

# SACRAMENT

*A Spike/Buffy Romance*



HOLLY DENISE





THIS WAS GOING TO HURT. A lot.

The stone edge of the headstone felt as if it sliced all the way to her spine, both knocking the metaphoric wind out of her body and rendering her momentarily dazed, and therefore unprepared for the Slayer's follow-up kick. Buffy had to give the newbie kudos. She really knew how to make it hurt. And not just the *I'll walk it off* kind of hurt—the big kind. The kind where she would have to drain a hospital dry before she felt anything like herself again.

"Now," she drawled, limping up, her eyes clashing with her enemy's, "that was uncalled for."

"I don't think you get it," the girl spat in her thick accent, leaping in the air and landing a whirling kick against Buffy's jaw. She waited until Buffy flopped uselessly to the ground before continuing, which was really thoughtful, all things considered. "This is not a game."

"Sure it is," Buffy replied, climbing back to her feet. "It's all a game. And I won."

The Slayer scowled and threw her another kick, but Buffy was ready this time. She caught the girl's leg and sent her flying to the ground. It had been like this for the past few weeks—every other night or so, no matter where she went, the Slayer was there. In her hair, in

her business, fucking everything up, and while it had been amusing at first, she was damn tired of it now. There were only so many ways she could *not* kill the girl.

Spike thought it was a hoot, which only furthered Buffy's irritation. It was bloody well deserved, he said, considering all the times she'd thwarted his schemes or mucked up his dinner plans. Every time he turned around, she'd been on his case. Strangely, Buffy didn't remember it that way, but what mattered was he was right—the Slayer was a nuisance, and one she needed to silence.

And that was the problem.

She didn't want to be responsible for killing a slayer. There were certain things death couldn't eradicate, and the connection she felt with her sisters was among them. No one else out there could possibly understand the loneliness and fear that came with getting out of bed every morning—none save the girl crawling to her feet now, wiping sweet-smelling blood off her split lip and glaring stakes in her direction. Buffy didn't want to kill her, but it was becoming more and more difficult to avoid it.

"You know," Buffy said, spiraling in place and landing a kick in the Slayer's side that sent her flying back to the ground, "I really don't understand why you guys couldn't just leave us alone. We bowed out gracefully. We don't go out of our way to piss you off. We—"

"You are an abomination!"

She rolled her eyes. "Here we go."

"This is the world you are supposed to protect, and you allowed yourself to be turned. You—"

"Yeah. I was totally responsible with the lying there and having no control over the situation." Buffy made a face. "And that isn't even the point, psycho. Honestly, what you *don't* know about vampires could sink the Titanic."

"I know enough."

"Well, I don't want to kill you."

"You can't!" the Slayer hissed, throwing a kick toward Buffy's midsection. She dodged easily, dropping to the ground and rolling a safe distance away. At this rate, she was never going to make her evening date with Spike.

Fucking figured the girl would ruin her night.

*You asked for it, pet*, the Spike in her head warned with his typical cocksure grin.

*Oh, bite me*, she replied.

"I can," Buffy replied, fangs descending. She had yet to get used to the feeling, but that didn't matter. She was too addicted to the raw power fueling her veins and crackling between her fingers. "And I will if you force me."

"If I *force* you?" The poor girl seemed honestly perplexed. "You are a vampire."

"Like I said, *Titanic* of things."

It was a useless debate, one she and the Slayer had already had several times before. Every time Buffy thought she might be reaching the moronic teacher's pet, something intervened. Another vampire, a slightly more-than-flesh-wound wound, or, most frequently Spike, who spied on these trades more often than he would admit.

He loved watching her in her element.

"You are a creature of evil," the Slayer said. "The person inside a vampire dies the second a vampire is born."

Buffy shook her head and tsked. "Sorry to burst your bubble, honey, but that's just—oh, what's the word? Bullshit."

"I know my vampires."

"I think tonight is proving you don't."

The Slayer's expression melted into a scowl and she barreled forward without warning. A wild fist flew toward Buffy's face and was quickly deflected and countered with a swipe at the Slayer's legs. Buffy seized the opportunity to leap away the next second, but the situation was quickly spiraling out of control. Every confrontation became sloppier, more violent, and though there was a sizable part of her enjoying the thrill of the hunt, it was damn difficult avoiding the killing blow when she didn't want the girl's blood on her hands.

"The Council will have you killed," the Slayer warned, her accent growing thicker with rage, and a stake materializing in her grasp. "If you kill me, another will follow."

"Yeah, I kinda know how it works."

"And I will not rest until you are dead."

"That's a damn shame."

The Slayer swiped at the air between them with her stake. "Why do you not fight?"

"Are we really back on this?" Buffy demanded, bored. "How many times can I say *I. Don't. Want. To. Kill. You.* You and me? We got the shaft. I just found a way out."

"Death is not a way out!"

"Where the hell have you been? Death is the ultimate way out."

"You should have walked into sunlight rather than become a monster."

"Yeah, but then I wouldn't be here having a ripe old time listening to you yammer on about things you don't know anything about." Buffy shrugged, wiping dirt off her outfit. Short skirt—easy access for Spike—and a camisole, both of which had looked smashing before the annoying do-gooder had ruined her evening. "I know what it's like to be you," she reasoned.

"That girl died," the Slayer argued. Honestly, it was like talking to a brick wall.

"Twice, now that you mention it."

A confused frown. "Twice?"

"Yeah," Buffy agreed. "Think that makes me the expert on death, wouldn't you say?"

Another wild swing came rolling for her head. She ducked gracefully, throwing back a kick that landed the Slayer on the ground.

"You are a murderer," came the righteous accusation.

Buffy shrugged. "Girl's gotta eat."

"This ends now. Tonight. I've let you go too many times."

"Aww, did someone get a poor performance evaluation?"

The Slayer huffed and sprinted forward, stake aimed in what would have been a perfect arc for Buffy's heart. A split second decision and a minor stab of guilt later, Buffy twisted and jerked the weapon from the Slayer's grasp, flipping her onto her back with a vicious growl.

"For the record," she said, snapping her fangs, "I didn't want it to end this way."

The Slayer spat in her face and wiggled. Well, that was just rude. There was no telling the stupid girl anything. Perhaps the next slayer

would be a better listener—because there would be a next, and then a next, and a next. And as long as she and Spike walked the Earth, there would be no rest for them.

At least it would keep life interesting, she supposed.

Buffy sighed, wiped her skin clean, and pressed the jagged end of the stake against the girl's chest. "If you're gonna be that way," she said conversationally, "let me show you how it's done."

Strangely enough, for all her hesitation, as the stake broke through flesh and bone, as the Slayer gurgled and spat up blood, Buffy didn't feel a thing.

Not a goddamn thing.



"SHE'S KILLED A SLAYER."

If there was ever an announcement that could make the air fall still, it was that. Somehow, it made everything harsher, more real. As though the months spanning Buffy's absence had, in a way, been make-believe until that moment—as though all could be forgiven and forgotten. But that ended now—now everything was real in ways it hadn't been before. Killing a slayer was different business.

Killing a slayer was a sin of a different color.

"Oh, my god," Jenny Calendar whispered, placing a hand over her mouth.

"Are you certain?" Giles asked softly. "Are...there has to be..."

"What? A mistake?" Xander demanded. "She's a vampire, Giles. Not much with the moral compass."

The look on the watcher's face was heartbreaking. There were things he understood, of course, things he'd always known...but Buffy killing one of her own was unimaginable.

Angel nodded and took a step forward. "News travels fast in the underworld," he said, speaking to everyone, though his eyes didn't waver from Giles's. "Especially news like this. I'm guessing you'll get word within the next day or so." He paused. "Her name was Kendra, and she'd been sent specifically to locate and destroy Buffy and Spike."

"Locate and destroy?" Willow echoed, voice bathed in worry. "I thought...I thought we'd decided we'd try to—"

"Yes," Giles said, quickly recovering. "But the Council is a different matter. The second Buffy was turned she became an enemy, and there is nothing more powerful or frightening in the world than a sired slayer. The Council would have wanted her eradicated immediately." He paused. "Before she could impart serious damage."

"But that's not what we decided," the redhead objected.

Xander tossed her a sympathetic glance. "Don't really think the Council cares what *we* decided, Will." He turned back to Giles. "Vampire slayer turned vampire. Think I can see where they're coming from."

Angel hesitated then took another step forward. The library had become even more of a second home in the aftermath of Buffy's turning. Every second not dedicated to schoolwork and keeping up appearances was wasted away in the library, poring over books, looking up spells, and discussing options regarding their missing slayer. They spent more nights encircled by dusty books than they did at home, but for all the effort, there was little in the way of options.

Little aside from staking her.

"Do we at least know where she is now?" Giles asked. "If we have a location..."

"My sources say somewhere near New York," Angel replied. "But I'm not certain if they're reliable."

Xander raised his hand. "Why wouldn't they be?"

"I was snapping off their fingers at the time."

Willow winced. "Ouch."

"Not exactly the preferred method of extracting information," Giles said dryly. "Demons aren't known for telling the truth to begin with."

Angel shrugged. "They weren't talking. I made them talk."

"And they might have said anything."

"Even so, we have a lead, which is more than I can say for where we stood yesterday." Angel turned to Jenny. "How close are we?"

"I'm missing some ingredients, but we're close." She sighed. "Or as close as we're going to get. I keep telling you, I have no idea if this is



actually going to work. Casting spells on people requires a large amount of focus...and at my skill level, there's no telling whether or not I'd be able to reach Buffy with a whole continent between us."

"It's still worth a try," Giles reasoned. "Anything is worth a try."

"And then what?" Willow demanded. "We give Buffy a soul and... how do we even know if it worked?"

A series of glances were exchanged.

"We'll know," Angel said softly. "One way or another."

THE COUNCIL GITS weren't exactly known for their stealth, but this was bloody ridiculous.

Spike supposed he would humor them some. Buffy wasn't expecting him for another five minutes or so, and while he didn't like to keep her waiting, there was something to be said for the hunt.

Especially with prey like this, prey who thought they were the hunters. Honestly, with as many of these prats as he offed on a weekly basis, he would think the Council would get its head out of its ass and try something other than offering up fresh meat every other day.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are."

They wouldn't come out. They never did. Instead, they lurked in the shadows, pretending they could still manage to wrangle the upper hand before everything else went to shit. Spike knew—he and the Council wankers had played out this scene a time or two. Just as well, though if they bugged his date with his slayer, he wouldn't be quite so forgiving.

Any second not spent with Buffy was a second wasted.

Spike honestly didn't know how he'd managed to live so long without her at his side. The past few months had been so blessedly

good to them, be it stalking those who would hunt them down at night and dancing until the sun came up or shagging until they accused each other of being tired just so they could sneak in a wink of sleep before starting up again. She was a fiery spitball, his slayer, and he was the lucky bloke who got to take her home tonight.

Tonight and every night.

Spike grinned. "Oi!" he called. "What sorry sort of watchers are you, anyway? Dangerous vampire, here. Does a bloke really need to bite someone to get a little attention?"

Something flew fast across his cheek. Spike whirled around, his demon emerging in full force. Seemed taunting them had paid off. There were two of them, both bearing crossbows.

"Bout bloody time," he snarled. "Come on, boys. Come to daddy."

The watcher to his right stood slightly taller than the other, thicker around the middle with a handlebar mustache. His friend was lanky with a heavy dose of priss and struck Spike as the sort of bloke who spent more on fancy leather shoes than others did on rent. He doubted either of them had ever done so much as pump their own gas, let alone tote heavy weapons in search of a dangerous pair of vamps. Pickings were getting slim, he suspected. The Wankers Council had likely run out of viable candidates on the East coast. Had to happen sooner or later.

"Let's make this fast, yeah?" Spike drawled. "Gotta date with a lady."

Tall and Lanky took a nervous step forward. "N-not go-going far, vampire."

He barked a laugh. "Real convincing, that. Practice that speech in front of a mirror?"

"Where is the Slayer?" Handlebar demanded with a bravado he didn't clearly possess. His sweaty hands grappled clumsily at his crossbow, his eyes wide and frightened. "Tell us where she is, Vampire, and we'll—"

Spike snorted, sticking a fag between his lips. "Piss yourselves?"

"She is the property of—"

"Finish that sentence, mate, and I'll rip out your insides." He lit up

and inhaled, eyes bouncing between the so-called hunters and the weapons they carried. "What's that they say about the broad side of a barn?" he drawled. "Or are you hoping to get in some target practice with yours truly?"

"We only want the Slayer," Lanky chirped, his voice shrill and wobbly. "She is w-wanted for questioning regarding the d-disappearance of Kendra Young."

"You mean what happened last week when your replacement slayer snuffed it." Spike arched his eyebrows and blew out a pillar of smoke. "Way the lady tells it, she did everything she could to not kill the dumb twig. Your girl couldn't get it through her head that all we want is to be left alone."

"Now, now," said Handlebar. "You're familiar with slayers, aren't you, William?"

"Didn't know we were getting so friendly, chubs. Yeah, I've done in a slayer or two in my time. You lot want to *arrest* me, too?" He snorted. "Bloody pathetic. This really the game you're playing, now? Gonna cuff her and try to sweat her out? She's tried explaining it to you thick gits a hundred times."

"She's an abomination!" cried Lanky, firing a wayward arrow in his excitement. It soared far over Spike's shoulder, disappearing into the blackness behind him.

"Smart move," Spike snarled, tossing his cigarette to the ground and stomping it out. "See, boys, here's what I figure...you two are the bottom of the barrel. Council's lost its best men, and now the reserves are being called to the front line.

Lanky's eyes went wide and his sweaty hands quickly made to reload the weapon.

"Here's what I can't suss out. Maybe the two of you can lend an ear." He offered a toothy grin and hooked his thumbs through his belt loops, taking broad, casual steps in their direction. Whether or not the wonder twins were conscious of the fact that for every step Spike took, they went in reverse, he didn't know or particularly care. This was fun. The thicker the sportsmen, the more entertaining the sport. "Council's not known for getting involved personally, and yet every other night

I'm having to off another one of you namby-pamby stiffes just to get in a *decent* night's kill. Like digging through cereal just to get the toy at the bottom of the box, you know? Gotta say, I've been around for a while now, and I'm a little offended it took the siring of one little slayer to become so bloody important."

Handlebar glanced quickly to Lanky, who did not look back.

"But here we are, the three of us. You boys got sent out to bring in yours truly—"

"We only want the Slayer!" Handlebar protested.

"Yeah, and you know that I'm standing between you and her, and I'm not too keen on moving." Spike kicked at a clump of grass and plastered on a wide, phony smile. "Why's it that I became so sodding popular all of a sudden? Killed two slayers in my time and you lot just send another my way. Feed one a little blood and the rules change."

He swung casually on his heel before coming to a stop before them.

"You're here because I'm here, and I know where she is." He shrugged. "Or I could find her in a pinch. Bit unpredictable, that one. It's what makes it so exciting, you know? So *fresh*. Worth getting up for at night."

"She killed a *slayer*," Lanky hissed.

Spike rolled his eyes and threw his hands in the air. "Have you gits been listening? Why is *Buffy* all the rage when you have *William the Bloody* right the bleeding hell in front of you! Buffy bagged a slayer. I've done in three in my time. Council doesn't see it fit to send the coppers after me, though, do they? Had I just drained my third and left on my merry way, we wouldn't be here now, would we? You'd be kicking it back in some cushy office and some other daft chit would be meeting her untimely end. It's *insulting*, is what it is!"

"This is different," Handlebar said.

Lanky shot his friend a worried, almost manic glance. "Tom, don't engage it!"

"Yeah, Tom," Spike mimed. "Stick to the script."

"This is a sired slayer. The Council has to take every precaution, and what's more, you knew it. You knew by siring her, you'd be bringing hell upon yourself." Tom raised his crossbow higher, fat beads

of sweat dribbling into his eyes. "They're too dangerous to be left in the wild."

Spike growled and stepped forward. "Slayer's not a rabid animal, mate."

"She killed Kendra Young."

"Yeah, that's what we do. We kill slayers. It's only fair, right? They're here to kill us."

"She's stronger than you," Tom warned, his voice climbing in octaves. "Only a matter of time before she views *you* as a threat."

"You do your vamp research at a Drac film fest?"

"Shut up!" Lanky spat, firing another arrow. Spike didn't bother to track where it fell; its aim was way off its mark.

"And if it's sour grapes that brought you here, well..." He took another step forward, which they recovered in the opposite direction. Then another, and another. "How's about next time you make sure to send your slayers off to annoy someone else. Might help in keeping them alive."

"We'll send as many as we need!" Tom cried.

"Then you're gonna have a bloody massive turnover rate. We haven't reaped much damage, Buffy and I. She loves the hunt. Loves her games, loves excitement, and while she'll have a bloody ball doing whatever it is she does, she's not one for playing with her food." Spike grinned, tipped his head. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I gotta date with my lady..."

He felt her, then, and fuck if that wasn't a brilliant sensation. Spike wasn't the sort of bloke who had ever given thought to what it would be like to be perfectly in sync with someone, but the awareness was so damn rich he couldn't work out how he'd ever managed without it. He also didn't know how he hadn't realized what a connection they had the second he set eyes on her. Weeks of moping around after his final split with Dru seemed aimless and wasted now. He had pure life at his fingertips rather than the staged play he'd lived with his sire, and while he'd broached the subject of claiming his once black beauty on more than one occasion, it seemed beyond a foolish venture now. He couldn't contemplate experiencing the oneness of being that he shared

with Buffy with anyone else. He hadn't known what to expect beyond what he read in his many Rituals for Wankers rags and the like, but what he'd gained in Buffy far exceeded his greatest expectations.

Like now. He felt her now. Felt her moseying through the graveyard, gravitating toward him as though magnetized. He felt her smile, felt her amusement, felt her fire as though it were his own. The claim was still fresh, of course, and they were still working out the kinks, but being able to feel her wherever she was definitely warranted a big fat check in the bonus column.

"A date, he calls it," Buffy said airily, swinging into sight from behind a mausoleum. "Any other guy, I would have eaten by now."

"Evening, pet."

"So this is where you've been," she said casually as she neared the scene, taking long, swinging steps toward the mismatched hunters. "I told you...three nights in a row and someone gets a spanking."

"Oh, golly, I hope it's me," Spike said, smirking.

"There should be a rule, you know? Standing me up gets you all kinds of punished." She flashed him a grin, then leaned against his shoulder to peck his cheek. "So," she drawled, "what's my boy been doing? Making new friends, I see?"

"Was just having a little chat with these blokes," he said, waving at their audience. "Seems they want a word with you."

Lanky and Tom looked like they had shat themselves. They stared at Buffy as though she were the incarnation of Lucifer, but with the same awed reverence one might give the Pope. Fear and wonder were two very powerful emotions that often went hand-in-hand, and though their sudden muteness amused him, Spike couldn't particularly say he was surprised. Buffy was poetry in motion, a piece of living art. Or unliving art, as the case may be. She took his proverbial breath away just by batting those killer eyes of hers. What it must be to see her in person for the first time...he almost envied them.

"Hmmm," Buffy mused, pressing a finger to her lips. "Let me guess. Tweed—check. Blank expressions—check. Crossbows—check. Pitiful lack of aim—check and check. Either you two are lobbyists, or the Council's sending me more fan-mail."

"S-slayer," one of them managed to stutter; Spike didn't catch which.

"In the past-tense form of the word, I suppose," she agreed, nodding. "I was at one point the one you call *Slayer*, or Chosen One, comma, the. Now it's just...what did we decide upon, honey? Your majesty? Goddess Extraordinaire? Buffy the Great and Powerful?"

Spike shrugged. "I call her kitten."

"Yeah, but that's just you. I don't think these two wanna see what happens if they get cutesy..." She leaned toward them conspiratorially. "Do you?"

"Hint," Spike said with a wide grin. "You don't."

Neither men spoke. They only stood, staring dumbly as though thinking they couldn't be spotted if they didn't move.

"So," Buffy said, resting an elbow on his shoulder. "What'd you boys wanna chat about?"

Still no response. She might as well have addressed a rock.

"Something about a bird named Kendra," Spike supplied helpfully. "Little fuzzy on the details."

Buffy frowned. "Oh. Was this girl spunky, about my age..." She held up a hand an inch or so above her head. "Yay tall, thick accent, and, oh, dead?"

Lanky murmured something, though for the vacant expression on his face, Spike wagered that much would be news to him.

"What was that?" the vixen at his side demanded. "Say again?"

"Slayer."

"Why, yes," Buffy said. "Now that you mention it, I believe she *was* a slayer. Emphasis on the *was*. As I said, she's kinda of the dead."

The gits just stared at her, apparently floored by her candor.

"What?" she asked, shrugging. "Is this breaking news?"

"These gents are of the opinion that you were a bit rash in drawing the girl's blood," Spike muttered, rocking on the balls of his feet. God, he loved seeing her like this. She was a natural, his slayer. Most young vamps were sloppy and awkward during the first few years, but not Buffy. No, she took to it like a bloody duck to water. She was made for this—made for the night. A spirit like Buffy's couldn't be confined to



just one lifetime; every step she took, every coy twitch of her lips, every excited flicker to light her eyes spoke of promises larger than the whole of his meager existence. Things he would see to fruition, things he wanted with such desperation it was all he could do to keep from falling to his knees and begging her for whatever it was she held out of reach—whatever she had yet to give him.

He had her until the end of days. Exploring her would be a never-ending journey.

Buffy rolled her eyes. “Ah, crap, this *again?*” She tossed him a worn look and planted her hands on her hips. “You told them it was self-defense, right?”

He nodded. “Seems it’s a matter of popular opinion, pidge. Vamps don’t bite outta self-defense.”

“I told her I didn’t want to kill her, but she kept coming after me with a stake.” She shrugged and turned back to the watchers as though asking them to settle a bet. “You can’t tell me that wouldn’t annoy *you* after a while.”

Tom’s chin wobbled. “She was just doing her—”

“Yeah, that line? You don’t wanna feed it to me.” Buffy grinned, her eyes rolling back to Spike. “Speaking of feeding...have you had dinner yet?”

His smirk widened and his stomach rumbled. Bloody good timing, that. “Was waiting for you,” he drawled. “Feel like Italian?”

“Meh. The last one I ate didn’t go down too well.” She made a face and flattened a hand against her stomach. “Unfortunately, I think we’ll have to settle for something old, dry, and stiff.”

“You’ll just be hungry again in an hour,” he pointed out.

Buffy shrugged. “Yeah, but until then, at least I won’t be bored.”

Her sparkling eyes met his again just before bursting into the gorgeous golden sheen of her inner demon. Christ, he loved her like this. Loved the fire she exuded, loved the passion and energy she poured into every action.

He loved the way she made them scream.

His darling little monster.



HOURS LATER, ON A BED SEVERAL BLOCKS AWAY, BUFFY DREW A LINE down Spike's abdomen before lapping up the stream of blood she'd drizzled onto his sinfully delicious flesh. She loved this game—well, she loved every game, but this one was among her favorites. Every time her tongue touched his skin, he hissed and arched and murmured nasty little things, and all it did was encourage her to tease him more.

"Further south," he whispered, lifting his hips.

Buffy giggled and wrapped her hand around his cock. "Is this where it hurts?"

"Yeah. Think I might need something soft and wet to dip it into."

"You think so?"

"Only one way to find out."

She laughed again and took him into her mouth, rolling his fore-skin around his sensitive head. God, she loved his scent. Musky, masculine, everything that made him Spike. She loved the way he purred and cooed, the way he panted and begged. He was such an enigma to her—both cocky and insecure, confident and desperate. He contradicted himself on every turn, and the more she got to know him, the more she wanted to know.

They had a long time to explore each other, but she suspected it would never be long enough.

"Mmm," she murmured, kissing his steely flesh. "Yummy."

"Christ, pet..."

"You like that?"

"Fuck, yes. Do it again."

Buffy grinned and ran her tongue along the underside of his cock, her eyes wandering up his pale, blood-smeared torso until colliding with his own. He was so fucking pretty, and that wasn't something she'd once found attractive. Men couldn't be pretty, else they weren't manly. They had to be tough and morose. They had to have huge biceps to flex, a large brooding brow, and at least two feet on her in height.

Spike was all man, there was no doubt about it. His wiry build gave way to lean, roped muscles he managed to hide and emphasize at the same time. His strength was deceptive at times—though hers almost always surpassed his, he had surprised her a time or two by flipping her

under him when she would have thought it impossible. Furthermore, the man had abs of marble, a thoroughly lickable bellybutton, and a smirk that could moisten her panties just by thinking about it.

Yeah, this was the good life. Right here, in this apartment they'd stolen from two strung out dope fiends who had tasted surprisingly, well, psychedelic. She loved this—every fucking minute of it.

"You took the good one," Buffy informed him before sucking the thick head of his prick between her lips. Spike's eyes went wide as though he were about to protest, but the second her mouth touched him, he crashed his head against the pillow and rolled his hips under her, sliding himself across her tongue. He was so passionate in everything he did. He never ceased to meet her halfway.

And the boy tasted good. Damn good.

"Don't think," she said, releasing him with a wet plop, "I'm gonna let you get away with that."

He blinked several times. "Which one was the good one, again?"

"Moustache. The other one tasted all...stale."

Spike smirked and funneled his fingers through her hair. "You said that's what you were in the mood for."

"I meant metaphoric. Tomorrow, I'm so choosing the restaurant."

"Oil! Tonight didn't count as my pick. I still get tomorrow."

Buffy shrugged. "I don't make up the rules. You stood me up."

"Did not!"

"You weren't where you said you'd be when you said you'd be there. Ergo..."

"The gits bloody cornered me. I—"

"Couldn't handle two dummies who might as well have been wielding water guns?" She arched a brow, licking the head of his prick again. Then she was up on all fours, slowly prowling her way up the length of his sinful body until his mouth was beneath her mouth and his cock was rubbing her wet, needy flesh. "Cause honey," she murmured, "if you can't handle it—"

"Oh, I can handle it," he growled, his eyes flashing. He seized her by the wrists and flipped her under him so fast it knocked the proverbial wind out of her body. "Mmm, such a naughty slayer."

"I need to be punished."

He rubbed himself against her slick folds, then slammed into her with force so sweet she nearly wept. “I think we can manage that,” he purred.

Oh, yeah. Oh, *fuck* yeah.

This was the only way to live.

THE LIBRARY HAD TRANSFORMED over the course of the last six months. Strange how that worked. Nothing had changed aesthetically—the tables remained, the books were shelved, students were conspicuously absent, and the only occupant was a middle-aged librarian who looked more ragged by the day. He was poring over books, which was normal...but the life in his eyes had all but drained. More and more these days he resembled a trauma victim, both in appearance and action. It was the sort of sore that never scabbed over, and though he often pushed off offers for help with the insistence that he was fine, his eyes betrayed the truth.

Willow suspected Giles had never given much thought to what would happen if he lost Buffy. She knew it had been a recurring nightmare of his—a year and a half might have passed since she and Xander stood at his side in a dream-induced reality wherein he was forced to look at a grave bearing Buffy's name, but she remembered well the torture on his face. However, nightmares were reserved for fears people couldn't face in the daylight, and though she knew that Giles knew the dangers that came with being a slayer, he'd put so much faith into Buffy, never allowing himself to venture near a place where he might have to admit she wouldn't always be at his side. All watchers'

stories ended in sorrow and heartache, but like those before him, he'd assumed his story would be different. He might not have believed it logically, but he hadn't allowed himself to explore the alternative.

It had hit Giles the hardest, and that was saying something. Their lives had all been up a certain creek since Halloween. Knowing Buffy was out there somewhere—knowing she was running loose and killing was worse than a grave marker bearing her name. It meant a creature of unspeakable evil had stolen their friend's identity and was doing god-knows-what with it. It meant knowing Buffy existed even if she wasn't alive. It meant knowing she might turn up one day with a demon's grin and finish them all off for good.

And now this business with the dead slayer—Kendra, or whatever her name had been. Buffy had killed one of her own kind. It wasn't just a nightmare anymore.

Willow expelled a deep breath and rounded the corner of the check-out desk, where Giles sat absorbed in one of his books. He did that a lot these days...well, more so than ever before. As though an explanation for Buffy's ailment lay in the pages and all it would take to cure her of her disease was dedicated reading.

"Hey," she said calmly, holding up the shopping bag in her hand. "Fresh supplies from the magic shop. These are the last ingredients Ms. Calendar said she needed to do the you-know-what."

Giles's eyes remained on the page for a long second before he tore his attention away. "Yes," he replied. "Jenny should be here momentarily."

Willow smiled and set the bag on the counter, shrugging off her backpack and letting it fall to the floor. "Is Angel coming? He said he wanted to be here...but I don't know exactly what he expects."

"I'm assuming he expects what we all do."

"Which is?"

"I'll tell you as soon as I work it out." Giles offered a bland smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I've heard word from the Council. It seems Buffy and Spike took out the last operatives we had in the New York area last night."

The bitterness in his voice was hard to ignore. "Friends?"

"One of them was. Thomas Kent. He and I went to school togeth-

er.” He winced and closed the book he’d been reading. “The other was Clarence Reed. I knew him, but not well.”

“And the other slayer?” Willow ventured.

Giles nodded. “She and her watcher are set to arrive in New York sometime tomorrow. With any luck, their services won’t be needed.”

“Their...slayee services?”

She didn’t know why she was surprised. Giles had confirmed as much the other night, but it seemed perfectly reasonable to Willow that if gypsies could infuse Angel with a soul, the least they owed Buffy was attempting the same thing. She knew those closest to the matter might be inclined to disagree—or those who viewed the picture on a larger scale, but to her, Buffy was a friend worth risking everything to save. She wasn’t just a footnote in the Watcher’s Diaries. She was Buffy, and how anyone could want her dead rather than saved left her more than just a little rattled.

As though reading her mind, Giles cleared his throat and said, “You have to understand, Willow, the Council stopped considering Buffy a slayer the second she accepted Spike’s blood into her body. Their wants and our wants are not the same.” He paused. “We don’t even know if giving her a soul will improve her odds of survival. If the Council ceases their campaign against her, there’s no telling what impact having a sired slayer will have on the demonic community.”

“So...what we’re doing now...”

“Our best shot,” he said. “Our only shot.”

“And even if we get this done before the new slayer gets a chance to take Buffy out, or be taken out, she’s not our biggest concern.”

“She is still a force with which to be reckoned if what I’ve heard is true.” Giles exhaled deeply, adjusting his glasses on the bridge of his nose. “This particular slayer has already made a name for herself. She was called just after Buffy was sired, you see...and she’s already burned her way through two watchers. The first one was killed by a vampire called Kakistos, and the second was a little, how to say...mad. Needless to say, the girl—Faith, I believe that’s her name—the Council is beginning to think she’s cursed. This third watcher they have sent to her is a textbook example of someone too young to be in the field and more concerned with climbing up than doing his job properly.”

“So we have a maybe-cursed slayer and a corporate-ladder climber as the defendees of the world?” Willow licked her lips. “I want Buffy back.”

A tragic smile befell the watcher’s face. “As do I.”



AN HOUR LATER, THE LIBRARY WAS A DIFFERENT PLACE.

“Here,” Willow said, handing Jenny Calendar the purchase she’d made at the magic shop. “I was lucky to get this one—they only had one left in stock and their next shipment doesn’t come in until next week. Apparently, people use these things as paperweights so they’re a big seller.”

The teacher’s lips twitched. “Town like Sunnydale, this happens a lot.”

“What’s that?” Giles asked, emerging from his office.

“The last piece I need in order to conduct the ritual.” She held up a small, glassy ball. “Orb of Thesulah.”

“People use them as paperweights,” Willow repeated.

“Ah,” Giles said, his cheeks tinting slightly. “I see. Well, err, are we about ready to commence?”

“We’re waiting on Angel.”

“And Xander?” Jenny asked.

“He volunteered to wait with Mrs. Summers,” Willow explained. “We don’t know what Buffy will do once it...once it happens. She might call here or home, a-and since Mrs. Summers is still on the side of the wiggins with the whole ‘my daughter’s a vampire’ thing, we thought it’d be better if someone were with her.”

Jenny’s eyes filled with contrition. “How is she doing? Joyce?”

Willow and Giles exchanged a glance. They had gone along with Xander and Angel to speak with Buffy’s mother after the turning. Giles had known it would be the most horrible hour of his life, but he hadn’t been prepared for the woman’s heartbroken outrage. She had screamed and slapped him, wept and sent a lamp crashing into the wall. Then she’d ordered them all out and told them never to shadow her doorway again. Obviously, it hadn’t taken. Willow had gone by every day since



then to bring her flowers or cookies, and though she could be mistaken, she often thought she smelled Giles's aftershave in the living room.

"Better," Giles said, though he obviously didn't quite believe it. "She seems better, anyway."

It was likely fortunate Angel decided to make his appearance then; over the past few months, Willow had grown especially apt at detecting the cue to a long, uncomfortable silence. Any time the conversation veered to Buffy and her whereabouts, or the people she'd left behind, guaranteed at least one or two, and that was being conservative. Talking was one of those things no one liked to do anymore.

Not since Buffy had left.

"Ah," Giles said, looking up. "Here we all are. Ready?"

Jenny whirled around. "Angel. I didn't hear you come in."

"We never do," Willow supplied softly. "He's all with the stealth."

Angel didn't respond. His eyes had settled on the ritual preparations Jenny had set out on the tables. "I take it we're ready," he said.

Giles nodded and stepped forward. "According to the transcriptions Jenny uncovered, the three of us will form a triangle that cannot be broken. We need you to read the Latin. I'm deferring to your advanced age in the hopes that, while your schooling is bound to be older than mine, I'm hoping it might likewise be a tad more thorough."

"So you're hoping Angel is more Giles than you are right now?" Willow summarized.

"I suppose so." The watcher sighed and turned his eyes to the vampire. "Do you have any idea what we might expect once the ritual is conducted?"

"Providing we're successful," Jenny added. "Like I said, I've never heard of a restoration ritual succeeding with this much distance between the witch and the target. I would have suggested we fly out east, but..."

"But what?" Willow asked.

"But Buffy and Spike haven't exactly been stationary," Angel explained. "They're in New York now, but given the amount of attention they've received from the Council, not to mention what happened

with the other slayer, they might wizen up and decide to get out of Dodge before we could even book a plane ticket.”

“Which I’m willing to do if this doesn’t succeed,” Giles confirmed, his eyes stony. “Whatever we have to do to get her back is worth it.”

“Agreed,” said Jenny. “But for the moment, this is our best bet.”

Willow wet her lips and shot Angel a glance.

“All right,” the vampire muttered. “What do you need me to do?”



HER CHEST WAS BEING RIPPED APART.

Buffy’s eyes shot open, a harsh gasp clawing at her throat.

*Oh god, what is happening to me?*

There had never been pain like this. Never. Death itself had seemed simple, even serene, and she was a girl who should know, having notched the death-board twice in her time. The Master’s fangs had pierced her neck and the rest had been left to a puddle of water. Then not even a year later, Spike had made a harvest of her throat before spilling his own essence into her mouth, and though waking as a vampire had been painful in its own way, it had nothing on this.

Flesh ripped from bone and her body split in two. Something in her chest was angry, scratching and ripping at a heart now half a year dead, preventing her useless lungs from heaving an even more useless gulp of air. It spread from her fingertips to her toes, slashing through nerves and leaving her tingling with the worst sort of numbness she’d ever known.

*Fuck, fuck, fucking fuck.*

Somehow, she managed to sit up, forcing the brunt of the pain from her chest and into her gut, which rumbled in a way it hadn’t rumbled since her heart stopped beating. Buffy managed another gasp at that, her legs swinging over the edge of the bed, her eyes straining as her body wore away. The apartment. Yes, she was still at the apartment. And Spike was in bed beside her.

Spike...Spike, was he all right?

Buffy tossed a glance over her shoulder, where her man lay sleeping soundly. He slept through anything, her Spike. At least he was all right.

Then another wave crashed over her, and Buffy went tumbling to the floor.

"Oh, fuck," she gasped, crawling to her knees. Even words seemed to hurt. "Oh, Jesus."

Spike made a small sound and shifted, but didn't awaken.

Another ripple of pain sent her to the ground again. Buffy mewed pitifully, bracing herself on all fours. There was nowhere to go, but she couldn't sit still. She had to try to outrun it—she had to move, else she conceded defeat. So she moved, crawling slowly from the bed on which she'd oh so recently collapsed in orgasmic bliss in the arms of the man she loved, and into the living area where their sexual romp had begun. The apartment was laughably small, but at the moment the trek seemed endless. Her knees hurt and her hands wobbled, and every inch she moved sent a thousand shards of agony through her trembling body.

Something lived in her chest. Something screamed and tore. Something wanted out.

Her hands touched carpet at last, and there she collapsed.

Spike was miles away now. She willed him to wake, but he did not. She swore he'd sleep through the apocalypse, and had even joked once or twice about starting one up just to test her theory. He hadn't found it very amusing—said the world was too much fun to kiss goodbye, at which point she'd assured him her jests were all in good fun. No way would she give this up. Ending the world and ceasing to exist had zero appeal. She'd wanted eternity—an eternity of discovery and games, of fun and experience. An eternity with him.

Buffy gasped again and rolled onto her back. The ceiling seemed so far away.

*My kingdom for a stake.*

Scenery faded and colors clashed. The world was about to black out.

And then she felt it. A force of energy smashed into her breaking chest, exploding on impact and sending millions of shimmering tremors through her veins. Her fingers tingled. Her head felt light. She heaved a gulp of air and all fell still again.

She didn't realize what had happened at first. The pain began to

fade, easing off her like a satisfied lover. The ceiling remained where she'd left it, though it looked closer now. Blurs focused and furniture took shape again. She was on the floor in her apartment—in the apartment she and Spike had seized from its inhabitants. She was just a few feet away from her mate. She was...

*Oh, god.*

Buffy rolled over and gasped again. No, no, no. This was wrong. Everything was wrong. This wasn't where she was supposed to be.

These hands. The walls. This body.

"Oh, god."

*Not real. This isn't real. None of this is real.*

Buffy looked up. The scenery didn't change. Nothing changed.

*A dream. Is this a dream?*

Her gut twisted again, and this time she couldn't fight it. With a nauseating gag, she vomited on the floor. Once, twice, again and again. She couldn't stop. She needed to expel it. She needed it all gone. All of it—as though by emptying her stomach, she would wipe her sins away.

*Not real, not real. This can't be real.*

She trembled as the waves subsided.

The carpet was soaked in blood.

Tears stung her eyes and her stomach trembled again.

Dreams didn't feel like this. Dreams didn't leave this taste in her mouth. Dreams didn't hurt.

"Oh, god." Her voice broke and she fell back to the ground. Blood clung to her skin, but she didn't care. She couldn't move.

This was an all-new pain. One she couldn't outrun, though she would try.

As soon as she gathered the strength to climb to her feet, she'd leave nothing but a memory behind.

IT HAD BEEN six months since he'd last found himself alone in bed. They were both heavy sleepers—Spike out of nature, and Buffy out of the freedom that came with no longer being the Chosen One and Only. On the days when he stirred first, he'd lie in bed and watch her. She told him it was creepy, but he didn't care. He couldn't get enough of her; how he'd managed as long as he had with naught but insane little whispers to guide him on his path was beyond him. He'd walked away from that—away from darkness and obscurity and toward light. Toward a girl whose spirit and buoyancy filled his nights with a giddy sense of freedom and awe. How he'd ever convinced himself he belonged to anyone else when she was so clearly the one he was meant to be with still bloody amazed him.

Yet when he awoke that morning he was alone. Buffy always stayed in bed until he blinked his eyes open, often feigning sleep so she could catch him staring. The place where she slept was empty, indented with the whisper of her body, but he could tell immediately that she had left his side hours before.

However, that wasn't what concerned him. Any number of things might have distracted her, and he knew that every day wouldn't be like

the last. It was the fact that he knew almost at once that she had left the apartment that had his chest tightening.

Spike tossed the sheet aside and bounded to his feet.

He always felt her. Always. It was a perk to being her mate—they never felt far apart.

Only he couldn't feel her now. At all.

"Buffy?"

It was useless, he knew, but a compulsion he had to act on. Every desperate sod who had stood where he stood now—alone when they should be anything but—had stupidly called out to the person who belonged with them. And just like every desperate sod, he felt his heart drop when he received no response, confused concern transforming into panic in a flash.

"Buffy!" Spike shouted, racing out of the bedroom. He checked the loo even though he didn't hear the shower running, peeked into the kitchen, and nearly fell to his knees when he ran into the living room.

There was blood on the carpet. Blood that hadn't been there before.

Blood that Buffy had vomited. He knew that smell, even if he wished he didn't.

"Oh, god," Spike muttered.

What the hell had happened here?

"The fuck." He was moving before he knew where his feet were guiding him, throwing open the front door in a mad rush.

Streams of sunlight poured onto his skin, which blistered and sizzled on impact. Spike howled and stumbled back over the threshold, slamming the door shut with enough force to send the previous tenant's hideous artwork crashing to the floor.

"Bleeding, bugging fuck!" he screamed, aiming an errant kick into the entertainment center.

Sunlight. Bloody sunlight. How long had she been gone?

Spike cursed again and looked wildly around the room for a clock before settling for the blinking digital face of the VCR.

It was just a few minutes after five. Earlier than he typically awoke, but not early enough, *goddammit*. The sun had been setting early here; he'd just have to wait it out.

Spike sniffed and set his glare on the front door.

Something had happened here. Something beyond bad. And for whatever reason, for some unknown motive, she hadn't come to him. She'd run.

She'd left him.

"No," Spike muttered furiously, hands balling into fists. "Not like this."

Things had been so perfect for so long. He wasn't about to give that up. Not without an explanation.

Not without a bloody fight.



IT TOOK HER TWELVE HOURS TO FIGURE OUT WHAT HAPPENED. Twelve hours of remembering horrors she'd witnessed, crimes she'd perpetrated, blood she'd spilled and painted onto a firm male body. Blood she'd licked off her lover's skin before giggling madly and losing herself in pure physical ecstasy. Her nights had been dreamless and sound. No waking nightmares of the sins her hands had committed. No, all had been well until that morning. Until the horrible pressure on her chest and the images of everything she'd done, every life she'd taken flashed before her eyes in horrific Technicolor.

There were things she knew. Things she remembered. Things like the costume she'd selected for last Halloween. Had it been just last Halloween? Could only six months have passed between then and now? Yes, it had to be. Her memories were real, and try as she might, she couldn't account anything to lost time. Yesterday she'd awakened in this body without one damn care in the world. She'd looked through her eyes, spoken with her voice, snapped necks with her hands, torn flesh with her fangs, and guzzled blood down her throat. She'd mounted Spike with her legs and teased him with her tongue, and she'd melted into his kiss as his cock thrust into her body. This was all crisp, a perfectly preserved memory. An account for a day Buffy, *Buffy Anne Summers*, had not lived.

Not really. Not Buffy as she knew herself.

Buffy as she knew herself wouldn't have been in a bed across the

country from her home, cuddled next to a vampire who still smelled of the blood they'd smeared across his body. Buffy as she knew herself belonged on Revello Drive, in school, in the library, in any place except the one she discovered when she opened the apartment door.

*God, oh god.*

She'd dressed as a vampire that night. Halloween. So long ago. She'd dressed as a vampire out of...what? Fun? Spite? To poke fun at Angel for flirting with Cordelia in her absence? She'd dressed up and then—without any warning of any kind—had found herself sporting an actual honest-to-god pair of fangs. And at once, every care she'd ever entertained, every worry to invade her young, schoolgirl head had become a thing of the past. The once muddy future became clear, even transparent, and the naughty list of secret no-no's she hadn't even entrusted to her diary no longer seemed wrong or unattainable. In fact, the lickably evil resident vampire had become oh so very accessible almost immediately.

And that was it. Buffy hadn't come back to herself. She remembered teasing Spike about making her transition permanent, as well as her relief when she'd awakened and found him worriedly hovering over her. Since then, they'd been living a life of pure sin without regret...and then...

*A soul.*

There was no other explanation. Her friends, most likely...those she'd left behind. They had given her a soul to return her to herself. A soul to bring her back from the dead and into a world where she had no place.

Where ghosts chased her, even when she shut her eyes—where she saw the things she'd done over and over again, and felt it all the more. Felt the fear she'd invoked, the terror she'd relished, and the cries of people who had begged for mercy before she'd silenced them forever.

No one could live like this.

And what killed her all the more was the screams of the demon inside—the ache splitting her down the middle and singeing every nerve with more pain than it was worth. She knew why it cried, she knew why she hurt.



Every step she took away from Spike, the man she'd tied herself to for eternity, was pure torture.

Buffy had known this would happen. She'd sensed it the second she neared the edge of the city, and though her body had cramped and her chest had tightened, she'd pushed on. It would get better with time—any distance at all had been damn near unbearable during the first week, and while she wasn't looking forward to the adjustment period, she likewise understood it was a temporary ailment.

Claims were dangerous. Damn dangerous. And she'd linked herself to her enemy.

*Enemy.*

Buffy blinked back tears and turned her eyes instead to the Greyhound bus she'd been studying for the better part of an hour. Pegging her destination after leaving the apartment hadn't been easy. These last few weeks had given her a working knowledge of New York, but not enough to have the city behind her by the time the sun set. Maneuvering during the day was damn difficult, and something she and Spike hadn't yet done together. The wee hours of morning had given her the needed cover to get as far as she could before slipping under a sewer cap and relying on instinct—the same instinct that demanded she turn around and run back to the man she'd abandoned—to get as far as she'd managed. When the angry honks of cab drivers and colorful shouts of pedestrians began to fade, she thought it safe to venture a peek to the world above.

She hadn't gotten as far as she would have liked, but for the time being, it was far enough. The closest feasible landmark had been a luxury hotel, crowded with what appeared to be senior citizens on a group tour of the Big Apple. One such tour looked to be heading out at nightfall—likely so the travelers would sleep through the bulk of the journey—and though Buffy hadn't the foggiest idea where they were headed, she knew she'd be on the bus.

And gone.

She couldn't stop the small cry that bubbled off her lips anymore than she could stop the two tears that came with it. Buffy sniffed hard and pulled herself away from the hotel's entrance. Once the bellhops began loading the luggage in the cargo hold, she'd make her move. It'd

be a tight fit, but hey, no oxygen needed for the heartbeat deprived. At least there, it wouldn't matter what time it was. Sunlight wouldn't be an issue.

No, the only issue would be the pure torture of putting so much distance between herself and where her demon thought she belonged.

Buffy forced out a sigh, though it honestly hurt to breathe, and turned to the payphone she'd located shortly after sneaking inside. There had been a modest amount of cash and a whole mountain of coins at the apartment—courtesy of the now-deceased residents—and she'd snatched every penny she could before leaving. Granted, her destination remained undecided, but she'd known she'd need money and she wasn't quite up to the task of picking pockets. Her initial, *Buffy* reaction was to call Giles or her mom—tell them where she was and what had happened, though it seemed a moot point. Giles would know where she was, and if her mother didn't know already, then it might be a crushingly unnecessary shock to hear the voice of her presumed-dead daughter on the other end of a phone.

Still, she needed to talk to someone. Anyone would do. She needed to know the world she'd awakened in was the one she'd left behind... though honestly, she didn't know whether or not the answer would make her reality any better.

Buffy dug into her pockets for change. A quick punch of numbers later and the phone was ringing.

Only the voice that answered was not the one she'd expected.

"Buffy?" he demanded, the name barking out in a terrible marriage of fear and outrage.

Something in her chest cooed in relief as the rest of her went still with dread.

"Buffy?" Spike shouted again. "Hello?"

*Hang up. Hang. Up.*

But she couldn't hang up, and she knew it. Just hearing his voice was enough to calm the raging storm. It gave her the illusion of being near him, and the demon needed the illusion.

"Hello."

The relief on the other end was palpable. She saw him sighing, his knees bending as he collapsed onto something—a sofa perhaps.

"Bloody hell, give a fella a heart-attack, why don't you?" Spike said with a nervous laugh. "Where are you, love?"

"Where are you?" she countered lamely. Someone behind her yelled at a bellhop, distracting her but not well enough.

"You rang me up, pet, not the other way around."

"The apartment?" she guessed. It was the only thing that made sense. "I...uhhh...I didn't even know I knew this number."

"Where are you? What's wrong? There's blood on the carpet, sweetheart, and you weren't here when I—"

"I'm...I'm leaving, Spike." Her eyes traveled back to the Greyhound as though seeking reassurance. It was still there, and its passengers had yet to file outside. "I'm leaving right now."

"The bleeding hell you are! Where are you?"

"I'm not coming back."

"What the hell is going on? Did I do something? Tell me if I did something."

"You didn't do anything," she said, hating herself for the lie but not knowing any truth she could give him that would begin to explain. He hadn't done anything except turn her into her nightmare. He hadn't done anything except set her free. He hadn't done anything except be the man she needed. He hadn't done anything except not have a soul, and she couldn't begin to explain that.

Not with every inch of her body breaking.

"Buffy, please!" He swore. "It's another ten minutes before sunset, love. You've *got* to tell me where you are."

"I'm so sorry, Spike."

*"Tell me what's wrong, goddammit!"*

She winced and wiped her eyes. She hadn't even realized she was crying until tears blurred her vision. "I'm sorry..."

"Tell me where you—"

"I've gotta go. I'm sorry."

"I love you! You hear me, Buffy? I love—"

She hung up, her hand shaking. The phone rattled with crushing normalcy. Sound returned within easy seconds—the swing of the lobby doors, the rush of occupants checking in and out of the hotel, and the racing pulses that came with them. The sort that reminded her she

hadn't eaten since last night, and there was only one thing on the menu that would satiate her hunger.

The world returned and not much had changed.

She was still a vampire. Still on the wrong side of the continent from home. Still hopelessly alone.

Her inner demon began wailing again, but this time she didn't fight it.

This time, its pain was her pain.



"WE THOUGHT WE WOULD HAVE HEARD FROM HER BY NOW, RIGHT?" Xander blinked and glanced around the library, as though expecting a show of hands. "Right?"

There was no immediate answer, which was fair since the question was fairly open-ended. Willow and Jenny Calendar sat at one table, sharing a book on the occult and restoration rituals. It seemed Giles and Angel couldn't sit. The normally rigid librarian had bounded to his feet seconds after settling in a chair, and the vampire had secluded himself to the shadows near the staircase. No one seemed to know where to look.

The past few hours had been long and tense, and they only looked to get longer. After what Jenny had proclaimed as a successful restoration—at least insofar as what she'd experienced in conducting it—the silence that followed had been insufferable. Xander had arrived after an hour or so of Joyce's phone not ringing only to find himself in a similar hell of waiting, though this time with more company. No one wanted to move yet standing still yielded few results.

"I still don't see why we can't just attempt the soul-spell again," Xander said when no one responded to his question.

Giles rolled his eyes. "As we have said—I believe seven times—attempting a restoration ritual on someone who already harbors a soul is completely out of the question."

"No one can handle more than one of anything in them," Angel said. "Vampires only have one demon, humans only have one soul."

"You have one of each," Xander argued.

"Yes, but as we discovered with Eyghon, I can't have *two* demons. If the spell worked and we try to put another soul in her, it could kill her. Even if it didn't, we still wouldn't know whose soul it was and it could get destroyed in the process." Angel tossed a glance to Giles. "I don't think we've given her enough time. The sort of person Buffy is with the magnitude of what she's done... I remember this. She won't want to see anyone for a long, long time."

"Even if she knows we're the ones who did the ritual?" Willow asked desperately. "S-she'd know we did it, right? And that means we want her back?"

Angel shrugged. "We can't know what she's thinking. I just know that if the spell worked and Buffy *is* back, we can't put her on a timetable. She'll come to us when she comes to us."

"I can work on a location spell, in the meantime," Jenny offered, flipping through the pages of the text she and Willow shared until she landed on the right chapter. "I've never done one, obviously...but if Buffy is back and if she needs help, she might not want to tell us where she is. We can go to her just as easily if that's the case."

"It might make things worse," Angel said. "If we force ourselves on her—"

"It wouldn't be force," Willow argued, frowning. "We just want her to know—"

"This isn't something that can be explained or understood. She'll come at her own pace."

The shrill ring of the library phone punctuated the vampire's sentence with a large exclamation point. Xander nearly toppled off the table and Giles jumped out of his skin. It took a second ring before it registered on anyone that they hadn't imagined it.

"That's her!" Willow cried. "It has to be!"

Jenny jumped to her feet. "Rupert!"

But Giles was already moving. No one had ever seen him run so fast. The phone was in its third ring by the time he picked up, shouting an eager, "Hello!" into the receiver. There was a moment's pause, and then his shoulder's sagged and he braced the counter for support. "Buffy..."

Willow and Xander hurried forward like children on Christmas morning.

Giles held up a hand. "I...oh, Buffy...I..."

There was a scream on the other end of the line, muffled but powerful enough to thunder through the library like a cannon. The redhead jumped and nearly knocked Xander off his feet. Angel winced and Jenny's hand went to her heart.

"Buffy, Buffy, please..."

Another cry, this one softer. And then the line went dead.

Giles stood mutely with the phone glued to his ear, shock and grief splattered across his worn face as though someone had fired a bullet into his gut.

"What?" Xander demanded. "What the—"

"It's Buffy," Angel said.

"She's..." Giles cleared his throat, his glasses falling swiftly into the waiting hem of his sweater vest. "She says she's not coming home."

"Oh, god," Willow said, her voice strained.

Jenny took a step forward. "Rupert?"

Giles blinked hard and glanced up. "She said... God, she'll never forgive me. She'll never..."

And that was it. The man fell to the ground behind the counter with a devastated sob, choking on words that wouldn't come.

They ran to him, of course, but comfort didn't exist.



JUST SECONDS NOW. HE WAS JUST SECONDS AWAY.

"Come on, you bastard," he muttered, keeping his eye on the clock. The weatherman had pegged for night to fall at 5:41, just seconds away from now, and it was all Spike could do to keep from rushing out prematurely. He wouldn't do her any good if he got himself fried—he could barely do her any good at all. Standing here like a dolt when she needed him, when she was out there, hurting and needing him.

God, he was going to bruise her so good for doing this to him. For making him this sick with worry.

"Come on," Spike hissed, his heel twitching.

He focused for a second—just a second to keep himself occupied—on the name he'd heard in the background during their brief and infuriating phone conversation. The name that had inspired him to tear the bloody apartment apart in search of a phone book, and from there given him the starting point. He knew where she was, or where she had been when she placed that call. Now all he had to do was get there, knock some heads together, and find out where she'd gone.

What could have possibly been so horrible...

"Fucking finally!" he snarled, storming for the door at long last.

Something exploded just as his fingers grazed the knob, sending him stumbling on his feet in half a blink. Dust billowed and splinters flew, and Spike found himself on his back before he had time to curse. It took a second or two to realize what had happened, and another five to register reality with the face of the unfamiliar, nasty-looking bint pointing the business end of a crossbow at his throat.

He was so fucking sick of crossbows.

She cocked her head and flashed him a smile he ached to rip off her face. "Going somewhere, blondie?"

"You are in my way," Spike growled, wiping dust off his mouth. His every nerve had gone tight, tension pounding his temples and the demon's roar deafening everything else. It didn't take much to peg who the bird was, but at the moment he couldn't give a fuck. All that mattered was that she stood between him and the door.

"Well, we'll just save the introductions for later, then," the girl said, taking a step forward. "Here to see a vamp about a lady."

STRANGE HOW SWIFTLY THINGS CHANGED. Not too long ago, Spike would have bounded gleefully to his feet at the prospect of facing a new slayer, especially one who turned up so quickly on the heels of the last. The blood of a slayer was the ultimate trophy to most anyone who knew what it was worth, and to him, hunting down the chosen girl was a favorite pastime. He would have sought out as many as he liked had it not been for Dru's ailment. The two he'd challenged and killed had simply been a case of the right place, right time. As soon as he'd ditched Dru once and for all, he'd gone back to the only refuge he'd ever known.

Hunting down slayers was what he was good at. He lived for it. The entire idea that one girl found her name drawn out of the hat per generation to face the hordes of demons and other nasty uglies had him thoroughly enchanted, and even though his William side wanted to sympathize, the rest of him geared up for one bloody brilliant fight.

He'd loved fighting Buffy. She was a natural—feisty and unpredictable, passionate and righteous, vulnerable and soft, and she looked damn good doing it. He'd been drawn to her almost immediately without knowing why, though he'd told himself it was because she was the Slayer and he'd never met a slayer he hadn't liked.



Then she'd come up to him dressed to fuck and sporting honest fangs, and some inner trigger had fired. He'd needed to possess her. Christ, he'd needed her more with a simple look than he'd ever needed in a lifetime and a half with Dru. What had followed was innate and primal, and though he'd been shocked when he found himself mated, his initial outrage had only masked his intense relief. At last, for the rest of his days, he'd be with the one for whom he'd searched. Perhaps he'd always known she'd be a slayer—anything seemed possible. Anything at all.

So yes, once he would have rejoiced in getting a go at another slayer so quickly after tasting the last one's blood. But not now. Not bloody now. Not with fuck knew how much distance separating him and Buffy, and not much time to spare before she gave him a more permanent slip.

"Move or I'll move you," Spike snarled, wiping off the scattering of dust that had settled across his duster. "I'll let you off nice this time. How's that?"

The bint had the audacity to smirk, her eyebrow twitching as her index finger smoothed the corners of the crossbow's trigger. "Doesn't look to me like you oughta be barking orders, Blood Breath," she said. "Now, how about you cough up your girlfriend, huh? And you and me can pretend we never saw each other."

"I'd love to. Get the hell out of the way, and I'll see what I can do."

"What?" the girl said, blinking innocently. "She not here? Well, that's just fucking *rude*, is what that is. I had to haul ass to this shithole when there's this new club on Ninth I've been *dying* to try, and Buffy the Wonder Brat doesn't even have the courtesy to fucking be here?" She shook her head heavily and perfected her aim, an arrow now pointing at his heart. "Wanna try for the truth this time? Where's the elusive Buff?"

Spike flexed his fist, a muscle in his jaw ticking. One lucky move was all he needed. Something told him this slayer thought a bit faster on her feet than the last, but she was cocky as hell and he knew from experience how exposed that made her. Delusions of invincibility were a surefire way of ending up in a coffin prematurely, and though he'd

love to stick around and give her that lesson in person, there remained a much more pressing issue at hand.

"I'll say it again," he growled softly. "Put that bloody thing down and move. If you make me force you, you're gonna beg."

She jutted out her chin. "Not the begging kind."

"Sorry, ducks, I've been around the block a time or two. Know how to call my beggars."

"Ohhh. Is the Brit trying to threaten me?"

Spike stared at her for a long second before breaking off with a shrug. "Well," he said conversationally, the bones in his face shifting as his fangs fell into place. "Can't say I didn't warn you."

The next thing he knew, the girl had thrown the crossbow into his arms, kicking him back before he had time to feel the rush of surprise. He hadn't seen that coming, but Spike was nothing if not adaptable. He threw the weapon aside hastily and seized the slayer's leg, ducking under the mad swing of what looked to be a mean right hook before digging his fingers into her ankle and belting her into the wall.

"I'd love to stay and kill you," he said cheerfully, "but I got me a *real* slayer to find."

The girl blinked dazedly and rubbed her head, but by the time she pulled herself to her feet, he was long gone.



BUFFY'S HANDS SHOOK. GOD, ALL OF HER SHOOK.

She didn't know what to do. She couldn't begin to explain what had happened, even to herself. All she knew was the hungry beast in her belly was satiated, even as the girl who wore its skin fought to keep from gagging.

The kid looked young, maybe a year or so ahead of her. College seemed the best bet. A weekend job at a hotel was reasonable. A nice, normal, not-hellmouthy job where the only danger he faced came in the form of lousy tips and bad breath. There was no way he could have planned for—no way he could have predicted—the starving vampire hiding behind the oversized purple suitcase. No way he could have known how sweet he smelled and how the mere

hint of his pulse pushed aside sanity and coaxed out something she hadn't known existed within herself. He couldn't have known that opening the cargo area of a Greyhound bus would be his last act on Earth.

Blood stained her hands and smeared her mouth. She knew she should move. The bus had stopped at a Holiday Inn sometime after three in the morning. The parking lot was empty, but it wouldn't be for long. Someone would have heard or seen something. Someone would wonder where their luggage was. Someone would come looking for the dead man lying on the pavement, and she needed to be somewhere far from here when they did.

But Buffy couldn't stop staring at him any more than she could keep from shaking. A life was gone now because of her. She'd seen fear in his eyes and heard the ring of a horrified scream on his lips, but her fangs had torn out his throat before it had the chance to touch the air. She'd killed a man. Not her first, but this wasn't something she could wish away or blame on a lack of a conscience. She had lost control. She hadn't realized how controlled she was by hunger until that moment, and it hadn't even been that long since she fed.

Of course, she had tossed up her last meal...and by the way her stomach rumbled, this one wasn't too far behind.

"Oh, god," Buffy murmured, staggering to her feet. She wiped her hands on her shirt, which did little more than spread the bloodstain. Her eyes shot back to the boy, as though hoping to catch him stirring awake. "Gotta get..."

She blinked dumbly. She had no idea where she was. She'd tried to listen in on the driver's announcements and the muffled conversation of the bus's occupants, but advanced as her vamp hearing was, the screech of the engine and the roll along the highway had drowned out everything else. So she was stranded in a strange place, isolated from everything she'd once known and everyone she'd once relied on, and staring at the dead body of the man whose life she'd ripped away.

"Gotta get outta here," she said, sniffing and vainly attempting to keep tears from flooding her vision. "Gotta get..."

Her eyes fell on a shiny, bloodstained ring of metal protruding from the boy's pocket.

“Okay,” she murmured, wiping her cheeks. “We’re definitely not going to steal the dead guy’s car. That’d be...”

He was a mangled wreck. Torn flesh exposed parts of the human form no one should ever see, jagged bits of broken bone spearing the gooey mess that had once been his neck. His eyes were open and glassy, a frozen look of absolute terror locked for an eternity on his face.

She supposed the line separating right and wrong had already been crossed.

“No. No, no, no.”

Yet even as she spoke, her feet carried her forward. There was little in the way of options. She needed to get away from here, and fast.

“Well,” Buffy whimpered, choking back a sob as she pried the slippery key-ring from the corpse’s pocket. Then her eyes fell on what had to be his wallet. A long sigh rattled through her breaking body. “Well,” she said again, pinching the leather and pulling it free. At the very least, it would contain an address. A place—hopefully an apartment where he lived by himself—where she could rest and wash up before hitting the road again. “At least I already know I’m going to Hell.”

She wiped her eyes again, turned away, and paused.

She had to leave. She couldn’t be here any longer.

But she couldn’t leave him out here like this. She had to put him somewhere. If nothing else, if she left him he’d be found quicker than she could afford, and her hope of a temporary refuge would be completely eradicated.

“I’m sorry,” she told him as she took him into her arms. And god, how she meant it. She meant it with every cell in her body.

The parking lot remained unoccupied long enough for Buffy to find a suitable place to hide the boy’s remains. It wouldn’t be difficult to find, but at least now she’d bought herself enough time to clean up, find out where she was, and decide where she wanted to go. Where in the great continental US she could hide until the pain in her chest went away—until she learned how to live without destroying everything she touched.

By the time she returned to the parking lot, dripping in blood and doing her best not to get sick all over herself, she was no longer alone.

Two hotel employees had stepped outside for a smoke break, talking loudly and oblivious to her presence, but there nonetheless. Buffy's feet went rigid a hair of a second before the rest of her could react—then she ducked behind a blue Honda, hand diving into her pocket in search for the purloined keychain. “Okay,” she muttered, panic tickling her spine. “This is bad.”

She paused then, an awful burst of laughter bubbling off her lips.

From awaking in New York City and finding herself encased in a vampire's body to hitching a ride to who-knows-where and killing some poor kid whose only crime was smelling like dinner...yes, this was bad. Very bad.

She kept waiting to wake up.

Buffy raised her trembling head high enough to peer through the Honda's windows. The employees were still there, of course. They sucked heavily on their cigarettes and spoke animatedly, likely about some unpleasant guest or a manager. To them, this was a typical night, after all. Nothing out of the norm. Sometime tomorrow or the day after, one might wonder what had happened to what's-his-face. He hadn't been seen in quite a while, and that wasn't like him. Then a guest or one of the other employees would remark on the terrible smell coming from one of the dumpsters, and then everyone's lives would take a radical turn. Whether or not these two future cancer-patients knew the boy who had, up until a half hour ago, breathed and talked and laughed and snored just like everyone else, was a different matter. This sort of thing changed people in ways most didn't realize. Buffy had the unlucky advantage of knowing just how much.

She didn't know how long they stood there, but it seemed like hours. More than once she contemplated smashing out the Honda's windows and attempting to hotwire the damn thing, but that was really more Spike's line of expertise.

The pain in her chest expanded, but she shoved it aside. *Don't think about him.*

Impossible. The mind was no one's slave. The mind did what it would, and the command alone had it pissed enough to shower her with a collage of images she'd done her best to ignore. Spike smiling. Spike laughing. Spike's eyes sparkling. Spike stroking her skin. Spike

kissing her lips. Spike buried between her thighs. Spike's tongue tapping her clit. Spike holding her to his chest. Spike nuzzling her hair. Spike inviting himself into her shower. Spike shoving her against a wall and mauling her with his mouth. Spike cupping her breasts. Spike telling her he loved her.

Her stomach twisted again. He had loved her. She knew that. She wasn't blind or stupid or anything in between. These last few months might have belonged to some entity of herself that no longer existed, but she knew he'd meant it. He'd loved her, and she had loved him.

And she missed him. She missed his confidence—confidence she could surely use right now. Yet she also knew thinking about how she missed him wouldn't do her any favors. Spike was gone. She couldn't go back to him—he represented a part of her that hadn't really been real. A part of her now stuffed inside a soul. A part of her that couldn't love a monster. She could barely stand living with herself; how could she handle living with him as well?

What was more, Spike wouldn't want her now. He'd loved the thing she wasn't and could never be. He wouldn't want this hollowed shade of someone she'd once been. She wasn't even the Slayer he'd known. She was just...

*Lost.*

Buffy wiped at her eyes and again peered through the car window. The parking lot was empty once more.

"Okay," she said softly. "Time to move."



HERE. RIGHT HERE. SHE'D STOOD IN THIS VERY SPOT NOT TOO LONG ago. Her scent was strong here. Rich. As though she could turn the corner at any minute and bathe him in the warmth of her eyes. As though she hadn't gone at all, even though he knew she had.

Spike grunted and tore away from the payphone he'd stared at longer than he cared to admit. Buffy's scent had been scattered but rather simple to follow, and it had led him to a Holiday Inn on the outskirts of Manhattan. It matched the muffled location he'd heard through the receiver, and while he felt good about having sussed this

much out, he'd thought finding where she'd gone would leave some indicator as to what had happened to cause her departure in the first place. No one here had any answers, and he was left with more questions than he'd had since waking up that morning.

"Why did you run, love?" he murmured. "Something I did? Something I said? Why couldn't you tell me?"

He sighed and surfed out a pack of fags from his duster pocket. Buffy's scent died just a few feet from where he stood, which indicated she'd left on something with wheels, and that didn't help him much. New York bloody New York—people came and went every five minutes. She could have offed some motorist and hiked his bicycle or eaten some businessman's driver to jack his ride. She could have, but something told Spike she hadn't.

The largest clue came with the lack of fresh blood in the air. He could always tell when there had been a struggle, and even if the pickings Buffy selected for her evening meals weren't bright, they always fought. Always.

"So you hitched a ride," Spike said, indulging a long drag of his cigarette. "Or knicked one."

That wasn't likely. A stolen vehicle would have been reported by now...or so he suspected. People could be ridiculously blind at times, but his gut told him Buffy had found herself a ride some other way. A way that she wouldn't be spotted. It could be wrong, but Spike trusted his instincts. Right now they were all he had.

"Right then, ducks. Tell me where you went."

The shine of headlights took him out of himself for half a second. Spike made a face and tossed his cigarette to the pavement, feet backtracking until he was out of sight. Another group of overnight lodgers, from the looks of things, in a monstrously large tour bus. He watched as the two dozen or so travelers piled off, making inane chitchat and snapping photos of the Holiday Inn as though it were the Chrysler building. Any one of them would make for a good quick meal, but he wasn't hungry. Not right now.

His worry for Buffy eclipsed mere hunger.

It wasn't until the group was inside and the bellhops came forward to unload the passengers' belongings that he knew what had happened.

Buffy's mind would have worked this way. She was brilliant for being such a young vampire, but her ideas of travel were a bit outdated. She wouldn't have thought of their Desoto and the black paint smeared across the windows. Her first idea, point of fact, when he'd mentioned a cross country trip had been hiding out in the cargo area of a bus or semi-truck. She hadn't given much thought to daytime traveling where they were behind the wheel. Not until he'd mentioned it.

And if she had been in a hurry to leave town, that's what she would have done.

An excited shiver raced through his veins.

Now all he had to do was find some nice, breakable human to tell him the destination of the bus that had left between five-thirty and six o'clock.

Buffy had led him to her whether she knew it or not. And if she ached nearly as much as he did, she wouldn't get much farther than she'd managed.

Soon, very soon, he'd know exactly the reason why she'd fled.



SHOWERS HAD HEALING POWERS, BUFFY WAS CERTAIN OF IT. AS SOON as she stepped under the welcome nozzle in the bathroom of Mr. Dead's—thankfully unoccupied—apartment, she felt completely healed. It was a temporary fix, she knew, but one in which she basked for as long as she could. While the water ran, she couldn't hear the inner screams of the dying girl who lived inside her chest. She couldn't chastise herself for being so flippant about the life she'd taken in a fit of hunger, or how callously she'd stolen his cash and broken into the sanctuary he'd once called home.

Healing powers indeed. She shampooed her hair and watched blood and grit slide off her skin and into the waiting drain. Right now she might be home, scrubbing herself clean after patrol. She could almost hear her mother snoring down the hall. She could almost imagine the cozy bed awaiting her arrival. She saw Mr. Gordo sitting expectantly on a pillow, and wondered briefly if she had forgotten any homework that was due tomorrow.



None of that was real, she knew, but right now she could pretend. Hell, with as dirty as she felt, she might never rejoin the world outside. It wasn't as though the water running cold would bother her.

Buffy rubbed her eyes and ran her fingers through her hair. God, yes, she could hide in here forever.

But she didn't. The realist inside knew her time here was borrowed, and therefore needed to be used wisely. She stepped out just after hitting the half-hour mark, her skin pruney and cold. She would have felt normal were it not for the lack of a reflection that met her gaze when she turned to the mirror.

Sorrow crushed her chest, but she brushed it off with a shaky sigh. No time for that now. She had to find clothes. Judging by the closet, she wouldn't find anything gender appropriate, but she figured the boy had owned a pair of jeans, at the least, and one or two t-shirts. She didn't have a bra but she doubted she'd need one immediately. It wasn't as though she was going to be out in public anytime soon.

"Maybe a butcher," she said absently, pressing a hand to her stomach. For the time being, she located a pair of boxers and a white undershirt. She'd sleep now. She couldn't do anything until she slept. "I'll need blood."

The thought had her shivering again, but there was no sense denying it. She would need blood. If she didn't eat, she risked putting someone else in danger. She'd take another life as she'd so thoughtlessly taken the boy's tonight, just because she couldn't control her hunger.

Of course, there was an alternative.

Buffy trembled and cast a glance to the window. The sun would be up in six hours, give or take. She could end this easily with a quick outdoor stroll.

It wasn't the first time the thought had surfaced, and while she knew it wouldn't be the last, Buffy wasn't a coward. Death was the wussy way out, and though it might be appealing as all hell right now, it wasn't deserved.

What she deserved was exactly this, if not worse.

A knock to the front door jarred her out of her thoughts. Then her eyes went wide.

"Oh god."

They had found him already. The boy. They had found him. She hadn't hidden him well enough. She'd been in a hurry, panicked, and she'd missed something she shouldn't have missed. She'd left something behind.

"Oh god..."

Another knock.

"Umm," she said loudly. "No one's home?"

She winced. Right. That only worked in cartoons.

*Well, damn, and the Dumb Blonde Award goes to...*

"Buffy?"

All of her froze, her head going light. That voice couldn't be real. She'd lost it. She'd officially lost it. No one knew she was here.

"What?" she asked.

"Buffy, you can open up. I know you're in there."

The space separating her from the door fell behind her in a matter of seconds. She couldn't have heard right. It wasn't real. It wasn't...

The door flew open and there he was. It wasn't a dream or a mirage.

"Oh my god," she whispered.

A pregnant pause stretched between them. She blinked, rubbed her eyes, and blinked again. He stood where he was, watching her with a heavy gaze. He didn't disappear.

"Oh god..." She stumbled a bit against the door, unable to reconcile sight with reality. "Angel?"

BUFFY FOUND herself lampooned six months back—the eve before she’d decided oh so wisely to show Angel who was boss by donning a pair of fangs and flaunt her goods in tight leather. Not much time had passed since she’d last seen him, but it might as well have been centuries. She felt so much older now. Jaded, wiser, broken and alone. The part of her that would have leaped giddily at the prospect of seeing her creature-of-the-night boyfriend had died the same night she had.

Still, she couldn’t deny the rush of pure gratitude that washed over her tired body. She’d screamed some rather unpleasant things at Giles before hanging up on him, the foremost being her outrage at what he’d done to her. How he could have brought down all this turmoil and guilt on her without so much as a postcard of warning. Logically, she knew a head’s up would have had her soulless self running for the proverbial hills to avoid the curse that was her conscience, but no human being could understand the weight she carried.

She also knew that infecting her with a soul was the only surefire way outside of killing her to ensure the safety of others. She just resented the hell out of it, and she’d made sure Giles knew it.

Yet Angel was here, which meant the others likely knew where she

was, and though she couldn't help but feel a ripple of irritation, the rest of her all but collapsed in relief. Suddenly, she wasn't alone anymore.

"I...ummm..." Buffy licked her lips and stepped to the side. "Do I need to invite you in?"

"No," Angel said as he stepped over the threshold. "I take it whoever lived here..."

"I ate him." She shuddered and tore her eyes away. "I was so... hungry, and he was—"

"There. Yeah, I know."

He would. He was likely the only person with whom she could relate.

"When the person dies, the need for an invite becomes moot," he explained. "It's how you got in here."

"Ah." Buffy crossed her arms, suddenly aware of how little she wore. She'd just been reflecting on her lack of need for a bra and now Angel was standing just inches away from her, and she didn't want him to see just how pointy the cold had made certain parts of her anatomy. Buffy in the buff was for Spike's eyes only.

Her heart fell. She supposed it would be that way forever, and quite frankly, she was all right with it. She was barely twenty-four hours in to this whole soul-having thing—imagining a world beyond her current surroundings with someone other than Spike was pushing it. Every inch of her still belonged to him.

"Ummm...not to sound something other than ecstatic to see you," Buffy said self-consciously. "But..."

"How did we know where to go?"

She perked her eyebrows and a smile she didn't feel tickled her lips. "Yeah, something like that."

"Apparently, the Council had decided to start lacing the blood of the watchers they sent your way," he said. "We were going to do a location spell after your...ahhh, abrupt conversation with Giles, but we received word rather quickly that it wasn't needed."

She swallowed hard. "Word?"

"Some guy named Travers. He's been checking in with Giles every few days or so to give him updates. Those guys you and Spike—"

Buffy winced, and Angel noticed. He didn't stop talking, though, and for that she was thankful.

"—crossed paths with the other night had ingested some sort of mystical tracker. They've had a bead on your locations ever since."

She didn't miss the plural on *location*, but didn't inquire. It made sense they knew where Spike was if it had been so easy to find her. An icy sliver of panic shivered down her spine, and though she tried to shake it off, it refused to let go completely.

Spike could more than well handle himself, but he had to be preoccupied now. Preoccupied with her.

God, she hoped he watched out for himself.

"And here I thought I threw up everything I drank that night," she said instead. "Guess that wasn't enough. Where is *here*, anyway?"

"Cleveland."

Buffy balked. "I didn't think we went that far."

"I think you were traveling with a gang of elderly half-breed demons. The bus didn't smell human when I arrived."

"I didn't notice."

"Your senses aren't as developed yet."

"Uh huh. So even though I tossed my cookies—"

"Throwing up the blood wouldn't have done any good by the time you, well, threw up. By then, the tracer would have already migrated to your immune system." Angel inhaled sharply and drew his eyes back to hers. "It took a bit, but I found out which bus you took and where it was headed. After that, it was...well, I got to the hotel and smelled...it was just a matter of following my nose."

She laughed humorlessly. "Well, that's depressing. I've been on the run for all of a day and all it took was a human Doberman to find me."

"Not human."

"Close enough."

"It was just the timing."

"Yeah. I seem to have *really* rotten timing." Buffy sighed. "Is... anyone with you?"

"Giles is on his way. I couldn't stop him. He had to deal with some stuff at the school so his flight was delayed a day, but he said he'd come

regardless of whether or not I actually found you.” Angel took a step forward. “Buffy, he didn’t mean—”

She held up a hand. “I know.”

“He loves you. We all do. He was just trying to...I know what this feels like.”

A rush of irritation shimmied down her spine, slicing through her sense of gratitude with bitterness she didn’t know she possessed. “Right. You know what this feels like. Sorry if that doesn’t make everything all better.”

Angel’s eyes darkened. “Buffy, I—”

“No, please. Continue. Tell me what this feels like. Tell me all about waking up in a hotel room on the other side of the planet next to...” She broke away and shook her head, wiping her eyes. “A-and...needing...God, I need...I feel like I can’t breathe—”

“You don’t really need to.”

“That’s not the point! Everything hurts, Angel. *Everything*. The farther I go, I just can’t...it’s in my chest. I feel like I’m...”

He took a step forward. “Is it Spike?”

The cold, aching sickness she’d come to expect whenever anything reminded her of the vampire she’d left behind stampeded over her heart. It was getting worse—she felt it with every inch of her body. It wouldn’t stop hurting, and there was only so much fight she had to give. At some point she just needed rest.

She hadn’t been away from him but a day, and already felt the need to cave in.

Angel sighed. “It is, isn’t it? It’s Spike.”

“I can’t stop...”

“Those marks on your neck are not just bite marks.”

She frowned. Could he really tell the difference between regular bites and claim markings? That didn’t seem possible, or fair. “What do you mean?”

“He claimed you. You’re his...you’re *his*.”

Well, crap. Buffy reached for the place on her throat where Spike’s fangs belonged, the place marking her as his mate for all eternity. The angry patch of skin almost burned her fingers—as though punishing her for depriving it of the connection it craved. “To be fair, I did it

first," she said. "When we...before the whole vamp thing was official. It was one of the reasons he turned me. The other reason being I asked him to."

"You claimed *him*?"

"Not on purpose. It just happened."

"Like, whups, he fell on your fangs, it just happened?"

She rolled her eyes. "Angel, get serious."

"You don't think I take this seriously? Buffy, do you have any idea what—"

"If you're about to ask me if I know what a claim is, I'm going to push you out a window. What the hell do you think? I've only been living with him for the past six months. I can't even *think* about him now without feeling like a part of me has been amputated and is out there, crying for help and needing me, and the more distance I put between us, the more it... The more *I* hurt. I knew this would happen, I just didn't know...*this* would happen." She sniffed again, hating the cold sting of tears but doing little to fight it. There was no sense battling the inevitable. "I miss him."

There was no missing the pain that flashed across Angel's face. He didn't try to hide it, and for that she was grateful. Lying to each other now seemed a fruitless effort.

"I know how that sounds," Buffy continued. "And I know what he is. I know what...I am. And I don't know how much of it is claim-related. All of it, maybe...but he makes me not hurt."

"You think that's it, then?" he asked, slightly hopeful. "You just miss Spike because of..."

She worried her lower lip between her teeth, her mind immediately launching down a familiar slideshow. A thousand different expressions colored on one unforgettable face. A thousand stolen moments. A thousand passionate kisses. A thousand dirty jokes. A thousand whispered promises. Over and over again, all coming in a soulless, unrepentant package—one she knew she should reject, even resent, but couldn't. Spike wasn't the problem. He wasn't even a symptom, and though he might be a monster where it counted, he hadn't shown that side to her. Not even when they hunted together. He always had more humanity in him than any beast she'd known.

He'd always need bloodshed, though, and that she couldn't abide. Not when she'd done so much damage herself. However, she knew then what she couldn't have known before. If Spike had been on her doorstep, she would have dragged him inside, mauled him with her lips, and begged him to make it all right even if she knew he couldn't.

"No," Buffy said at last. "I don't just miss Spike because of the claim. We were... I loved him, Angel. I think I still do. And I know that's wrong and confusing and...well, wrong, but this is something bigger than me or him or us or you or...any of it. And I'm having to deal with that plus this whole being of the undead thing and how I could have killed *anyone* and—"

"That wasn't all you."

"What do you know? You're Mr. Likes to Brood."

The corners of his mouth twitched. "I see we're getting some of your wit back. No, Buffy, I get the guilt. I do. And it's easy for me to stand here and tell you that it wasn't you, but we both know better. The thing that killed me when the gypsies enacted their voodoo was the knowledge that a part of me lived in my soulless half. This? The guy I am now? This isn't who I was before. I was a drunk, skirt-chasing lazy son of a bitch, and I relished every second. That guy isn't me, and neither was the incarnation I called Angelus. Being a vampire changes you, but you and I know, now, better than anyone, that being a souled vampire changes you more. You're not the person you were or the thing you became...you're a hybrid, and it took me a lot of years to come to terms with that." He glanced down. "I can tell you it wasn't you, but a part of it was...just not the part that counted. And I know that because *Buffy* wouldn't have shed one drop of human blood. You can't feel guilty for something that you wouldn't do, just because this alternate you didn't have the same scruples. And you can't feel guilty for her, either, because she didn't know better. For her, that was nature."

Buffy stood still and dumb for a second. Of all the speeches she'd expected, that wasn't one of them. "And I guess...with you..."

"With me, it's different," he said simply. "I have to live with what I did, you don't. You have to live with what you did, and I don't. It's easy for me to say it wasn't Buffy because I know Buffy wouldn't have done



what you did. You can say the same for me, but I won't feel it. I'm too close, and you are, too."

"You're one with the fortune cookie wisdom today, aren't you?"

He sighed again. "Buffy—"

"Look, I know you're right, and that's all well and good, but this... this feels so..."

"Complicated?"

"There's an understatement for you." Buffy heaved herself into the rocker that had once belonged to the kid now lying dead in a dumpster some twenty blocks away. She tried not to think about it. "I know what the books told me, and I know what Giles told me...about vampires and the person who dies isn't the person who wakes up, and all that jazz. But if that's the case, then why am I so...miserable?"

Angel frowned. "Do you want me to give you the obvious answer?"

"If I'm not the person I was, why do I miss Spike so much? Why do I still love him? It's more than just this...hurt in my chest. I miss *him*, and if it wasn't me who did all that stuff, then why should I? Why should I miss someone who represents *that*?"

He was quiet for a long second, a silent war waging behind his typically pensive eyes. She knew that look, and she hated it. She always had. It made her feel like a very small spec in a world only he understood.

"What do you know about claims?" he asked.

"We're seriously on this again?"

"I mean beyond the definition. I don't peg Spike for having done much research, and if you claimed him on the spur of the moment—"

"I didn't know what I'd done until he told me."

"Yeah. And he wasn't too upset, was he? Funny enough, I don't see the Spike I know reconciling the fact that you were the Slayer just because you had a pair of fangs."

"Do you know Spike at all?"

"Yeah, I do. Do you?"

"Hey!"

"When he's ruled by love, it's one thing. God knows I spent twenty years with him following Dru around like a sick dog." He paused and tossed her a glance. "Dru is—"

She waved a hand impatiently. "I know who Dru is."

"Yeah, and even if he *had* just split up with her before Sunnydale, that doesn't mean he wasn't going back to her. Do you have any idea how often they split up? It was usually Dru's doing, but I figured Spike grew some backbone and decided to let her know how it felt. Had it not been for you, he would've crawled back to her eventually. That was the way he was, because he loved her." Angel gestured. "You claiming him would've pissed him off had it been anything other than what it was."

"Yeah?" she snapped. She always grew a tad testy whenever the subject of Dru was raised. "What was it?"

"And now we're back to this. What do you know about claims?"

"A bond—a really big bond, or whatever. Spike said it was like marriage, but he wasn't wild about the comparison. It was the best way to describe it. Marriage that never ends."

"And that's all he knew?"

She shrugged. "He told me a while back that he once wanted to claim Dru, but she never accepted."

"Yeah, because even with as crazy as she was, she knew what it meant." He shook his head. "Claims aren't meant to be spur of the moment, Buffy."

"Gee, sorry. I'll try to keep that in mind from here on."

Angel ignored her. "And there's a reason they're so rare. Numerous vamps have tried the claiming ritual and failed because they weren't fit for each other. Their personalities would clash too strongly and the claim would suffer and ultimately fall apart. Only those vampires who truly connected with each other ever managed to perform a successful mating ritual, and very rarely with such little ceremony. To do it so fluidly wouldn't make sense to us."

Buffy considered this for a few long seconds, frowning. She was almost sure Angel had confused the claim with something else, because none of what he'd said described anything she and Spike had discussed, or anything she'd experienced since the fateful words were exchanged.

"Are you sure?"

"Your ritual consisted of—"

"It wasn't a ritual. It was...words. I said he was mine, he wiggled,

told me what I'd done, and that was the end. Or rather..." She averted her eyes quickly, her mind dragging her back to that night for just a second. He'd had her splayed across a worktable, licking her clit and caressing her wet flesh with his tongue. She had never known such pleasure until that night...and then he'd straightened and slid his cock into her aching body. It had been heated and spontaneous, but perfect.

Then her thoughts took her to the body she'd dumped tonight and flushed cold. Pleasure was something she didn't deserve, and those memories should inspire disgust instead of longing.

"So," Angel said, his voice invading the sudden fog around her head. "You just said the words, and that was it?"

Buffy shook her head dumbly and returned to herself. "You know," she drawled. "You're really making me wish we'd had this whole thing video recorded."

"Buffy, claims aren't supposed to be that easy. Don't you get it? Vampires are very passionate creatures, and we're *greedy*. Whenever we're intimate with someone, we take ownership of them. The word 'mine' isn't something we can really avoid in the heat of the moment." He paused. "And submission to that isn't uncommon, either. If claims were performed that simply, the whole vampire population would be linked."

"How do you know?"

"How do you think? I've lived it. Darla and I were together for over a century, and while we satisfied urges with others, we belonged very much to each other. Hell, I did it with Dru just to piss Spike off. If claims typically came with those words, I'd have—"

Buffy held up a hand, wrinkling her nose. "I get it. You're an undead man-whore."

"No, you don't get it. A real claim takes preparation and an exchange of blood. It takes more than what happened that night."

"So you're saying Spike and I aren't really mated."

Angel sighed, his shoulders falling. "No," he replied. "That's exactly what I'm *not* saying. You *are* mated, Buffy, and that's what I've been getting at. It's not supposed to happen as easily as it did for you, but for whatever reason, it did. Spike knew it immediately, didn't he? He felt what happened."

She nodded.

“Yeah, and that’s the funny thing. Spike didn’t know much about claims since Dru told him she would never go through with it.” He shrugged. “He looked it up, sure, but never what the full ritual entails. He likely only saw the part where claims were a mystical promise between vampires and other demons that, when performed correctly, last eternally. I doubt he ever knew that most claims are never sealed and most are weak and fall apart because of incompatibility. There already has to be a bond in order to create a foundation. With you two...”

Angel met her eyes again. Buffy pressed a hand to her aching stomach.

“It shouldn’t have been that easy for you to claim him,” he said. “But it was.”

“And this...the reason I hurt... The claim is falling apart?”

She knew then that he’d give anything in the world to tell her yes, but the true answer surfaced in his dark gaze before words reached his lips. “The reason you’re hurting,” Angel said slowly, “is because a bond like this isn’t meant to be stretched. Not at first. Whatever sealed you two together is trying to hold on. It hasn’t had enough time to fortify itself on its own strength and survive independent of you and him. That’s why you miss him so much.” He inhaled. “Spike is a part of you. You feel like this because a part of you is somewhere else, and you can’t survive without it.”

Buffy swallowed hard. “It won’t always be this way...”

“Not after the claim matures.”

“We knew that much.”

“Yeah. I figured.”

“But...how can it... I have a soul—”

“It still brought you two together.” Angel sighed again and rolled his eyes. “You can’t imagine how thrilled I am, but I know enough about claims to know about this. Trust me, the first time Darla tossed me through a wall for daring to tell her she was mine, I did as much reading as I could. I didn’t want a mate and neither did she, and the misconceptions about the ceremony were enough to have us both

worried we'd sealed the deal for eternity. I learned then that claims take more than just words, but I doubt Spike ever got that far."

"Maybe not." Buffy grew still for a long minute, her eyes fixed on the door. As though simply by thinking about him, Spike would come through the door and this messed up world she'd entered would suddenly right itself again. At the moment, though, she didn't really know what she wanted. Everything seemed up in the air.

"I'll be a friend to you," Angel said when she didn't continue. "Always."

"Even..."

"Believe me, you being Spike's mate is a big pill to swallow, but I can adjust."

A dry smile tickled her lips. "Can you?"

"I can."

"Because I don't know how to deal with the guilt on top of everything else."

"We'll work on that. And when Spike gets here—"

Buffy's heart nearly leaped. "What? Gets here?"

Angel looked at her for a long minute before gauging she was serious. "Really," he said, "you can't honestly think he'd let you go so easily."

"The way I left him..."

"Trust me," he deadpanned. "He'll be here."



FOR WHATEVER REASON, ROLLING OVER THE WELCOME TO CLEVELAND sign wasn't as much fun as running down the one on the outskirts of Sunnydale. Still, Spike mused as he wedged a cigarette between his lips, it was satisfying.

He stuck his left hand out the open window as his car bumped over the twisted metal, wind caressing his fingers. The burning rage in his chest began to calm at last. He already felt closer to her, already felt the gnawing hole in his gut piecing itself together. Soon she would be within an arm's length again. He would have her in his arms, her skin

against his skin, her lips against his lips. Soon she would be where she belonged.

And he would know exactly why she'd fled.



"YES. THANK YOU." WESLEY WYNDAM-PRYCE SLAMMED THE GAS station payphone back onto the receiver and heaved a sigh. "Cleveland," he said over his shoulder.

Faith's brows perked. "Cleveland?" she repeated, smacking her gum.

"That is where the bus stopped. It makes sense, actually. It's one of America's four most active hellmouths."

She frowned. "How does that make sense?"

"The bus she took happened to be occupied by a group of pacifist humanoid demons." He beamed a grin and straightened the already annoyingly-straight lapels of his suit. It made her want to ruffle him up all dirty like. "Are you ready?"

"For another road trip? Sure thing, big daddy."

Faith winked and pushed herself off the wall, slapping his ass on a whim.

Damn, the boy could blush.

THE FARTHEST HE got before the sun peeked over the horizon was the hotel parking lot, where the blood on the pavement gave him one hell of a head start. It didn't take much to piece together what had happened. Buffy had hitched a ride, as he suspected, and taken down some poor schmuck in the process. Her next move would likely have been to find shelter, and nothing beat the readily available space that had once belonged to a now-cooling body.

That made sense...well, as much sense as Spike could cherry-pick from the chaotic upside-down turn his life had taken over the past two days. What didn't make sense was the other scent he detected—a scent that should be halfway across the country. A scent that had his cold blood boiling in half a second.

*Angel.*

Spike inhaled sharply and stormed back to the running Desoto, flicking his spent cigarette to the ground. None of this made any sense. None of it. Buffy bolted from his bedside to hop a bus out of town and run into the arms of her moe of an ex. It wasn't the girl he knew. Not the girl he'd lived with for the past half a year, the girl he'd loved hard with his hands and mouth. The Buffy he knew didn't run. The Buffy he

knew hid from nothing and no one. She sought out conflict if only to beat it down.

The gentle morning hues forewarned he didn't have much time to investigate, therefore Spike retreated into the hotel to find a bed and someone to eat.

When night fell again, he'd find her.

He'd have answers.



IT DIDN'T TAKE MUCH TO SUSS OUT THE REST. THE WHOLE STAFF kept blabbing about how Brandon Townsend hadn't shown up for his shift which was apparently 'so unlike him.' Toss in the bit where two bellhops admitted to having heard a scuffle around the time Brandon was last seen, and Spike had a name to look up in the phone book. The name led him to a depressing building in what he supposed passed for a shady neighborhood, and the second he put the Desoto into park, the building's front door flew open and Buffy stepped out.

It was something that he couldn't have timed if he tried. Spike watched dumbly as Buffy stepped into the moonlight, her face drawn and worn, her eyes exhausted. A huge hulking shadow loomed behind her, one Spike immediately identified as Angel. And though the festering rage in his chest couldn't be contained, the fury of his inner monster was nothing compared to the whiplash of realization.

The face she wore was her face, but those were not his Buffy's eyes. Her shoulders weren't drawn back and confident, nor did her lips play in a sinful smile. She hadn't laughed at all today, from the looks of it, and the misery etching her face, while in part due to their separation, was laden with an emotion stronger than anything he'd ever experienced. Something he hadn't bothered himself to feel since the night he crawled out of his coffin.

Vampires, after all, had little use for remorse. Guilt was a futile emotion—the past couldn't be changed and the future had yet to happen. The moment was what mattered. Only the moment.

Spike had never seen regret on the face of a demon. Not until the



night he'd taken Sunnydale High hostage. Not until the night he'd seen Angel again for the first time in decades.

He knew it then. He knew. Buffy wouldn't have left him—not in a sodding millennia, not with the fierce way they loved each other. Buffy wouldn't flee the city, sob into a payphone and take refuge with his wanker of a grandsire. Buffy wouldn't leave him. Not his Buffy.

And that was the kicker. He knew then what he couldn't have known before—what he couldn't have guessed. This Buffy wasn't his.

A thousand things crystallized at once. The blood on the floor. The tears on the phone. The haunted look in her eyes. Of course. Of *bloody* course. God, he was a thick git. The second he'd disappeared with Buffy in tow, he should have known this would happen. The only real question was why it had taken her chums as long as it had to muck everything up. With nancy boy Angel lurking around every corner, feeding them fantasies about domesticated fluffy-puppy vamps, there was no bloody way the Mystery Gang would have left their slayer to her eternity in peace. They would have done something.

They would have infected her with a soul.

Spike blinked dumbly, shock rocking him back on his heels. He should have heard it in her voice. The Buffy he knew didn't cry or whimper, didn't apologize for anything. The Buffy he'd had at his side, in his bed, knew she had nothing to apologize for. Whatever happened was out of their control, and when it came to the things that weren't, Spike reckoned it made bugger all sense to worry over something once it was behind them. It was a sentiment Buffy shared. One they celebrated together.

Buffy wouldn't have left him so easily under any other circumstance.

He still had to cope with the fact that she'd left him at all. No explanation. No goodbye kiss. Nothing. As though the time they'd shared meant so little to her.

And that was the rub. He knew it had meant something to her, soul or not, because his Buffy had been the real thing. It was the reason he'd fallen so hard for her—the reason he loved her still.

It wasn't because the Buffy he'd met that night was different. No, it was because she'd been the same. The same laugh, the same irrever-

ence, the same puns, the same droll sense of humor—it had all been there, all in the delectable little package that was Buffy. Everything a guy like Spike could want, ripe and willing for the taking. The only thing she'd lost was the shackle around her ankle and the weight of the world on her shoulders. Making Buffy a vampire hadn't taken anything from her—it had given her a new lease on life, or on unlife, as it were.

She was the only vampire he'd ever known that had been like him. Spike hadn't changed into what he was overnight. It had taken years of self-exploration and discovery, and even now he feared the rebirth of the git he called William, knowing full well he could never fully repress his true self. It was the same reason he'd vamped his mum just hours after inhaling a gulpful of crisp autumn air for the first time as a creature of the night. Other monsters might have left her to die, but not he. He'd loved her, and he'd wanted to save her. He just hadn't anticipated her response. After all, if he was the same—felt the same, except for the new energy in his veins and the lack of earthly concerns in his heart—then she should react as he had. She should see the change as he'd seen it. A second chance at a life that hadn't treated them fairly, and the strength to get it right this time around.

His mum had been the greatest lesson he could have learned. The person who died was not the person who rose...not always, hardly ever, and he, Spike, stood as the exception that proved the rule. Yes, he'd done things that would curl Nancy William's blood, but he'd kept true to himself at the core. Outrunning his shadow was impossible. He'd never made it far.

Buffy had been the same. She hadn't gone after her family, she still cared for her friends, and she kept all parts of herself that made her who she was. She'd been perfect, then. A perfect remedy to the reservations he'd harbored since sinking his shiny new fangs into his mother's dying skin—the same fear that had kept him from being a prolific giver of life to those he viewed as less fortunate. Buffy hadn't changed where it counted. She'd been freed, and he'd freed her.

And her bastard friends had chained her up again.

Spike moved when she moved, taking in the lines of her body, reading her intent. Thank fuck that sod Angel didn't follow when she took to the streets, otherwise he'd have to dust the wanker and he

wagered that'd lead to a fight of a different kind than the one they were about to have.

He wouldn't let her go so easily. Soul or no bloody soul, she belonged to him.

Therefore, it was all he could do to keep quiet. He followed her from a distance, knowing where she was headed, even if she didn't yet—knowing she felt him even if it hadn't registered with her. She carried herself the way she did whenever she sensed him near, though not with the confidence he knew. Her shoulders weren't pulled back with bravado but slouched with a sense of self-defeat. Her strides weren't bold and wide, rather soft and timid. She wasn't Buffy the Slayer or Buffy the Vampire in that instant. She was just a girl, lost and alone, and likely more terrified than she'd been in all her life.

For a girl who had died twice, that was saying something.

He let her make it to the cemetery before speaking up.

"So, that's it, then?" Spike said loudly, allowing himself a ripple of victory when she jumped. She twisted to face him in an instant, her eyes wide and astonished. "Just take off? No note? No bloody explanation?"

Buffy gaped at him. "Oh, god."

"Can't tell me you thought I wouldn't find you, love?"

"Spike..."

"You thought I'd be...what? Okay with it? Give you my sodding blessing? Hmmm?" Spike slid his hands into his duster pocket, scuffing the grass beneath his boots with every step.

"You really thought I wouldn't come looking?"

"I hoped you wouldn't."

The naked honesty in her reply left him furious. "Did you, now?"

"Spike, you don't understand—"

"Of course I don't. Can't, can I?"

"I'm not who you think I am," she said, holding up a hand. "I'm not...I'm not..."

"And who do I think you are?" he replied as his feet swung another hearty step forward. "My girl? My slayer? My mate? Those marks on your throat don't lie, sweetheart. You can't stop being what you are, no matter how far you run."

"I'm not that girl anymore."

Spike nodded. "Tell me why. I need to hear it."

Buffy paused then and stared at him, a slow sort of comprehension sweeping over her face. "You know," she said softly. "You know, don't you?"

"Say it."

"They gave me a soul."

Spike nodded again, covering another step between them. "Yeah," he said. "I know. Knew it the second I saw you tonight, but I should've known immediately. Should've figured it out when you called."

"You know."

"I know."

"Then you know why I had to leave. I *had* to, Spike. I woke up, and it was killing me. This...pressure, or whatever, on my chest. I crawled out of our room and..." Buffy blinked and looked away, a long shudder claiming her body. "It happened, then. And then I had to leave. I couldn't be there anymore. I couldn't... Not with you or me or... I woke up a million miles from home after being asleep for half a year inside a body that wasn't mine anymore."

Spike stumbled forward until he was within an inch of her. "Not yours?" he rasped, grasping her shoulders. God, it felt so good to touch her. Just a little—even like this. "Not bloody yours?"

"I'm not her."

"Look like her. Smell like her." Spike grazed her lips with his, his heart leaping into his throat. "Buffy..."

He could drown in her eyes. "I've missed you," she whispered. "I have. I—"

His mouth was on hers before she could get out another word, and the harshness of reality melted almost instantly. Amazing how that worked—a simple kiss eradicated a world of heartache and pain, along with the uncertainty that came with it. He might not know what tomorrow would bring, but for the moment he had Buffy in his arms, against his chest. She nipped at his lips, seizing his waist and anchoring his pelvis against hers. The fight in her vanished on contact, and then there was nothing but the warmth of the moment.

The talk could wait. Hell, everything could wait, as far as Spike was

concerned. There were so many things he wanted to say, speeches he'd memorized and perfected on the trip, things he'd yearned to drive home the second he set eyes on her again, but his convictions fell apart when her lips parted and allowed his tongue to rediscover the contours of her mouth. She felt different and the same all at once. The Buffy he'd kissed for the past six months would be sucking on him by now, scratching at him with her fangs and giggling whenever he gasped and begged for more. This Buffy was soft and curious, almost to the point of shyness. Her kisses were sweet and gentle, though they did little to disguise the need winging through her body. The primal call of her demon to his, for deep down, they both knew where they belonged.

"Gotta have you," Spike growled, hiking her into his arms. "Right now."

Buffy barely pried her lips away from his long enough to say, "We're outside." It was obviously not the largest concern. Her eyes didn't even flutter open, and her legs had already wrapped around his waist.

"Glad you noticed," he murmured between kisses, stumbling forward in a blind search for something to shove her against before ultimately giving up and crashing to his knees.

Buffy let out an excited hiccup and grinned against his mouth. "You fell."

"Meant to."

"Spike...."

"Mmm, Slayer..."

Her arms went up and he wasted no time peeling off her shirt. A flimsy white cotton tee that he hadn't noticed until now, likely belonged in a boy's dresser rather than hers. The kid she'd eaten probably didn't have many clothes that would suit a woman, and he somewhat doubted she'd gone shopping. In any regard, it didn't matter the next second. Her small, perfect breasts were bare to his hungry mouth. God, he loved her breasts. Loved playing with them, loved sucking on her nipples, loved making her gasp and plead just by tugging with his mouth. Buffy hadn't known breasts could be that sensitive until him—he'd been her first, her goddamned only, and he'd shown her what her body was capable of.

“Ohh...” She shuddered hard and held his head to her, pushing herself against his mouth. “Yes, Spike...”

There was something about hearing her whisper his name that had his blood boiling and his cock so hard it was damn near painful. He’d never heard her say it like that. Not once.

She’d never had a soul before.

Spike released her breast with a parting lick. “Lay back, sweetheart,” he whispered.

Buffy loosened her hold on him. “What?”

“On the grass.”

She fell back as if in a trance, her wide eyes never leaving his. He kept his hands on her, slipping down her skin, stroking her belly and hooking in the waistline of her oversized sweats. They were gone in half a second, stripped down her legs and leaving her bare aside from the sneakers she’d stolen, which quickly followed suit. He hadn’t intended to get her naked, really. It left her vulnerable, and he certainly didn’t plan on stripping down, but a part of him needed to see this. He needed to see her body—how it was the same even if the girl inside had changed, however minutely. The same breasts, the same stomach, the same bellybutton, the same dimpled knees, and the same thatch of curls between her legs. How a person could be one thing and another all at once was beyond him, and Spike considered himself learned in most things.

This was different. So different. He doubted he would ever know how much.

Buffy wiggled under his scrutiny, poking out her tongue to lick her lower lip. “Getting cold,” she volunteered.

“Vamps don’t feel the cold.”

“I feel it, all right.”

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered as he reached for the clasp of his jeans. The words seemed trite, no matter how true they were. She was beautiful—he just couldn’t convey how much. He’d thought it before, a thousand times before, and he’d meant it completely each time the words left his lips, but she looked different now, more like a fallen angel than a liberated slayer.

“Spike, please...”

He grinned, lowering his zipper before shimmying his jeans far enough down his hips to free his cock. Then he was between her legs, right hand stroking her brow as he positioned himself at her opening. "Missed this, didn't you?" he whispered softly, edging himself inside her, her soft velvety flesh welcoming him inside what had to be paradise. God, he knew her body so well now; the way she sighed and stretched, the way her pussy tugged him in, the way she tightened and relaxed seemingly at once, though how he couldn't explain. It was coming home—his demon purred and the ache in his gut subsided. This was right. He was again where he was supposed to be, and nothing, goddammit, would keep him away from her.

"Missed this?" he demanded again.

"Yes."

"Good. Fucking good. Never letting you outta my sight again."

Buffy exhaled deeply, her hips rolling off the ground as he began to thrust. She looked drawn, then, sliced down the middle, and while she battled his hips to recapture his cock every time he pulled back, the part of her that had been with him just seconds before suddenly seemed distant. Her eyes remained on his, though...so wide and curious, so *young* that it nearly gave him pause. He didn't want to think about what must be going through her head any more than he wanted to consider the obstacles paved on the path before them, but he couldn't tear his gaze away from hers. His thrusts remained slow and explorative for only a few seconds, the need of the monster outweighing the part of him that told him it'd be nicer if he were a gentleman. He didn't want to be bloody kind. Home he might be, but he was still brassed off as hell that he'd had to chase it down to begin with.

"Gonna take you hard," he warned her.

Buffy just kissed him, her nails digging into his forearms. While he knew it was permission, it still didn't chase the haunted look in her eyes away, and he needed it gone. He needed her on this earth, with him.

"What's wrong?"

"I can't stay," she whispered, face breaking. Her hands were on his ass, now, moving with him and squeezing him as his strokes deepened.

It was desperate, as though loosening her hold would render her lost in ways neither had considered. "It's so..."

"You said you missed this."

"I did." She blinked. "I missed it...ohhh...so much. It... Spike..."

That was it. No more Mr. Nice. Vamp. No one took his girl away. Just the hint of what she wanted to say was enough to have the uncaged beast in his chest roaring for vengeance. Fuck easing her into their lovemaking; he'd take her whatever way he wanted.

And he wanted it rough.

Energy exploded across his body, wiring his arms and surging through his hips. He pounded into her pussy with hard, angry thrusts, with fire he hadn't known he possessed, striking with such force the shards of pleasure in his veins nearly transcended to pain. He didn't care. Let the pain come, just so long as it felt this good. Pain and pleasure went hand in hand too often for him to give a fuck about where the line fell. "Like that? Like me buried so deep inside you?" he demanded, dragging his cock away from her slippery flesh with a toothy grin. "I'm a part of you, Buffy. Can't outrun me."

"I didn't want—"

"You just said you did."

"Spike—"

"I'll find you. You know I will."

"Oh, yes. Yes."

"Not letting you go. Do you hear me?" His demon roared to life without warning, the bones in his face shifting just seconds before his fangs pierced her breast. She loved it when he bit her almost as much as he did.

Her blood didn't taste different. For whatever reason, that surprised him.

Buffy trembled hard, her cunt squeezing him so tightly he might weep. "Oh, god!"

"Mmm." Spike pulled back and licked his bloodied lips. "Not letting you go."

"It's all going to change now," she murmured, her words so soft he barely heard her over the smack of their bodies.

"Nothing's changing," Spike snarled, hooking his arms under her



shoulders and slamming harder still within her. Not nice. Not nice. Had to make her see. Had to make her understand...

And then, suddenly, he was on his back. Buffy had rolled them over, astride him now, bouncing feverishly on his cock. God, she was a sight. A fucking vision. Moonlight kissed her pale, naked flesh, blood streaming from the fresh bite mark at her breast, her pussy swallowing him over and over as her head rolled back and her hair danced to the tune of their fucking. Spike grasped her hips and pushed up, watching his dick disappear inside her. Blood sprinkled his chest, and she rode. She bloody galloped. She was a nymph and he loved her so much he could barely stand it.

"Buffy, Buffy, Buffy..."

He dragged a hand from her hip and settled where they were joined. He couldn't rub her clit as he liked—she was going too fast for him to keep up now—but he could wait and hope his fingers struck her every time she crashed home.

"Oh yeah," he snarled. "Fuck me."

The hand still at her hip traveled up her back. Buffy seemed lost in sensation. Her skin hummed under his touch. For a wild instant, he thought he heard her heart thundering.

Then he pushed her down so her breasts were against his chest, and sank his fangs into his chalice.

"Mine. Mine, you bloody hear me? Never run off again."

She tightened around him, shuddering, pussy clenching him to the next life as she spasmed and tumbled over.

"You're mine."

"Yes, I am."

Ivory sliced into his skin. He hadn't even felt her change.

She drank him and whispered the words in turn. And that was it—everything came crashing down. Everything. Waking up alone in bed. The blood on the floor. Her voice on the phone. The pure terror of never seeing her again. The desperate need to right whatever had wronged her, to heal whatever had sent her running. The panic he'd felt, the outrage and loss, the need to find her and make himself whole again...

Just seconds ago, she'd whispered she couldn't be here—that she

couldn't stay—but she had to. She belonged with him, she lived in him, and he knew nothing else.

Buffy told him she was his, and he burst into tears, hugging her to his chest.

“Yours,” he told her, though the word was choked.

He was hers. All hers. And he couldn't let her run again.

BUFFY STILL DIDN'T KNOW how they'd gotten here. The last thing she remembered, she had fallen into a warm post-coital slump, Spike with his arms around her, cock thrusting still into her body, demanding more of her than she had to give. His yellow eyes had tears in them. She'd never seen a vampire cry while in game face, and if he wasn't the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen, she didn't know what was.

Now she sat in a mausoleum, her body still humming from her recent orgasm, her clothing askew. Had she dressed herself? She didn't remember. All she knew was that she was sitting on a cold, stone sarcophagus, watching Spike's feet as he tore up and down the stretch of cement in front of her. He didn't like to sit still. It was a trait they shared.

"Why?"

Buffy blinked. "What?"

"You could've told me, pet. Could've told me anything."

"And how would that conversation have gone?" she asked. "Good morning, honey. You'll never guess what happened to me last night?"

"You could've said *something*."

"I didn't know that."

Spike's nostrils flared. "Oh, is that so?" he demanded. "Never gave

you a reason, I'd wager. An indication. A bloody inkling. Not one sodding clue that I'm the long haul bloke? I love you, Buffy. What more do you need?"

"This isn't me," she said. "*She* wasn't me."

"So we're back to that."

"We never left. Look, Spike, you can slice it any way you like, but the girl you love...she's gone. She's long gone. I'm all that's left."

His eyes darkened dangerously. "Mmm hmm," he murmured, stepping toward her. "I suppose you got it all figured out, then. Big Bad Spike, so bloody predictable. Never looks beyond the surface. You know what I'd see if I looked at you good and hard, love?"

Buffy swallowed but didn't answer.

"A coward."

"I'm not a coward. I'm a realist."

"Yeah? You think so?"

And then, something inside her snapped. Something deep and primal. The comatose state she'd wandered in and out of since stepping under the sky vanished without hesitation, leaving her in the open. She saw him, then—saw her Spike standing just inches away, his crystal eyes wide and pained. His chest heaving hard, crushing breaths, even though he needed air the same way other people might need a hole in the head. And she loved him so much she could barely sit still.

He was passionate and fiery, witty and full of life. He lived more in five minutes than she did in a week. He knew her head to toe. He knew how to make her laugh and how to keep her from crying. He knew what made her happy.

He had, at least. He'd known her as well as a man could know a woman. But things were different now. They'd changed, and circumstances changed with them.

Buffy would always love him. Always. Whatever else happened, whatever else was thrown their way, that one absolute would remain with certainty. She couldn't change herself or anything that had happened, and she couldn't hate Spike for being what he was. All she could do was love him. If she was supposed to hate or shiver in disgust, then she failed. Plain and simple. He was what he was, no apologies or regrets, and she loved him. Anything else, she lacked the wiring for.

"Do you have any idea what this is doing to me?" she asked softly.

"What?"

"This. Sitting here, watching you. Being so..." She wrung her hands and expelled a deep breath. "I left because I didn't know what else to do. The last time I was with you—really, *really* with you—you hated me. You wanted me dead. You—"

"I didn't hate you."

"Yes, you did."

Spike looked at her dumbly, blinking slowly, a small, incredulous grin spreading across his face. "No," he repeated. "I didn't. Figure you'd know it better than anyone, now. Did you hate anyone you hunted, pet? Did you hate the Slayer you snuffed? She kept coming after you, but you never hated her. You didn't hate the watchers who hunted us or any of the people we picked off the streets for mealtime. Hate never played into it. Not with you. You were fun and spirited, and when you were the Slayer, it was the same. I admired you. I loved fighting you. I never hated you."

Buffy stared at him a second before piecing coherent thought together. "And...wanting to kill me?"

He shrugged a shoulder. "Comes with the territory. You were the Slayer. I do in slayers. Just the way it is. Nothing personal, love. Not at first."

"Not at first."

"Everything's different now. I know you. I've felt you. And you can't bloody run away from me."

"Why not?" Buffy asked.

A dangerous shadow played across his face. "The fuck you mean, why not?"

"What did you think was going to happen? You find me, and then what?" She gestured emphatically. "We go back? Find a new home? Keep living the life we were living?"

"I didn't know about the soul until tonight."

"And now that you do know, you can't at all see why I thought leaving was the right choice?"

"I love you," Spike replied simply, his voice pained.

Buffy glanced down when she realized her vision was blurring. She

hadn't even felt the tears sneak up on her this time. God, she'd cried so much already. "Which me do you love?" she asked. "The one who doesn't give a crap who she hurts? The one who kills without remorse? The one who paints blood on your tummy and licks it off? I can't do those things, Spike. It's not me. It was never me. You love someone who's left the building, and I'm sorry but—"

"So that's it. You think you got me figured out. No, no, Spike doesn't actually have feelings. He confuses action for what's real." He shook his head in disgust and waved a hand at her. "I didn't love your laugh or your wit, or the way your nose crinkles when you grin. I don't at all think you're brilliant in ways you don't even realize. I've never once thought you're resourceful, beyond clever. I didn't love the way you looked at me. You know why? 'Cause I was too busy being a *vampire*."

Something strong had a hold of her throat. "Spike—"

"No, Buffy. Go on. Tell me more about how I don't know who I love."

"That wasn't—"

"If you say it wasn't you again I'm gonna pummel you till it sinks into that thick skull of yours." He closed a step between them. "Might not feel the same, pet, but I've been there. You know why I love you so much?"

She barely heard herself reply. "Why?"

"Cause you *weren't* different. Not where it counted." He placed his hand against her heart. "Not here."

"Not..."

"You didn't change the way others do," he said softly. "I'm not gonna stand here and preach to you about how vamps, deep down, really are the people they left behind, because that's rot. It doesn't work that way. We're not all one thing or the next. Some of us have more of who we were left in us than others. I know I did, and the reason I fell for you is you did, too. You were like me. We were the same."

Buffy shivered hard. "That scares me."

"Why?"

"Because if I wasn't different, then what kind of monster am I?"

“Rot.”

“Well—”

“No, rot. If you can’t tell the difference, then your bleach is seeping into your brain.”

“Hey!”

“I said you were more the way you were, not all. And if you stopped and thought a second, you’d see that, too.” Spike sighed and brushed his lips against her brow. “I wanted you since the second I laid eyes on you. I loved how bright and free you were. How you smiled. I loved your jabs and wit. I loved everything...and then you came to me that night and everything that kept you from being what you could be was gone. You were gorgeous, and I couldn’t help but fall the rest of the way.”

Something had a tight hold of her throat. “Is that true?”

“You know it is.”

“You really... The soul doesn’t bother you?”

Spike sighed heavily and rolled his eyes, though the action was not aimed at her. “Of course it bothers me,” he said, sliding the hand at her chest to her shoulder and giving it a squeeze. “Not the way you figure, though. Not because you’re not a picture of what you were before. You were free before, and your chums chained you up again. You weren’t haunted. You weren’t torn up, and you knew I loved you. There wasn’t a doubt in your mind.”

“Well...”

“And you knew you weren’t different. Not where it counted. We talked about it. A lot. You knew that was the reason I love you.”

She looked at him a long minute before the invisible grip on her throat loosened, allowing a long sigh to tumble through her body and carry away a world’s worth of tension. “And you weren’t different, either?” she said. “Not where...”

His chest puffed out, his nostrils flared, and his eyes grew pained. For a second, she expected him to shoot her down, but when words found him again, he had evidently decided the truth was the better route. “When I turned, I woke up with power I couldn’t imagine and a thirst to wage war on the prats who did me wrong. But I was still bloody hopeless, love. I still had my head in the stars and my heart... I

didn't feel different where it counted, so much to the point that I went to my mum to turn her. She was sickly, you see, and I loved her. I wanted her to get better. I didn't know what would happen. I didn't know she'd...be different."

Awareness pierced her chest. "Because you weren't. You still felt..."

"Everything."

"Spike..."

"Except obligation and duty, of course. I wasn't the lovesick poet who doubled as the village punching bag, anymore. I made my rules and lived by them." Spike cast a hand through his hair and sighed again. "You were the same. If you'd been another Angelus knockoff or anything of the like, I would've had my way with you, then put you in the ground. Sired slayer with a god complex would've been bloody annoying and fucking hard to kill. But you didn't turn into that. You were *you*, and that's why I fell. That's why we're here."

The wealth of emotion fueling his eyes was almost too much to bear. She'd often catch herself thinking that, how a man as bad and rude as he could betray so much with a simple look. The many layers he kept hidden from anyone who didn't bear her face were just one of the many reasons she loved him.

And then she knew. She knew what Angel had told her was right.

"He was right."

"What?" Spike asked. "Who was right?"

"Angel."

Just as quickly, the passion in his eyes melted to ire. "Yeah," he growled, his jaw tightening.

"About that..."

"You knew he was here."

"And unless you're about to tell me he's turned poofster, he's not gonna be here much longer."

Buffy grinned in spite of herself. "He's here as a friend."

"I'm sure he is." Spike rolled his head back with heated impatience. "How the sodding hell did he find you so fast, anyway?"

"Apparently the Council decided to dose their watchers' blood with mystical trackers before sending them to find us," she said. "Angel



found out which bus I was on, where I was headed, and beat me here. Giles is on his way. Hell, he might even be here now.”

“Brilliant.” He huffed. “Suppose that’s how that trigger-happy bint found me, too.”

“What?”

“New slayer. Kicked in our front door just as I was planning to make a run for it and fed me the usual threats before I put her into a wall.” He shrugged. “Didn’t know how she found me and I didn’t care too much.”

Buffy shuddered and wrapped her arms around herself. “New slayer. Already.”

“That’s how it works.” Spike reached for her chin and redirected her gaze to his. “But let’s not get off track, love. What was it you were saying about Angel? What was he so right about?”

It took a few seconds to relocate her train of thought. The prospect of a new slayer already on their trail shouldn’t have surprised her, but it did. In the hustle to get as far from herself as she could, she’d all but forgotten she was the target of a never-ending parade of tweed-wearing, weapon-wielding middle-aged watchers, as well as the slayers that came with them. Either they didn’t know, or care, about the part where she had a soul now, but with Spike looking at her the way he was now, what lay ahead seemed less important than the immediacy of the moment.

“Angel said we were mated too easily.”

Spike snorted and rolled his eyes. “Of course he did, the jealous berk.”

“He said that the ritual is complicated and rarely successful because of everything that goes into it.”

“What does he know?”

“A lot, Spike. He’s researched it.”

“So have I!”

“Not like this, trust me.”

He rolled his eyes again. “Course. Always falling short of grand-daddy forehead.”

“That’s not what I mean. And it’s not bad. None of it is bad...in

fact, he pretty much said we were...well, for lack of a better term, made for each other.”

Spike favored her with a long, incredulous look.

“Well, he did,” Buffy insisted. “He wasn’t happy about it, but he said it shouldn’t have happened like it did were we anything but what we are. What it boils down to is if every vampire declared ‘mine’ in the heat of the moment, every member of the undead nation would be mated to someone right now.” She expelled a deep breath. “A connection like that only works if the people involved are...well, connected. Otherwise it fizzles out. What you were saying about us...and me...and how I was different from any other vamp you’d seen... It makes sense to me.”

“So Angel found you, and told you that you...what? Belong with me?”

“Like I said, he wasn’t about to throw us a parade or anything, but I think once I told him the circumstances surrounding the claim, he just kinda accepted it.”

“You told him.”

“He saw the bite mark and he knew what it was. I told him that I claimed you first, and things progressed from there.” She held his gaze for a second before breaking off in another sigh. “Look, I know you and Angel have some eternal pissing contest that I can’t and don’t want to understand, but he’s not here to win me back or tell me how evil you are or anything of the sort.”

Spike snickered. “Yeah. Now that he knows you’re bloody off limits.”

“And he told me whatever happened—the things I did, that part wasn’t me, even if the rest of it was. He’s just here as a friend, I promise.”

Things fell silent between them, comfortable and strained at the same time. There remained so much to say, so much to discuss, explore, and settle. Yet at the moment, she allowed herself to breathe. The anxiety in her chest wouldn’t rest, she knew, and her guilt knew no place to land, but with Spike at her side, things felt right again. Things felt whole in ways she couldn’t have imagined. She’d have to put to bed her fears of being a monster, but with Angel and Spike telling her

essentially the same thing, she felt she might know peace someday. Perhaps not tomorrow or the day after that, but it wasn't a pie-in-the-sky hope anymore. She knew she'd touch it.

Someday.

"You still love me?" Buffy asked softly, her throat tight.

The Angel-induced irritation in Spike's eyes melted almost immediately. "Sweetheart..."

"I'd understand if you didn't."

"No you wouldn't."

"Well, I'd probably kick your ass, but..."

He cupped her cheeks and kissed her lips. He poured so much into his kisses. "I love you," he murmured. "Then. Now. Always. I didn't know I loved you until that night, and I grew to love you after, but the girl you were and the girl you are aren't different, sweet. You're still infuriating, beautiful, funny, independent, and a thousand other things. Only thing that's different now is you don't have that spark in your eyes that you did three days ago, but for the rest of my days, I'll do my best to put it back."

"Even if I don't eat people?"

He shrugged and kissed the corner of her mouth. "So you're a vegetarian. I can adjust."

"Even if I ask *you* not to eat people?"

Spike stilled for a second. "That's important to you, isn't it?"

"Very."

"Course it is." He sighed and rested his brow against hers, and for few long seconds, they sat in silence.

"This is a longer conversation than I wanna have right now," he said at last. "But what it boils down to is this: I love you. I love violence. I love blood. I can have you and blood and violence, just not in the way I thought I could."

"Spike—"

"Anything's worth keeping you, love. I spent a century and some change eating people and following around a woman who'd never love me the way I needed...now I have you. If I have to make some sacrifices, I can manage." He inhaled deeply. "Not saying I'm gonna like it. Might even hate it for a spell. Hunting with you was bloody brilliant."

"We can still hunt."

"I suppose you mean my friends and relatives?"

She wiggled. "Well, it'd be hunting."

"Like I said, pet, longer conversation than I wanna have. But if you need an answer, anything's worth it." He brushed his lips against her forehead, running his hand down her arm. "We'll suss out the details later, yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Guess the only thing left to ask is...do you still love me?"

Buffy blinked in surprise, though she knew rationally it was a fair question. So much had changed—*she* had changed, and he had stayed the same. And it seemed very logical to her in half a second that his concern wouldn't be with semantics like where they'd live, how they'd cope with the Council, and where to go from where they stood now, but rather if she still wanted that. It just surprised her because that wasn't a question she'd truly asked herself. She'd wondered about her motives, experienced guilt over her feelings, but she'd always known what she wanted. Always.

Even when everything else seemed dark and confusing, her heart knew where it belonged.

"Spike..."

The words tore off her lips with the impact of a semi-truck colliding with a rocky bank. She didn't realize what had happened until Spike whipped around, his demon tearing away his human face in half a blink.

Debris flew and dust clouded the entrance, but the scent was unmistakable.

Strong. Female. Human.

A young girl stood in the doorway of the mausoleum, a smirk on her lips and a crossbow in her arms.

"Aww, isn't this sweet?"

"Bloody hell," Spike said, his voice tempered but quaking with fury bound to boil over any second. "I knew I should've killed you."

"Shoulda, woulda, coulda. But hey! You brought me to the missus. Knew I could count on you." She perfected her aim, the arrow's head pointing at Spike's heart. "Don't worry, B, you'll get your turn...though

I guess I should be saying something now about last words, and all that jazz.” She shrugged. “Then again, I never was one for theatrics.”

The arrow fired before Buffy felt herself react, and in the whirl from leaving the crossbow gage and piercing Spike’s skin, something in her went off. Something primal. Something unadulterated. Something beyond comprehension and control. She heard a growl but didn’t realize the sound belonged to her until it deafened the air, the rage coming with it the purest she’d ever known.

Slayer and vampire diverged then into a sea of black, and Buffy was no more.

THE BITCH'S aim was off, and while Spike knew he should be grateful, gratitude didn't make the arrow protruding from his chest didn't hurt any less. Any urge to thank Lady Luck for sparing his parts faded away the second he curled his hand around the wooden stem to yank it free, but hesitated at the pain. Fuck, that hurt. He hadn't been speared with an arrow in a long time. Not since Prague, he wagered, and those gits' aim left even more to be desired than the Slayer's.

"Fuck," Spike gasped, crashing to his knees. "Bleeding hell."

Then the air around his head violently vibrated from the power of Buffy's shriek. His eyes widened and he whipped up his head, body fighting to keep from falling completely to the ground. The look on his girl's face was unlike anything he'd ever seen. It wasn't vampire and it sure as hell wasn't human. Her fangs had descended and her eyes blazed with a fiery ember, as though she'd transcended the point where regular rage knew its place and shattered through the wall guarding the next level. It was so raw, so foreign it nearly scared the shit out of him, but the broken beauty flashing across her face brought him back to earth.

"Buffy?"

Motion blurred, reminding him of those cartoons with the devil

that traveled by courtesy of his own speeding tornado, and Buffy disappeared into a whirl of destruction. His eyes weren't up to the challenge of keeping up with her; all he knew was the Slayer was standing in the doorway one second and had flown across the mausoleum the next, her body crashing against the far back wall and bouncing to the ground with all the resistance of a rag doll. Buffy heaved a breath and then moved again, this time her eyes centered on Spike.

"Bloody hell," he muttered again, wincing as she seized his body. "Oi, love, watch the chest. Watch the—"

She grabbed the arrow and yanked it free without ceremony.

"Fuck! Warn a bloke before you..." Spike shook his head blearily, his gaze shooting to the limp body of the Slayer his girl had so effortlessly tossed through the air.

"Buffy...sweetheart, are you all right?"

She scowled, her demon eyes blinking.

"Buffy?"

She didn't answer, and for a few long seconds they stood staring at each other, her expression vacant but primal—the part of her he knew intimately nowhere to be seen. He'd never seen anything like it; he'd never seen a vamp regress to pure animal. Sure, he'd felt his primordial urges battle down those that might be more evolved, but not to the point where his mind blinked out in favor of the inner monster.

He didn't know whether to be worried or proud. As little as he begrudgingly admitted he understood about claims, it didn't take a mastermind to suss out what had happened here. Buffy had gone lopsided the second the Slayer's arrow touched his skin. The part of her that belonged to him, that guarded him, that needed him, had magnified and shoved her better senses to the back so her beast could protect its mate.

"Come on, now," Spike urged, staggering a step forward. Buffy blinked again, a small growl rumbling through her throat. She glanced down to the hole in his chest, which had already begun to patch itself together, and then back at him expectantly. "Kitten, we don't have time for this. The bitch's still breathing and she's gonna be mighty brassed when she comes to...and as much as I'd love to knock her off good and proper, you and I haven't talked that out yet I'm doing my

bloody best to be a good boy for you right now.” He paused, his jaw tightening. “And you better come back to remind me why, ’cause I gotta tell you, ducks, *not* killing the Slayer is new territory for yours truly.”

Especially when the Slayer in question had pissed him off as much as she had. First with the apartment, busting in on him when all he’d had in his system was confusion, fear, and adrenaline. If he’d stuck around, he could have made her a footnote in her watcher’s journal rather than railroad himself into a moral gray area that he’d truly never thought to explore.

He wanted her dead, and he wanted it now, and the only thing keeping him from snapping the bint’s neck was the knowledge that Buffy wouldn’t want it this way. He hadn’t promised her anything, because he honestly didn’t know how well a promise like that would hold up, but he likewise understood that their relationship was fragile right now. Toss in a slayer killing and it might fall apart.

Thankfully, Buffy didn’t remain absent long. The empty look in her eyes faded at long last, the bones in her face shifting back to human. She frowned, then, a little dazed.

“What...”

“Thank bloody Christ,” Spike gasped, seizing her shoulder. “Let’s get outta here.”

“What happened?”

“Slayer.”

“What?”

He nodded at the wall, where the bird had fallen. “New one,” he said. “Decided to make me a hood ornament. Didn’t take, thankfully.”

She shook her head. “I don’t understand...Wasn’t she just... How did she get over there?”

Spike bit his tongue. “Doesn’t matter. We gotta move, love, unless you want another dead slayer on your conscience.”

The words sounded harsher in the air than they had in his head, but either way they seemed to do the trick. Buffy snapped out of her stupor and grabbed his arm. “Come on,” she said. “We’ll go back to the apartment. Maybe Angel—”

Something angry roared in his chest. “Angel?” he spat.



"He'll wonder where I am."

"Some mysteries shouldn't be solved."

Buffy rolled her eyes. "He'll help us, Spike."

"Not bloody likely."

"Look, we can argue here or there, but me? I like my chances better with the devil I know. You don't have to like him, but you do have to trust me."

Spike grumbled, but it was no use. She had already made up her mind and he knew what that meant. There was nothing to do but limp helplessly after her.

And hope to fuck she knew what she was doing.



SHE COULDN'T STOP OR HER THOUGHTS WOULD CATCH UP WITH HER. Buffy had no idea what had happened and she was quite content to leave it that way. It had been pure and frightening, deep and black—all she remembered was the girl in the doorway. The next second, the world around her had returned and she'd come back to Spike's concerned eyes burning into hers and the Slayer unconscious on the other side of the mausoleum.

That was fine. She could handle that. It hadn't happened before, true, but that wasn't to say it would happen again. She could make it not happen again.

Buffy tossed a quick, careful glance at Spike, who did not look back. She knew he hated turning to Angel, but honestly, she saw little in the way of options. They were in a town far from any home either of them had ever known, and there was every chance the arrival of the Slayer was just the tip of a very large iceberg of problems. Any friend right now was a step in the right direction...even one with ambiguous motives.

The bend in the road turned familiar, and soon she spied the familiar rust-stained brick of the apartment complex. No police cars yet. For the moment, the body she'd left in the hotel dumpster hadn't been discovered. "There it is," she said.

"I know," Spike replied shortly.

She didn't respond. He would know, she supposed; likely the same way Angel had.

"He might be able to buy us some time."

"Or he might've pointed the bird in our direction."

Buffy shook her head as they reached the door. "No, the Council dosed those guys they sent after us. The ones we—"

"You told me this already."

"But—"

He reeled and looked at her at last, his eyes burning. "I just don't trust the berk, all right? And sorry to say it, sweetheart, but that's not gonna change in the next five minutes, so you better hope dear ole daddy plays nice, else I won't. You hear?"

Buffy nodded. "I hear."

"Sorry if that upsets you, but—"

"It doesn't. I'm just...it never ends, does it?"

Spike's expression softened at that. "No, love," he replied, shoulders slumping. "It doesn't."

Buffy let loose a shaky sigh and pushed the door open before he could work out a convincing counter-argument. Only the sight that greeted them one she was prepared for. Giles sat in the rocker she'd slept in the night before, currently in midsentence and head buried in a book. She didn't hear the words on his lips, nor did she really register Angel shadowing the kitchen nook. Her eyes were on the watcher she'd left behind, startled even though she'd known he was on his way. She'd intended to have settled on whether or not she hated him for what he'd done to her by the time he arrived, and in the excitement of the night, she'd forgotten to give it thought.

"Oh," she said shortly, lacking a response when he glanced up. "I didn't...I didn't think you'd..."

Giles removed his glasses and swallowed hard. "Buffy..."

Angel cleared his throat. "Ah," he said. "Spike. I wondered if you'd made it."

Spike emitted a low growl. "Piss off."

Buffy held up a hand, taking an instinctual step back. "Well, this is...sufficiently awkward."

"Not really," Angel offered with a shrug. "You said you'd be back in

a half-hour and it's been almost two, and if Spike hadn't arrived by tonight I would've been surprised." He paused and inclined his head at the vampire behind her. "And hello to you, too."

"Buffy, I..." Giles paused stupidly and shook his head, his glasses sliding again from their rightful place. "I imagine we're a little pressed for time."

"How did you know?" she asked.

"The Watchers Council was good enough to inform me of their intentions, but when I made my own clear, they effectively cut me from their communication circuit. I daresay we have ten minutes at the most."

"Buffy knocked out the Slayer," Spike offered. "Threw her into a stone wall."

"It was an accident," Buffy muttered.

Giles sighed. "All right, well...that might have bought us some time."

"Time for what?"

"To explain what happened."

She paused, her stomach churning. The more she thought about what had happened, the more she didn't want to. "Really, that's not needed."

"Buffy—"

"No, really. I'm sorry for..." She shook her head again. Dragging herself back to the mindset she'd been in just a day ago was more than she wanted to take on. "No, I'm not. I'm not sorry for what I said. I was shaken and freaked out, and it was...*huge*. I know it was for the best and thank you, but...I just can't be sorry for feeling the way I felt."

She was extraordinarily grateful, in that instant, that Spike was behind her. He rubbed her arm, giving her strength without saying a word.

Giles swallowed hard. "I...um, I was going to say...the mating."

Her shoulders fell. "Oh."

"Buffy, what happened was..." He broke away with a harsh breath, his eyes haunted. "To explain everything that needs explanation requires more time than we have now, but I pray you will give me the

chance someday. And I'm doing my damndest not to weep like a child just to see you again, so we best get to business."

She expelled a deep breath and nodded, though her arms felt heavy and the pressure on her chest had yet to alleviate. Whatever she'd expected when she again met Giles's eyes couldn't have prepared her for this particular mental maelstrom, especially when she had yet to recover from Spike's sudden reappearance into her life. She felt she'd aged so much in these last few days, and while no time at all had truly passed since she'd come back to herself, it might as well have been centuries.

"Now," Giles said, clearing his throat awkwardly. "I believe, if Angel told me correctly, that he has explained to you the implications of claiming a mate as a vampire."

Buffy nodded mutely while Spike snorted his derision.

"So we're being schooled, is that it?" he drawled. "The two of you here to—"

"That's not what this is about," the Watcher said sternly.

Angel rolled his eyes. "If you'd keep your trap shut for two seconds—"

"The last thing she needs is the two of you filling her head with useless rot!"

"Or you shutting us out because you feel threatened," the elder vampire replied.

Spike sucked in his cheeks, his eyes flaring. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Guys!" Buffy's hands came up, though whether in surrender or to keep the other two from attacking each other, she didn't know. "The pissing contest can wait."

Spike held his glare a beat longer before stepping back, jutting his chin with indignation she doubted he could even attempt to hide. "He started it," he said.

Angel scoffed. "You are such a child."

"Yeah," Buffy muttered irritably. "This is kinda what I meant by pissing contest." She turned her attention to Giles. It was strange how much time could pass without changing some things, but meant the world of difference to the rest of the picture. Turning to Giles

felt natural, felt right. Smiling awkwardly at his befuddled expression, shrugging as the conversation fell from his control, if it had ever been there to begin with. "I'm sure you had a point a minute ago."

"Yes," Giles replied irritably. "The implications are rather simple. Claiming rituals are, as Angel indicated, more complicated than the one you two experienced."

"Sod off. Doesn't make it any less real."

Buffy squeezed Spike's shoulder. "I don't think he's saying it is."

"I'm not," Giles agreed, though he plainly would have given anything, up to and including his life, for it to be otherwise. "I am merely saying a bond this complex, and this strong once enacted properly, is something that the world has not seen much of. For a while, it will be crucial that you two remain in tune with each other, if not physically then mentally, as the bond cements itself."

Buffy blinked. "Giles..."

"Secondly, these bonds cannot be broken without serious repercussions."

Angel frowned. "They can't be broken."

"It's not advisable." Giles nodded. "I did find a case wherein a vampire female and a human male had successfully claimed each other, but the vampire was castigated by her Order and the male, upon discovering what would become of her, hired a warlock to sever their bond. The vampire went mad from the loss and the human hanged himself."

Buffy and Spike exchanged glances. "So," she said slowly, "on the list of options, that's on the bottom, right?"

Spike snarled. "Just try it, either one of you."

"Calm down," Angel said.

Giles nodded. "I only mentioned it as an example of the commitment you've made to each other."

"As if we didn't know," Spike retorted. "I tracked her down for a reason, mate, and the claim had nothing to do with it."

"Is that so?"

"I love her."

"This is not the girl you mated, Spike," Giles said carefully. "I have

to be certain before we proceed...what I am about to advise is in direct violation with the wishes of the Watchers Council."

"Fuck the Council. And yeah, she is. Already hashed this out and not lookin' to do it again. Soul or not, Buffy's always been Buffy."

"He loves me, Giles," Buffy said, dropping her hand from Spike's shoulder into his. "I'm confused and frustrated and...a thousand different things right now, but I know he loves me. He...he doesn't lie about things like that."

She avoided meeting Spike's eyes, as well as Angel's.

"Very well, then," Giles said. "We must get you out of here."

"What?"

"The Slayer will have already tracked you here," he explained. "Just the same way Angel, and I'm assuming, Spike did."

Buffy wrinkled her nose. "She smelled blood? That's a power I don't remember having."

"She pieced together the bus and the dead kid and the dead kid's residence," Angel said, likely more bluntly than he intended. "We need to get you two gone."

"Right," Spike said. "Any reason why the two of you didn't lead with that?"

Giles ignored him and moved forward, his eyes on Buffy. "You have two, maybe three hours before the trace wears off," he said softly. "We'll buy you as much time as we can, but the rest..."

"I'll be fine."

His mouth pulled into a tender, heartbreaking smile. "I have no doubt."

There was some magnetic pull between fathers and daughters; this she'd experienced numerous times over the past few years, especially in the wake of her own father's exit as a permanent figure in her life. When that title had officially transferred from Hank Summers to Rupert Giles, she didn't know, but he was someone she knew, regardless of what was said or how much they hurt each other, who would love her as though she was his own.

Buffy felt it as his arms closed around her, squeezing her into a hug.

She'd said some horrible things to him, and while she'd meant them at the time, she didn't mean them now.

"I'll see you soon," she swore.

Giles's embrace tightened. "Goodbye, Buffy."

Then it was over. Spike closed his hands around her shoulders, and she was moving. Moving for the door and toward an uncertain future.

The impact of goodbye had never stung so hard.

BUFFY HAD NEVER BEEN able to sleep in the Desoto before—or maybe she’d just never tried—but the second her skin had met the fabric of the seats, she’d experienced a rush of something hard and beautiful at the same time, chased by exhaustion that seemed damned determine to seep into her bones. By the time Spike had slid behind the wheel, she’d been struggling to keep her eyes open, and he’d told her not to bother.

So Buffy slept. Absent pain—the physical kind, anyway—and at peace on a primal level she figured she wouldn’t understand for a long time.

Every time she opened her eyes, she reached for him, and he was there. Grabbing her hand and kissing it, asking if she needed anything, and ultimately telling her to go back to sleep.

When at last she awoke, she found herself alone in the front seat, which sent such a charge of panic through her that instantly chased away any residual sleepiness. Buffy sat up with a hard, lung-hurting gasp.

Her lungs didn’t work anymore, sure, but they still hurt.

“What is it?”

Buffy jumped and twisted in her seat, and immediately felt like an



idiot. Spike was in the back, his hair tousled and his deep blue eyes flooding with concern that didn't quite mask his own fatigue.

"What happened?" he asked, then began craning his neck in various directions in search of the threat, which likely didn't do much good considering the black stains on the windows.

Even now, she didn't know how he managed to see well enough to drive.

"Nothing," Buffy said, feeling dumber by the second. "I...I just..."

He studied her for a long beat as comprehension replaced alarm. "You thought I'd gone."

"I didn't know."

"Not much of a plan, that. Ditch you in my own car."

Buffy shook her head and looked away. "It just scared me, is all. My brain is fuzzy."

Which was good, because a fuzzy brain was a distracted brain. Except she didn't think she could stand the distraction much longer. Not when there were so many things yet to decide. Conversations to have. Realities to face.

"Where are we?" she asked instead, rubbing at her eyes. "I feel like I've been snoozing for three days."

Spike inclined his head. "Well..."

She blinked. "I've been snoozing for three days?"

"You needed it."

Buffy stared at him. He stared right back. "What?" he asked at last, huffing. "You know you did."

"So you've been camping out in the car."

"Thought about grabbing a room somewhere, but can't be sure the tainted blood's out of our system. Don't care what your watcher said." He let out a breath. "And since I've been cornered one too many times as of late, I didn't wanna chance it. Wanted to make sure we had a clean getaway in case some slay-happy bint shows up."

"I guess that makes sense." Actually, it made a lot of sense. "It's smart. Really smart."

He smirked. "And here I thought you were just using me for my body."

"Well, even if that were the case, I don't think anyone would blame

me.” She rested her forehead against the back of the seat, a multitude of things she wasn’t ready to think about pressing forward. “Are you still...”

“Am I still what?”

“Okay.”

“Think I’m more than okay, pet. Far sight better than I was a few days back. Found you, didn’t I?”

“I mean with...” Buffy sighed and looked away. “With what we talked about.”

“Need a bit more than that. We talked about a lot of things.”

“I guess...” She pressed her lips together, forcing her gaze back to his. “I guess with me. Are you still okay with me. The...having a soul and stuff.”

Spike studied her for a long moment. “Is that a serious question?”

“It won’t be like it was before. We were happy before.”

“And you think we can’t be happy now.”

“I... I don’t know.” Now that she was awake, her mind was again at war, charged with memories she didn’t want and everything that came with them. The people she’d hurt. The lives she’d taken. The pain she’d inflicted. Amazingly, she hadn’t dreamt about it during her three-day snooze fest.

When she looked back at Spike, a piece of her heart shattered.

“You...” He swallowed, his eyes wide and vulnerable. “You don’t know if you can be happy. With me.”

“What? No! That’s not it. That’s not it at all.” God, she was such a mess. “Can *you*? Can you be happy with me? I’m not—”

“If you say you’re not the same person one more bloody time—”

“I’m not, though. I mean, most of me is, I guess, but we... we *hunted* together.”

Spike shrugged. “And?”

“And I...I told you. Killing... I can’t kill, Spike. I can’t do that to anyone. Just knowing that I did...” She blinked hard, but the tears came anyway. “Knowing I’ve killed anyone—*hurt* anyone—is... It tears me up. And I know that’s the soul, but the soul is me, and I can’t stop being me and I don’t want the soul gone, either, because then I’d go back to...to that, and that might as well—”

He cut her off with a kiss, and she was thankful, because once she started babbling, she wouldn't stop.

"I want you to be you," he murmured when they pulled apart. "It kills me that you're hurting, and I resent the fuck outta your mates for doing that to you, but you are the same, love. I told you. That's the reason I love you. I don't care about the hunting or the killing or any of it. You're all I want."

Her lower lip began to wobble. "And you're...you're okay. With it not just being me who's not killing people anymore."

"Ah."

That *ah* didn't sound too promising. Her chest tightened again, compressed with old fears. It was a big thing to ask, she knew. She understood it intimately now. How the urge was there, always there, whispering how good it would feel, reminding her how good it *had* felt. Taking what she wanted and not giving a damn, except giving enough of a damn to draw lines where she saw fit. Arbitrary lines, sure, but those that lived up to her own fucked up code.

Spike had said she'd been different as a soulless vampire, but some things weren't different. She'd enjoyed killing, even if she'd made efforts to avoid it here and there. That part was the demon—the same kind he had, and the only thing keeping him from giving in was her.

She wasn't sure that was a way she could expect anyone to live.

"Whatever you're thinking is bollocks."

Buffy snapped her attention back to him. "What? How do you know what I'm thinking?"

"Cause you're not very good at hiding it." He offered a small smile. "Dunno how it's going to work. But I told you then and I meant it then. Whatever I gotta do to keep you happy—"

"Even if you're not happy? How can you be happy if I ask you not to be you?"

Something dangerous flashed behind his eyes, and the next thing she knew, he had grabbed her by the back of the head, pulling her toward him. "You look at me," he said hotly. "I could spend the rest of my miserable days tearing apart every last tasty pulser that crosses my path if I wanted. I know it. You're not asking anything of me. You said it yourself."

"I'm—"

"Been thinkin' about that a lot, point of fact." He released a long, ragged breath, staring into her eyes and like he was daring her to blink. "Everything we talked about. I told you it was a longer talk and we had a lot to suss out. Turns out it's not and we don't, 'cause it all comes down to this. You're the one person in this stupid sodding world I give a damn about. The one person I'd rather stake myself than hurt. And picking off your neighbors would do that—it'd hurt you. And I draw the line at causing you pain. So yeah, Buffy, I thought about it. The answer's the same as it was."

A long pause stretched between them. "But I did ask," she said at last. "I did ask—"

"No, you said *if*. *If* I would stop if you asked. I'm telling you now that I've decided you don't need to ask."

"But I am asking. Just that you think any of that means I'm asking, doesn't it? For you to not be you? Because I can't be the me who was fine with you being you?"

He narrowed his eyes. "You really need to lay off thinkin' I'm in love with a different version of you. Fuck, I thought we'd been through this."

"I'm saying I'm like a recovering alcoholic who used to be a lot fun to be around, and I'm asking you to join the program too, even if you don't want to."

Spike stared at her for a moment, then snorted and shook his head. "Care to give me a figure?"

"A what?"

"A number. An estimate. How many times you reckon we'll have this conversation before it sinks into that beautiful thick skull of yours?"

"I'm serious—"

"I know, and it's pissing me off." Spike released his grip on the back of her head, his hand trailing around her face until he had her cheek cradled against his palm. "Been walkin' this sorry planet for a long time, love. Some of it good, most of it was bloody awful. One thing I know beyond a sodding doubt is...I hate pain."

Buffy couldn't help it—she arched an eyebrow. “No, you love pain. You get off on pain. We've gotten off on pain together.”

“I'm talking about a different pain. You know the kind. Not so much fun then.” He smiled softly. “Y'know what makes me hurt the most?”

As it turned out, she didn't need to think very hard. “Does it begin with B and end with uffy?”

He bit back a laugh. “Only when Buffy herself's hurting, see. That's the worst I've felt. Ever. And I never wanna be the cause. Not if I can help it.”

Something stung her eyes. She sniffed and looked down, but he was still cupping her cheek, and guided her back up again.

“I need you to understand this. You haven't asked me anything. Kick me to the curb and nothin'll change. I'll be in the same bloody place. Loving you and not wanting you to hurt. Knowin' that I can keep you from hurting by keeping my fangs to myself.” He stroked his thumb over her skin, wiping away a stray tear. “Course, I'll be a right miserable sod without you, and from what we learned, you'll be in sorry shape if you cut me loose. The claim and all.”

She nodded. “Right. The claim.”

“Only vamps in modern history who got it right, if I understood correctly.”

“That's what Giles said.”

“So we owe it to ourselves to make a go of it.” Spike leaned forward, pressing his brow to hers. “Also if you run, I'll just follow. Might be fun for a while, but there are only so many times we can have reunion sex and still call it that.”

A bark of laughter exploded off her lips. “I guess you have a point. I just... I love you. I do.”

He growled—the sexy kind of growl that never failed to make her legs tremble. “First time you've said that since I found you.”

“Well, I do. I love you,” she repeated, “and I don't want you to not be who you are because of me. But I also know—”

“Who I am doesn't figure into what I eat, love, no matter how many times you say it. We can get blood anywhere. Human or animal, doesn't rightly matter. What matters is you. I wake up next to you and

I'm over the bloody moon, understand? That's all I need." He tilted his head, keeping his brow pressed to hers as though relishing the contact. "Blood and violence, like I told you. I can have both. I can have that and you. That's all I want."

"You called it killing your friends and family yesterday."

"Yeah, well, I forgot I don't really have any friends, do I? And the only family that'll claim me just aided and abetted in our getaway." He paused. "Still hate the wanker."

Buffy fought to kill a grin and failed. "Of course."

"Point is it's settled, as far as I'm concerned. We'll find plenty of things to kill. As long as I have you, I'm a happy bloke." He leaned in and brushed his lips against hers. "And someday you're gonna have to just accept that that's that."

He kissed her again, a soft, tender kiss that made her bones shake. And when he pulled back, and she met his eyes once more, she understood. This was a man who would do anything for her. A man prepared to sacrifice whatever was asked of him in order to keep her. The knowledge was heady and a little scary, but that didn't make it any less true. He might have the power to hurt her, but she held the power to destroy him.

"Okay," she said.

Spike perked his eyebrows. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

He studied her a moment longer, then grinned and kissed her again. "Bloody right," he said as he climbed back into the driver's seat. "Anywhere in particular you wanna go, sweet?"

"Where were you headed before?"

"Nowhere. You were knackered and I wanted to put as much distance between us and the new bird as possible."

Buffy pursed her lips, her thoughts turning to the future—or rather, the now. Their *now*.

For the first time since she'd awakened with a soul, she experienced a rush of something that might have been excitement.

The first thought that came to mind was likewise the most impossible. Aside from the fact that there was still a lot of healing to do, returning to Sunnydale was out of the question. The Watchers Council

would likely keep an eye on Giles for a while, and maybe Angel as well. Perhaps one day they could risk it, but that day was not today.

"Nope," she said at last. "What about you?"

Spike tilted his head. "Wanna see where Anne Rice lives?"

"You're kidding."

"Haunted town, New Orleans. Crawling with all kinds of nasty beasties. Could keep us busy for a while."

Buffy shrugged and sat back, gesturing at the road. "Then point us south. I wanna meet Lestat."

He snorted. "Think you got your hands full with a real vamp, love. Let's lay off the fictional ones."

"Oh, come on. If Lestat existed, I'd totally want a chance to—"

"Careful how you finish that sentence."

"—*slay* him." Buffy bit back a laugh at the look he gave her, that *excited* feeling in her chest compounding. "Why? What did you think I was going to say?"

He studied at her a moment longer before breaking off with a chuckle and shaking his head. Then he fired up the ignition and the Desoto purred to life. "You're gonna drive me outta my mind, aren't you?"

"Probably." Buffy hesitated, then scooted across the seat and rested her head against his shoulder. When he wrapped his arm around her, pulling her to him, she would have sworn her dead heart jumped. "But you're gonna love it."

Spike whispered a kiss against her brow, and she felt his lips curl into a grin. "Every bloody second."

THE FUNNY THING about knowing that monsters exist was how irrevocably it shaped the universe. This knowledge couldn't be unlearned. There was no going back, even if the Slayer was dead.

Or, in this case, undead.

The calendar kept creeping closer to October 31, and Willow found that with each passing day, she became more anxious. She hadn't felt like this before, after she and Xander had lost Jesse—a guy who had been in their lives much longer, but somehow not nearly as important. Losing Buffy had been a horse of a different color. It hurt more, and the hurt didn't really go away.

Likely because Willow knew that Buffy was still out there somewhere. Dead to the world but not to her friends—those she'd left behind.

Those who had taken up her mantle for her.

Giles had assured her that this Halloween was likely to follow normal protocol, but the days leading up to it had proven to be a nightmare, as though all the vamps and demons in the area needed to get their pent-up evil out before taking a day off. She and Xander had taken to meeting Angel at various graveyards for evening patrols—something that Angel had only recently stopped protesting. Whether



they had proven their usefulness or the vampire had just given up trying to talk them out of it, Willow didn't know, but the past few days had gone without the customary, "You don't belong out here," speech that she was sure she could recite verbatim.

Which was nice. It meant Angel understood that they weren't going to be dissuaded no matter what he said.

In fact, Angel was waiting for them at the entrance to Restfield that night, his face contorted into the perma-frown Willow had long since gotten used to.

"Stay close," he said by means of greeting, then turned on his heels and strode into the cemetery.

"I think he's warming up to us," Xander said. "Maybe next month, we'll get an actual *bello*."

Willow tried for a smile, but her heart wasn't in it. Next month was just a few days away, and then it would have been more than a year since she'd last seen her other best friend.

What was Buffy doing now? Was she okay? Was she happy? Did she miss them at all?

"What are we looking for tonight?" she asked Angel, jogging a bit to catch his stride. "Or is it the same old?"

"One of my contacts said something about a family of Fyarl demons," the vampire replied, "which can't be good, because, unpleasant as they are, they usually are just the muscle."

"Anything we should know about them?"

"Yeah. Let me handle it."

Willow turned to Xander and they rolled their eyes at the same time.

"I heard that," Angel said without looking at them. "Just trust me on this. They're dumb, but they'll snap your necks if you get too close. I—"

He broke off without warning, coming to a sudden halt. Had Willow not been paying attention, she would have crashed into his back.

"Hey!" Xander drew up beside her. "What gives, Walkus Interruptus?"

Angel held up a hand and tilted his head as though straining to hear something.

Then he took off at a sprint.

"We really need to work on his people skills," Xander muttered.

"Come on!" Willow snapped and broke off to follow.

Angel was not the easiest guy in the world to tail, particularly when he was in a mood to whip out the vamp abilities. But by the time Willow lost him, the night cut her a break, because she could hear it, too. Unmistakable sounds of a fight, punctuated with hard blows and grunts.

There was something familiar about the cadence. Something that made her heart leap.

No. No, it couldn't be.

"Will!" Xander yelled from behind her, panting. "What is up with all the running?"

She didn't stop, though. Her legs pumped and her chest ached, but she knew. *She knew.*

At last, she rounded a corner in the cemetery and saw them.

*Oh my god.*

They were back to back, each staring down one of the ugliest—and largest—demons Willow had ever seen. Like the beast from the Disney movie, if the beast had been bald and bony and had a problem with mucus. Buffy had something silvery clutched in one fist; Spike was unarmed but also unconcerned. He said something to her over his shoulder, and she broke into a hard laugh before taking a swipe at the demon nearest her.

Willow blinked, then nearly fell over when Xander crashed into her back. She would have hit the ground if Angel hadn't caught her.

She hadn't even noticed him standing there.

"God," Xander breathed. "Is that... It can't be..."

Buffy planted the silver thing into the nearest demon's chest, abruptly dropped to the ground, rolled between Spike's legs, then sprang up in a mad flurry of movement, her fist connecting with the other beastie's jaw. In the same beat, as though it were rehearsed, Spike whirled around and kicked the end of the silver weapon until it was so thoroughly buried in the demon's chest that the end was no longer visi-

ble. He then ripped it free and tossed it over his shoulder to Buffy, who dispatched the other one in a similar fashion.

"Oh my god," Xander said again.

Yeah. She agreed, but she couldn't find the words.

They were perfect together.

Panting, Buffy leaned over and jerked the silver instrument free from the dead demon, wrinkled her nose, and handed the weapon to Spike. "I believe this is yours."

He snorted and rolled his eyes. "Honestly, love, it's just a little snot."

"I did my good deed for the night. This is yours." She leaned over and kissed the scowl off his face, then whispered something that would likely have Willow's virgin ears burning, judging by the way Spike's eyes lit up.

The display of affection seemed to knock Angel out of his stupor. He cleared his throat, and the lovers turned in a way that made Willow realize they'd known they had an audience.

Of course they'd known. They were vampires.

"Ello, Angel!" Spike said brightly, throwing his arm around Buffy and starting toward them. "Wondered if you were gonna just bloody stand there or join in the fun."

"You looked like you had it covered," Angel replied. "And what are you doing here?"

"Gee. Hello to you too." Buffy shook her head, shifted her gaze to Willow, then away just as quickly. The smile on her face dimmed a bit, which would have hurt Willow's feelings had she not seen the uncertainty in her friend's eyes.

Buffy never had been good at masking her emotions.

"Hey guys," she said, her voice a pitch higher than usual. "Long time."

Words stuck in Willow's throat with no viable exit strategy.

Xander, however, had no such trouble.

"Buff..." He all but stumbled in his haste to get to her, and had her wrapped in a bear hug that would have crushed a normal girl the next moment.

Buffy's feet left the ground and her eyes went wide. Willow had forgotten how short she was.

"Xan, I love you, but unhand me before I show you how strong I am *now*."

"Oh, right." He set her back down, grinning sheepishly. "I...ahh...forgot." He tossed Spike a somewhat apprehensive look. "Umm, Angel told us about the...whatever thing. You're not gonna rip my throat out for hugging her, are you?"

Spike arched an eyebrow.

Xander took a step back.

Buffy rolled her eyes. "No, he's not. He knew before we came here that I might be liberal with the giving of hugs."

"Why are you here?" Angel demanded. "Buffy, do you have any idea what kind of—"

"Yes. Of course I do. This isn't a decision we made lightly."

"If the Council—"

"The Council, last I checked, thinks I'm dust. Anyone here gonna blab?"

Willow shook her head, her voice still trapped stubbornly in her throat.

"Been meanin' to ask you, mate," Spike said, his eyes still on Angel. "How the bloody hell did you manage to convince a slayer and her watcher that a heap of sawdust was yours truly? I never thought that would stick."

"Well, it won't if they get wind you're here."

"That's what you did?" Xander looked awed. "Good thinking, man."

Angel shot him a narrowed look. "We didn't have a lot of time to plan and we didn't know if it'd work. Faith got to us well before the tracer in the blood should have expired, so it was a long shot."

"A long shot that worked. Guess you can be a convincin' actor when you want, eh, Peaches?"

Angel stiffened—the way he did when he was annoyed—but continued as though Spike hadn't spoken. "If we'd had more time, we could've come up with a better plan, but we worked with what we had. I think Giles sold it—he was...ah, in a state after you left, which we

think convinced Faith you were dust. It convinced her watcher did, at least, and that was that."

"Faith?" Buffy asked. "Oh, the new slayer."

"Not so new anymore," Angel said.

"She snuff it?" Spike asked, his eyes lighting up. "Crash into the wrong bloke's apartment? Been tryin' not to ask—gotta low profile to keep and all—but—"

"No, she didn't *snuff it*," Angel wrinkled his nose in clear distaste. "I meant that she's been at this for half a year, so she's not exactly new anymore." He paused. "And we don't want to attract her attention to Sunnydale. Giles is still on probation and he had to fight to stay here. There were hearings and everything, and the only reason he's not back in England is that this hellmouth is still active, but the Council would just love a reason to fire him completely. So I ask again, what the hell do you think you're doing here?"

Buffy looked somewhat stricken. "I...I didn't know any of that."

"Why would you?" Angel replied. "You haven't exactly picked up a phone."

"Giles yelled at me when I called!"

"He was being evaluated at the time. What did you expect?"

"Again, I didn't know—"

A low growl tickled the air. "We fixed it up already," Spike all but snarled, drawing Buffy closer to him. "So lay off. The lady missed her friends and her mum. What's life without a little risk?"

"Sensible," Angel replied.

"So you're gonna whine about the Slayer not ringing you on the regular but lecture us about showing up at the same time. We cleared it with the old man, so you can bloody stuff it."

"You did?" Willow asked, her voice hoarse. "Giles knew you were coming?"

Buffy had the decency to look sheepish, though still had yet to meet Willow's eyes, gazing instead at the ground. "I called Mom last week. I had to. I just...I couldn't take it anymore. And he was there." She frowned as though realizing something. "For some reason. He never told me. But we set it up then."

"A-and he didn't tell us?" The past few months, Willow had come to

rely on Giles more than she did her own family. That he could keep something so big from her...well, it hurt.

"He wanted to make sure I could see Mom," Buffy said quickly. "Before...before anyone else saw us and possibly let slip to the Council that we were here."

"We wouldn't do that!"

Angel had nothing to add but a scowl. Evidently, he hadn't been in the know, either, which made Willow feel marginally better. Marginally.

She was so going to have words with Giles.

"You've already been to see Joyce?" Xander asked. "Oh man. Don't tell me—"

"That was our first stop," Buffy said, a soft smile on her face. "It was...there were tears. And some screaming. And she threatened to pull an ax on Spike. Again."

"My kind of lady," Angel muttered.

Spike snorted.

"But we're... I think we're good. I needed to see her. And you guys." At last, Buffy turned to look at Willow directly, a world of uncertainty in her eyes. "I know...this is... I know it has to be weird. Seeing...well, us. But is it too late to say I'm sorry?"

Willow wouldn't have thought it would have been simple—not after the past year—but that question was all it took. At once, twelve months of anger and worry blossomed into something stronger—cementing into the knowledge that didn't want to be mad at her friend anymore. She just wanted to be happy that Buffy was back.

Before her mind could catch up, Willow had her friend in her arms, her eyes stinging. "Welcome home."

Whatever tension Buffy had been holding onto seemed to dissolve, and then Willow found herself crushed against a very emotional vampire.

"If the lot of you don't mind," Spike said loudly, "we think we might stay here a bit. Provided you can keep your mouths shut, of course. Turns out there's better hunting on a hellmouth and killing things is a hobby of ours."

Buffy stifled a laugh and hugged Willow tighter, but didn't say anything.

Spike met Willow's gaze. It was a strange experience, seeing a guy she'd only before associated with attempted murder look at her—or rather, Buffy—with such love. The part of Willow that had hated him, and hated him still, dulled, but only just. This was still the guy who had taken her friend away. No amount of time would make that okay.

But she saw how much he loved Buffy and that made her heart soften just a teeny bit.

"And the Slayer seems partial to the likes of you," he said, smiling softly. "Couldn't bloody shut up on the drive over."

Buffy laughed. "Like you minded."

Still holding Willow's gaze, Spike nodded vigorously and mouthed, "I minded."

Okay, maybe more than a teeny bit.

After what seemed like forever, Buffy loosened her grip and stepped back, her eyes, so familiar, shining with tears. "You're okay with this, right?" she asked, then looked to Xander. "Both of you?"

"Of course!" Xander said brightly. "Place hasn't been the same without the Buffster. I'm all about getting back to regularly scheduled slayage. Plus, something tells me he's"—he pointed at Spike—"gonna be more entertaining than Dead Boy."

"Got that right," Spike muttered.

Angel sighed. "I'm standing right here."

Buffy looked confused. "Wow, Xan. I expected the first hour with you to be full lecture."

Xander shrugged. "Six months ago? Yeah, totally. But that was then and I've had time to adjust."

Buffy arched a skeptical eyebrow.

"And what good would arguing do, I ask?" Xander added. "Really?"

"Well, none."

"I'm just glad to see you here. However long you can stay."

Buffy studied him a moment later, offering a watery smile. "I hope it's a long time."

"Yeah," Spike said, coming up behind her and wrapping an arm

around her waist. "But loathe as I am to admit it, Grandpap made a good point."

Angel sighed and tipped his head to the sky. "I think I liked it better when you hated me."

"I do. I'm just hating you a different way now." Spike grinned, brushed a kiss to Buffy's temple, then continued, "The Council comes calling and we're outta here in a blink. No matter what Buffy says. I'll tie her up if I have to." He paused, brightened. "Might do that anyway, come to—"

"Then we'll just have to keep it quiet," Xander agreed loudly, his cheeks turning red. "We can do that." He paused, then turned to Willow. "We can do that, right?"

She nodded, her heart skipping—which was an odd thing to be aware of in the presence of three vampires. "I might know a spell," she said. "Some kind of...disguise spell. It's a little advanced, but with Ms. Calendar's help—"

"Wait. Back up. A spell?" Buffy's eyes widened. "Like...a witchy spell?"

Willow grinned, her cheeks burning hotter. "Yeah."

"That you know."

"It's a hobby."

"A hobby that's made you Willow the Witch?" Buffy looked somewhat awed. "Wicked."

"Not wicked," Xander said quickly. "We have a strict no-wicked rule in place. Willow is not allowed to go evil."

"Yeah," Buffy replied. "That's totally my thing, anyway."

Willow grinned wider, feeling completely at peace for the first time in a long time.

There was so much to share. So much catching up to do.

She couldn't wait to get started.