again without his permission. He couldn’t help them if he tried. “Love you so much.”

“Yes, yes.”

“Love you.” He found her clit, so slippery under his fingers. She burned him up. “Always.”

“Always.”

“Come for me, pet. Please.”

“Yes, I’m—”

And that was it. At his final thrust, she arched and convulsed, digging her nails into his arms as she spasmed around him. And he was following her, emptying himself into her, bucking, desperate for as much of her as she would give him.

When the waves finally subsided, it took everything not to simply collapse on top of her. He held himself up on quaky arms, studying her intently, almost expecting her to vanish. Somehow, though, she didn't. She remained beneath him, around him, panting and blinking somewhat dazed eyes up at him. The warmth he saw there moved the final piece into place.

She didn't speak, but she didn't need to. She told him everything he needed to hear without saying a word.

Finally, as her breathing calmed, she quirked a grin. "You didn't go all bitey."

Spike blinked. "I didn't."

"Thought you would."

A smile tickled his lips and he lowered his head to the mark he had already given her. The mark that had somehow linked them together and brought them to where they were now. He gently ran his teeth over her skin, unable to keep from trembling.

"I will," he promised her. "But not tonight."

Not tonight. She had already given him so much tonight, and she wasn't ready for what that would mean for him.

But he had seen it in her eyes. The words were there, buried under doubt and insecurity.

For that, there would be another night.

And for once, he didn't mind the wait.

THE REST OF ME

THEIR EYES LOCKED in the darkness. He was over her, moving in shallow thrusts, hands skimming the length of her body, fingers exploring her temples before trailing to cup her breasts. Their mouths met and they ravaged each other over and over again.

Flash. She was astride him, riding him, arching and crooning with every downward spiral upon his cock. Her eyes were closed, a look of pained pleasure on her face. He tugged at her nipples, pulling her down to kiss her.

“So warm.”

The first words they’d shared in an hour. The room had been heavy with their shared whimpers and pants, but no words. They had been too occupied with each other. It was so rare for Spike to be vocally submissive, but he’d held his tongue.

Except he was speaking now, and it was wonderful.

Buffy placed her hands on his shoulders, eyes hazed. Her body tingled all over. There was something to be said for this. There was something to be said for a lot of things.

“What?”

“You’re so...so warm.” Spike panted, running his fingers up her sides. “You’re burning me up. God. Feels so bloody good. So good.”

"You, too," she gasped, rolling her head back. "Feel so good."

He threaded his fingers through her hair, directing her eyes back to his. "Tell me." There was no demand behind his voice; rather a plea, but she could deny him nothing. Especially not like this.

"Deep," Buffy sighed. "So deep."

"Oh..."

"Touching...it's never...not like this." She moved harder at her own words, pouncing on his cock. "Never been like this. Not even... with you...I can feel you...more than just..." A long sigh rumbled through her throat as he slid his fingers down her abdomen, between their bodies. She whimpered when he found her clit, and slammed down even harder, grinding her hips. "I feel you, and I know...I know it's you."

Spike closed his eyes. "Oh, Buffy..."

"And it's so good. I...I..."

His eyes flew open again. "Shhh," he said, hauling himself up and covering her mouth with his free hand. And she understood. Spike didn't want to hear she loved him over an orgasm. Which was good, because when she said it, she wanted to be sure it was real.

Right now was too soon. But it was coming.

Fortunately, at that instant, so was she. With a heady cry, she braced herself and rode out the endless ripples of her orgasm, squeezing around him until he whimpered. The whimper became a roar; he vamped and his back hit the bed, hard, his hands finding her hips and holding on as he pistoned himself into her.

And finally knew silence.

Spike hugged her to his chest and they trembled together. His fingertips skimmed her back, barely touching, and drifted over her sweat-laced hair. He brushed a kiss across her forehead.

And they rested.



"WHAT? OHHHH...AGAIN?"

"Are you really surprised, Slayer?"

“No. Really, really not. But...again?”

“Again and again. We’re putting a sodding deadbolt on that door. No goin’ in, no goin’ out. No bloody interr...fuck me, that’s nice.”

“Somehow, I think the hotel supervisor would have a problem with tha—oohhh, god.”

“Sod the bloody supervisor. I aim to keep you in this bed and well shagged for the rest of your days.”

“Oh...I could live with that.” She moaned, but it turned into a grunt. “But there’s...the stupid Ascens—”

“No thinking shop while I’m fucking you.”

“What should I think about?”

“How about this?”

“Oh...*ohh*, you make a compelling argument.”



“SLAYER, THAT FUCKIN’ tickles.”

She giggled and moved to the side of the bed as he lunged for her. He missed, by a lot, and nearly toppled to the floor. “Poor Spikey. What’s wrong? The Big Bad can’t handle a little torture? What sort of Big Bad are you, anyway?”

“Torturing utensils usually come in the shape of whips and chains, love,” he argued as he rolled over and raised himself on all fours, prowling toward her like a sleek feline. His eyes were sparkling, and he ran his tongue over his teeth in that way that made her go all weak at the knees. Being that he was evil, he wasted no time seizing advantage of her swoony state to capture her wrist. “Not sodding parrot feathers.”

“I was trying to be...inventive?”

“Where’d you get that, anyway?”

Buffy shrugged. “Who knows? This is your dump, remember? Not really of the fancy. Sunnydale suits aren’t exactly posh. For some reason, no one ever wants to vacation here.”

"Gee, I wonder. An' stop insulting the digs." Spike scoffed. "Behold the mini-fridge."

"And the smashed television."

"Blame that on King Forehead. He got in the way."

"Of what?"

"My fist."

"So you ruined a perfectly good television to hit Angel."

"Would've ruined a lot more, too. At least I saved the mini-fridge."

"Oh, right. This is high-living."

"Can't live highly if I'm not alive." He grinned at her, managing to pry the feather from her fingers. If she'd wanted to keep it, overpowering him would have been simple. Slayer abilities: major bonus in the strength department. But she didn't mind letting him win every now and then, so long as he knew that's what it was—a victory she'd let him claim.

"You're cute when you're inventive," he informed her, kissing her nose. He rolled away before she could capture his mouth. "But otherwise, a bleedin' amateur."

She pouted. How dare he look all kissable and just move away like that? "Oh really? Think you can do better?"

Spike shrugged. "Don't like to brag, but—"

"Oh please."

He chuckled. "Right. Who am I kiddin'? I love to brag." He waggled his eyebrows at her and sidled up closer. "Luckily, you've given me plenty to about."

Buffy flushed but walloped him on the shoulder. "As if."

"You know it's the truth, pet."

"You're bent."

"And it makes you scream, doesn't it?" He ran the feather lengthwise down his taut cheekbone, and grinned as she leaned toward him before turning the feather on her. "That'd be the hundred plus years of...experience."

God, his voice did a number on her. Buffy shivered and tried to look resolved. "Enough experience to know what to do with that feather?"

"I'm hurt that you even need to ask."

"Something inventive?"

"Of course," he replied with the utmost seriousness. "Lay back."

She wanted to fight him but the look he gave her screamed it would be well in her favor to obey. And if Spike didn't want to fight, he must have something...interesting up his sleeve. Metaphoric sleeve, of course. Right now, he was scrumptiously naked and very adamant on remaining that way.

"Comfy pet?" he drawled, grinning.

"Shut up and get on with it."

"Mmm...so sentimental. I can already tell we're gonna be one of those cutesy couples that can't help but bleeding bash each other's heads in or shag each other silly wherever we go."

"Spike!"

"Look here," he drawled, sitting back. "She's screaming my name already."

"Argh, you asshole! Just wait until I...uhhhh... Ohh..."



"I DON'T WANNA LEAVE."

"Then don't."

"Kinda must. School day."

"Bugger school. What can they teach you there that you can't learn here?"

She giggled and rolled onto her side, drawing mindless patterns into his chest. "Nothing important. But I really should. Willow and Giles and everyone will be worried."

"What about your mum? You didn't tell her where you were goin', did you?" Spike glanced at the door, as if certain she would burst in with an axe just at the mention.

"I left her a note."

He waited with an arched brow. Buffy rolled her eyes.

"Of course I didn't tell her where I was going. My mother might like you more than Angel—" Spike flashed an unrepentant grin and

she pinched his lips before he could brag. “—but that doesn’t mean that she would approve of us having had endless sexcapades on a school night.”

“Oh, but it’s all right for the weekends?”

Buffy smirked. “And holidays. There’s probably a Parent/Teacher Conference Day coming up soon.” Then her face fell. “Oh god. I hate those.”

Spike rolled onto his side and propped himself up on his elbow. “When do you leave?”

“In a half hour.”

“You might as well ditch. You didn’t get any sleep last night.” He grinned. “My naughty girl.”

A small smile tickled her face. “Trust me, I’d really like to stay here. Really, really.”

“But...”

“But I do need to talk to Giles.”

“About what we found.”

“Right.”

Spike pursed his lips and nodded. “Uh huh. So go talk to your Watcher and come back. No harm, no bloody foul.”

The thought was entirely too tempting. School was tedious, especially for a senior who skipped on a regular basis, anyway. But there was a principle involved. She didn’t know what it was, per se, but she was sure that it was involved. “You want me to flunk out?”

“Course not. You got homework? I’ll help.”

“What?”

“History, love. And English. I’m good in English.”

Buffy grinned and leaned against the pillow. “Because of the poetry, right?”

A pause. He ducked his head, blushing as much as a vampire could, and she found it unspeakably adorable. “Yeah...”

“I want to. Really. You’re making the *be responsible* thing really hard.”

He thrust his hips forward so his cock glided along her thigh. “That’s not the only thing that’s hard.”

“Spike!”

He didn’t even bother to look apologetic.

A few beats of silence settled between them. Soft and companionable.

“You know what I said last night was true, right?”

She looked at him.

“I’m not goin’ back.” Spike sighed. “I’m not leaving, and I’m not goin’ back. Either. To whatever we were doin’ before this. Makin’ excuses, telling each other it was wrong. No matter. I’m made of stone, pet. You know that better than anyone. But if you try hard enough, you can break stones, too. Especially you bein’ the Slayer and all. I’m not goin’ back to that. With you, Buffy, I’m only goin’ ahead. You got me?”

Buffy smiled and sealed the space between them with a gentle kiss. “It’s still real,” she whispered. “I promised you it would be, and it is. It is. It’s tomorrow and I’m here. I want to be here. And I don’t regret anything. Do you get *me*?”

He rewarded her with another one of those looks that made her tremble. As though he hadn’t truly believed it possible until now—now that it was daylight and she was still with him. As though he’d needed this moment to know differently. She was touched and saddened in the same beat. Knowing that she could do that to him was one thing; knowing that she had put him in such a state to begin with was something else entirely.

“Hey...” he said softly, reaching for her face. “No more of that. I can be a right wanker at times. I just...I needed to say it. Regardless.”

Buffy nodded, tried for a grin, then leaned in to claim a soft kiss, which inevitably led to another. And another. And another. A few minutes passed before either could break away.

“Mmm...pet?”

“Yeah?”

“Any idea where we go from here?”

“You know...for once in my life, I have no clue. I guess we’ll get an idea when we get there.” She paused to glance at him. “That all right with you?”

He grinned and kissed her again. "Bloody perfect."

She smiled, because she believed him. And for now, that was enough.

The morning could not last forever. With a great deal of willpower, Buffy forced herself out of bed and into the shower... which was admittedly not the greatest game plan, as Spike found it imperative to join her, hike her into his arms, and pound into her until the water ran cold.

It was worth it.

Dressed in yesterday's clothes, he escorted her to the doorway and paused before she could leave.

"When will I see you again?"

"Tonight. Today, right after school. Or training. Whichever."

"If you want, I can pop by the library and give Rupes a vow of my honorable intentions."

Buffy grinned and rested her head against his chest. "You better not. I don't want to risk him not listening to you and going all stake-happy. Listen, for them, it's going to take—"

"Time. I know. Because of all the 'trying to kill them' that I did."

"Tends to bring out the worst in people," she agreed.

"But now—"

"I know."

He grinned. "Just checkin'."

They studied each other for a moment, then Buffy pulled him into a lasting kiss she would carry with her throughout the day. He nibbled at her, battled her, and loved her with every stroke of that mouth. A taste that she never wanted to be without. It amazed her with every beat. What he was. What he did. What he had become.

How easily he made her burn.

When they pulled apart, she was smiling. "Today is considerably looking better than yesterday, judging by the start."

"My sentiments exactly."

"I'm glad I came by."

"Oh, god, me too. You have no bloody idea."

Buffy sighed and pulled away at last. It was time to leave. She had

to leave. Back to the mundane world of schoolness. All work and no play.

But there would be plenty of play at day's end. She counted on it.

"I'll see you later."

"Soon," he corrected, earning a smile. "Buffy."

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

If there was ever a time she didn't melt when she heard that confession, she reckoned she should be shot. He had the ability to turn her to butter with just a glance, but his words were her ultimate weakness.

Someday, she'd find the courage to say the words and mean them. She was halfway there as it was. With the depth of what she felt now, love was inevitable.

Inevitable, but not rushed. He did not want rushed. He wanted perfection.

"I know."

He smiled.

She knew.

And he would know, too.

Someday.



THE BELL for first period had hardly finished ringing before Willow twisted in her seat, wide-eyed. "Okay," she said. "You're talking."

Buffy scowled playfully and gestured at the front of the room. "It's learning time!"

"Oh, phooey. You're so talking."

"You're going to get us yelled at."

"And you have a massive hickey on your neck."

Buffy eeped and shot a hand to her throat. Not that it did any good. Willow merely grinned wider.

"Or should I say *hickey*s?"

"You mean..."

"You look like you have the plague. The plague of Spike lips."

Buffy grumbled and tugged her hair out of its ponytail, glancing around the room with the sudden suspicion that she was the target of a number of stares. For a school that thought it proper to ignore her, she had the strangest way of attracting attention when it was not wanted. "Dammit," she muttered. "He is so dead."

"Literally."

At that, she smirked. She couldn't help it. "Not where it counts."

"And where would that be, Missy?"

"In all areas." Buffy nodded toward the instructor, who was giving them a death-glare. "Later."

Later came sooner than she would have liked. Willow followed her with Resolve Face to the library, uncharacteristically unbothered that she was skipping second period.

The library itself was vacant, and Buffy was glad. Despite what she told Spike that morning, she was so not ready to face Giles.

"You're talking!" Willow all but exploded. "You disappeared last night with Spike, didn't contact us for hours, and Giles said that Angel came by to see him after—"

"You talked to Giles?" Buffy gulped.

"That time before school starts? Yeah, some of us are here for that, too."

"He didn't happen to...errr..."

"Well, he wasn't too happy with...anything. But I think that's just because he's British." Willow propped herself onto the front counter. "Speaking of British, you minx, you better start talking. You were all with the moon eyes last night, disappearing for hours when you were supposed to be tracking Faith, and show up this morning looking... well...I'm too virginal to put a name to it, but I know there's a name!"

"Oh, yeah. About Faith. I—"

"Save it for the Watcher. This is best friend QT. Did you and Spike..."

Buffy bit her lip, hesitating. "You're all right with the 'me and Spike' of that equation?"

"Well, I am a little wigged by the 'used to want to kill us' thing,

but hello! I was there last night." Willow grinned. "I saw something. Besides, after you get to talking to him, he's an all right guy. I mean, for someone who's all with the dead and all."

"Giles isn't going to like it."

"Giles will get used to it. He got used to Angel."

"Angel has a soul."

"Angel also murdered his girlfriend."

Very true.

"And," Willow continued, "I really don't think he'll have a problem with Spike if Spike doesn't make with the eating of Hellmouthy locals. Is he going to continue eating Hellmouthy locals?"

Buffy went hot, her mind detouring hard and fast down the nearest gutter. "Ummm...just one, I think."

Willow frowned, confused, then turned bright red. "I... uhhhh...ummm...Buffy!"

She grinned in spite of herself and shrugged. "What can I say? I've been corrupted by evil sex."

Xander chose that moment to burst into the library, and by the look on his face, it was more than obvious he'd caught that remark.

"No sex is evil," he said in greeting. "I rebuke this in the name of Guy-Dom."

Buffy and Willow exchanged a glance. The redhead shrugged, grinning.

Yeah, she might as well start with the announcements now. It wasn't like this cat was going to stay in the bag for long.

"The sex is with Spike," Buffy said.

To his credit, Xander didn't miss a beat. "I stand corrected. And disgusted. And...what?"

Buffy looked to Willow again, and they giggled conspiratorially.

This was an exceptionally good start.



LIKE ALL THINGS, it would take time getting used to this. From the

moment she'd taken Spike's hand in her own. From the moment their eyes had met. From the moment she'd understood.

In all things, there was no going back.

There were other factors weighing in. Giles. Her mother. Angel. The Mayor. Faith. All things to be dealt with in the days and weeks ahead, and some more easily than others. But then, there had always been battles to face. Evils to defeat. And there always would be.

But not today.

Tentatively, Buffy knocked at room nine of the Sunnydale Inn just as the sun was setting. The door flew open without missing a beat.

"Hey."

"Hey."

Such evils would be faced another day.

Spike stood aside and gestured her inward. "So," he began conversationally, hesitated, then leaned in to kiss her temple. "How was school?"

Buffy flooded with warmth, some part of her that had been askew until right now sliding back into place.

This was right. It was real.

And it was hers.