

SCREWED

Nailed Part I



HOLLY DENISE





FOREVER IN DEBT TO YOUR PRICELESS ADVICE

“PLEASE TELL ME YOU FOUND SOMETHING.”

“I found something.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“How significant?”

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

“But you think you know?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Nothing new there," Giles muttered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're a pig."

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

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

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

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

"What the hell are you talking about?"

So much for ignoring him.

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

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

Too much to expect him to ever be helpful.

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

"Course you did. Never doubted you would."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Buffy."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Such as?"

"The steps required in the spell itself."

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

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

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

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

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

"I would rather not."

"Giles..."

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

Exactly what it sounded like, then.

Well, fuck.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I didn't make a mistake."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Doing the deed of darkness? Really?"

“It is a rather archaic way to say—”

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

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

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

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

“I have to what now?”

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

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

“Do I look like I’m enjoying myself?”

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

“It is not.”

Of course it wasn’t.

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

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

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

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

“—for an hour.”

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

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

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

“What?”

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

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

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

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

“I'd really rather not discuss this.”

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

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

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

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

“But at what cost?”

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

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

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

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

“Just tell me.”

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

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

"It has to be Spike."

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

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

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

"You're actually considering this."

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

"But to debase yourself so—"

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

"You mean the chip," Giles replied tonelessly.

"What else?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Which meant Spike.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That a fact?"

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

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

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

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

"Sorry?"

"Is she here?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Expelled?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

And as he realized that, Spike realized something else.

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

Of course, tell that to his idiot mouth.

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

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

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

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

"Spike, I swear to god—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Nice and specific, that."

"It means you don't kill me."

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

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

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

Spike smirked. "Is that all?"

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

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

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

"This is serious."

"You see me laughin'?"

"No, but I'm about to."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, it’s thick all right.”

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

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

“I swear—”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Or hell, he might actually not survive this.

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

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

“Oh, so the whole team knows. Better and better.”

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

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

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

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

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

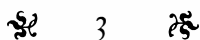
“Little ironic now, innit?”

“What’s that?”

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

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

Some things were worth it.



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

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

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

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

The question hadn't computed. "Huh?"

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

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

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

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

"You can stop there."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you saying you can't?"

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

"Define proactive."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Downstairs."

"Then let's get this over with."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Doesn't that defeat the purpose?"

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

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

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

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

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

"What?"

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

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

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

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

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

"We need a truce."

"A truce."

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

"Thought we already had one of those."

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

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

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

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

"What?"

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

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

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

"Don't."

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

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

"Why are you telling me this?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I do not want—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

No going back.



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

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

Oh, and turned on.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He had fuck all idea but—

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

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

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

"Good. We need it to be good."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He had to bloody hold on.

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

“You’re gonna bloody kill me.”

“Probably, but we have business first.”

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

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

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

He had an hour inside of her.

Provided he lived that long.

WHAT I NEED IS A GOOD DEFENSE

“BLOODY FUCKING HELL.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You don't have a soul to spill."

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

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

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

"Shut up."

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

"Why?"

"Wanna taste your tits."

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

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

“You don’t need my...*that*.”

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

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

“You’re not *my* Spike.”

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

“What?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Who’s hiding?”

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

“Again, you’re disgusting.”

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

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

“What? Finding you delicious?”

“That is not me.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Bollocks."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her first thought, when thoughts returned, was something along

SCREWED

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

And her fifth thought was *fuck*.



MAKE ME STRONG, YEAH, YOU MAKE ME BOLD

CHRIST, AT LEAST HE COULD DUST A HAPPY MAN.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Every part of her was marvelous.

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

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

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

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

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

"It was a reflex!"

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

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

"You're depraved," she told him.

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

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

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

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

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

"The *fucking* is a necessary evil."

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't need that."

"Clearly."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Shut up."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I never agreed."

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

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

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

"I am *not* enjoying myself."

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

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

"What's that?"

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

"Are you? And why is that?"

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

"But you don't hate this."

"Yes, I do."

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

"God, you are so full of yourself."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You’re sick.”

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

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

“Because you’re Buffy.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fuck, what a way to be remembered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It doesn—”

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

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

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

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

"You said it'd help."

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

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

"Spike..."

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

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

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

"That is...*insane*."

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

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

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

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

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

Her heart jumped. "Oh."

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

"Spike—"

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

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

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

SCREWED

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

Or, even more terrifying, that she did.

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

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

JUST GIVE ME TILL THEN TO GIVE UP THIS FIGHT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Spike, this is weird."

"What's that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Is this not a spell, then?"

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

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

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

"No?"

“That’s...that’s not about fucking a *slayer*, Spike. It’s about fucking *me*.”

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

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

“That’s not what this is.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Spike shook his head but didn't answer.

"Your very me-specific feelings?"

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

"*What* develops?"

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

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

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

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

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

"*Is there anything I can do?*"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And it had to stay that way.

LIKE A MOTH TO A FLAME,
BURNED BY THE FIRE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What do you think?"

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

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

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

"There are mixed messages, now?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Pity."

"And that's—"

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

"How in the world do you know that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You are so full of yourself.”

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

“My *salvation*?”

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

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

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

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

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

"Think I wanna hear you say it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Shut up!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It's nothing."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WORDS FALL THROUGH ME AND ALWAYS FOOL ME

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

Oh.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And Buffy didn't know how to handle that.

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

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

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

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

“Longer?”

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

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

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

“Why not?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Maybe all the orgasms helped.

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

She giggled.

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

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

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

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

"This a joke to you?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Not even him.

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

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

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

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

"I don't know."

"You don't?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Spike—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No, I don't."

"It's insane."

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

"Like *what* hasn't happened?"

"You. With a vampire."

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't tell me it wouldn't work without letting me prove how it could." His teeth were on her throat the next second, blunt and human, but her body knew. She tensed and squeezed, and he moaned low but didn't raise his head. Kept his mouth on her skin, licking and flicking places that felt loved raw but somehow, like the rest of her, hungry for it. Then she felt his breath at her ear, jostling the hair that wasn't sweat-plastered to her skin. "Doesn't matter what I was before. I don't need any of that."

God, he had to stop talking. "It can't happen."

"I would love you better, Slayer. You know I would." He nipped at her earlobe, his hands leaving her hips and his arms binding around

her. Pulling her to him so they were flesh-to-flesh, as close as they could be without falling through each other entirely. "I'd love you when you're strong. Love knowing you could pummel me into dust with your fists alone if you set your mind to it. I'd love being there with you in the thick of things, doesn't matter who we're fighting so long as we're together. I'd love that, and I'd know what I had and be grateful for it. For bein' in your life even a little where it's not where creatures like me belong."

Buffy pressed her eyes shut. It was building again—that pressure, both between her legs and in her chest. The burning in her sinuses that betrayed she was close to crying even if there was no reason to, even if she hadn't lost anything. You couldn't lose something you'd never had. You just *couldn't*.

And he kept talking.

"I'd love you when you're soft, too. When you need to be soft. And you do, love, you need it. Just on your terms." Spike buried his face in her hair and inhaled. "Let me show you, Buffy. Let me show you how good it can be."

"God, Spike, please don't." She didn't know how much more of this she could take—or how he could manage to break her with nothing when she had nothing of value for him to break. Certainly not her heart. Yet that pain was still there, throbbing and insistent, a different sort from any she'd felt before. That hollow sensation like she was grasping at air. Trying to hold onto something that didn't exist. Something that was just vapor.

"You know you need a little monster in your man. I know you know it. I could do that. Be your monster and your man."

"You can't."

"I can. And you know it. You want me to. I feel it." He pulled back just enough to catch her eyes—if she were smart, she would have looked away before they connected. Closed herself off. Blinked. Done anything but meet his gaze and hold. Found herself trapped in this moment with Spike. Spike's eyes and nose and mouth, Spike's eyebrows and cheeks and ears and the smooth perfection of his neck. Spike with his radioactive hair and his unapologetic evil. The same Spike that had stepped out of the shadows one night, clapping and

boasting that he would let her know who he was right before he killed her. The Spike who had kidnapped Angel and sent a bunch of unstoppable assassins after her, who had come to her to save the world because he liked Manchester United, who had blipped in and out of her life until blipping back in for good, who had mocked her after Parker and tried to kill her just a few months back when Riley had his health scare, who had told her death was her gift and that killing his first slayer had been the best night of his life, right after mentioning with a fond grin that he'd fucked Dru hoarse near the girl's corpse. Spike who had always been her enemy but was inside of her now, guiding her toward another orgasm, hard and thick, making her hurt in places Buffy had never hurt before. Telling her he loved her and asking for something she knew he knew she could never give but asking anyway because he was Spike.

And Buffy, somehow fuller than she'd ever been and empty at the same time, cracking down the middle under the weight of the answer he already had to already know.

Also realizing that somewhere beneath all the good reasons, better excuses, memories and knowledge and just plain logic that spelled out the reasons for her argument better than she ever could, was the understanding that he wasn't wrong.

Some part of her did want. Some part of her was curious. Some part of her heard what he was saying and thought *yes, this is what I've been waiting for.*

That was bad enough all on its own. Worse because she knew he saw it. It was that part he was appealing to now. Trying to get to take charge. Push all the other components that made up Buffy aside and give in to the thing she knew she couldn't have.

"Let me," he whispered, looking into her eyes as she moved on his cock, boldly himself. Boldly Spike. "Christ, Buffy, let me love you."

Then he swooped forward and touched his mouth to hers, and all that pressure coalesced, exploded, and took her along with it into an orgasm that was as cerebral as it was physical. She whimpered into his kiss, arms crushed around his neck to bring him into her, rolling her hips and clenching her pussy around him, wet and aching the way she'd never ached, trembling from the inside out, it seemed, and shooting

again into that impossible stratosphere way beyond the realms she'd reached before. And the world was turning, and her with it, and then she was on her back. Spike above her, panting, the gleam in his eyes almost manic.

"I know when you need the man," he told her between breaths, then the bones in his face shifted, blue melting into gold, and his lips curled around his fangs. "Also know when you need the monster. You live in both worlds. You need someone who can do that with you. Go to the places you go. That could be me, if you let it."

He rolled his hips, dragging his cock back by inches, and this was it. Their time was almost up. In minutes, maybe seconds, the timer would go off and the hour would be over. The world out there shifted, changed, and if the magic took, safer. But there would always be this, too. There would be Spike and the things he'd said, the things she'd said, the things she couldn't unknow, the love and the desperation and the hunger and the begging. There would be the memory of Spike at the end of what she'd guess was one of the longer hours of his life, finally unleashed, pounding into her so hard she worried the mattress would give. The sounds from before, wet and guttural and flesh on flesh, now all she could hear. As though he had blood that could race and a heart that could beat, and she was inside of it. Inside of *him*, just as much as he was her.

"Let me, Buffy," he rasped around his fangs. It was still there—the love. It hadn't gone away when the demon had come out. She saw it now and wondered how it was she hadn't always seen it, for in that moment she would swear it had always been there. "Give me a chance. Let me show you."

She didn't have an answer for him. All she had was his name. "Spike."

"God, let me..." He pumped his hips once, twice more, then buried his face in her neck. She felt the rumble of his growl against her skin, the corresponding flicker of alarm—her body's warning of a dangerous predator—felt the way she tightened around his cock with muscles that might be more than just sore, might actually hurt, but still with that underlying current of something that made the hurt worth it.

"Let me," he whispered again. She didn't know how she heard him

above the smacks of their bodies but she did. Then his fangs were dancing along her skin and her heart was about to explode and she had to hold on just a moment longer. Just a goddamn moment.

The shrill of a timer pierced the air at the same time Spike pierced her neck, and everything changed.

For the first time, she screamed. The sound hoarse and harsh and gritty and true. She screamed and clawed and clenched, scratching at his back, clutching at his head, and she'd swear her cells exploded into stardust. And Spike was moaning and growling at the same time, a sound fed to her skin where he kept pulling mouthfuls of blood into himself. Each drag, each inch of that fabulous pressure zinging straight to her clit so it just kept coming. So *she* just kept coming. Crashing and receding and building and crashing and crashing and Spike thrusting and whimpering and yes, finally, shaking and filling her with him. She felt every throbbing pulse of his cock, every spurt, and all she could think was how much she loved it. Loved the way he shook under her hands, the feel of his muscles shifting beneath his skin, Spike's moans muffled in her throat, and the sensation of giving as he gave. And somewhere outside of herself the timer still wailed, and then his fangs were gone, and she was screaming with the loss, but the scream was lost inside a vibration of pressure that seemed too large to be hers alone. The culmination of magic building and exploding. Of the shifting barriers outside this crypt—the energy she had made with him, that he had coaxed from her, geysering outward. Too much to keep here, just between them. Too much for too many reasons, not the least of which that it was over.

It was over. They were on the other side of the hour. The spell done, for better or worse. And everything she'd known when she'd shown up was different now. Changed in ways that couldn't be unchanged.

An embarrassing whine left her lips when his vampire face shifted back to human, but for the moment, she was too tired to feel shame. Just a shiver and a sigh, and then he was looking, his eyes fuller than they had ever been. And everything was over but it also wasn't, for this was part of that everything. The things he'd said. The questions he'd asked.

The one still there, waiting to be answered.

Let me.

And god help her, she wanted to.

Perhaps Spike saw as much, for he released a shaky breath and pressed his brow to hers a final time. "So how about it, Slayer?"

Buffy let her eyes fall closed, her mind whirling, everything inside falling apart without a place to land. And before she could talk herself out of it, she lifted her head and kissed him. It was brash and impulsive but something she needed all the same. One last kiss. Something that was hers and not the spell's. Something she could take with her. Something she could give him. *All* she could give him. For even though everything was still spinning, the world outside this crypt hadn't changed that much. She knew that. And he did too.

There were vampires and there were slayers. She could wave a white flag from time to time, join forces with evil when the world was at stake, but she couldn't do more than that. She couldn't risk everything.

Especially not her heart.

YOU GOT A PIECE OF ME AND HONESTLY

THE GOOD NEWS WAS EVERYTHING HAD GONE OFF WITHOUT A hitch, thank god, for she thought there was a decent chance she would have just started screaming and never stopped if it all turned out to be for nothing. But no, Buffy arrived at Giles's place to the news that the Council had reached out to inquire about the seismic and supernaturally significant burst of energy that had tripped all their cosmic alarm bells. Apparently, the Council had ways of tracking mystical power surges and could predict most of them based on other portents and historical data like a bunch of paranormal meteorologists.

Giles explained—studying the wall, the ceiling, the floor, his own hands, anything to keep from looking at Buffy directly—that the Council had confirmed for the first time since its inception that the reality they called home appeared “untainted.” Meaning home to only the sort of creatures who were supposed to be here, whose presence was natural and not the result of a break between worlds.

“They inquired if we had stumbled across something in the texts they provided on Glory,” he said while standing in the kitchen and feverishly stirring the cup of tea he'd just brewed for himself. “I confirmed we found a spell that seemed promising and had set about completing the steps necessary to see it fulfilled. Unfortunately, Buffy,

I will need to tell them everything. I haven't yet, but seeing as you had me reinstated, I am beholden to certain—"

"I got it," Buffy retorted, trying to ignore the heat in her cheeks and the hurt in her heart at the way Giles refused to look at her. She wasn't exactly surprised—he was the only one who knew all the steps she'd taken to secure their victory—but it didn't seem fair. She'd hardly wanted to go boink Spike for an hour, and she certainly hadn't wanted all the baggage that came with it.

"I have promised to deliver a full report by the end of the week," Giles said, still addressing his tea. Then he paused, his jaw firm as though he were steeling himself, and looked up at last. "They will want to know what became of Spike. What should I tell them?"

"What do you mean?"

"You bargained with a dangerous creature and deactivated the very device that has ensured our safety for the last year. I believe the Council will understand and even commend the sacrifice you made on behalf of the world—"

Yeah, that seemed likely.

"—but they will likely request reassurance that a known slayer killer was dispatched before he could do any further damage."

Buffy's throat grew tight and her mind—stupid thing that it was—wasted no time in dragging her back to the crypt. To the loud silence that had blasted her ears as she'd pulled her clothes back on. The awareness of semen dripping out of her as she moved, the sore slickness between her legs, the damn near magnetic pull of Spike's gaze that she had somehow resisted because she'd had to. Her hands had shaken and her legs had trembled and for an empty person, she'd been really full. Her brain at war with itself, her body begging for just a little respite before she had to go back to the world above. The dangerous temptation to crawl back into bed and crash against both mattress and vampire, succumb to her exhaustion and—yes—that sense of extreme physical satisfaction she'd only experienced once or twice before, and never as she had with him.

But she hadn't crashed. She'd known better. Known Giles would expect her soon, and if she didn't show, he'd go looking for her. Likely heavily armed. Discovering her entangled in Spike's bed would do little

more than ensure someone would get hurt, and she hadn't wanted to risk it. So instead, she'd limped her way to Revello Drive. Dragged herself into the shower where she'd stood under the spray until the water had run cold before finally grabbing the soap and going about the business of scrubbing him off her. She'd promised herself a long soak in the tub after she got home from the expected debrief.

Which brought her to now. Giles telling her the spell had been a success. Giles having trouble looking at her. Giles asking her if Spike was still alive or if she'd killed the vampire who had helped her save the world on her way out the door.

"He's alive," she said, trying not to wince at how scratchy her voice was. Trying not to consider the reason why it was scratchy in the first place. Failing on both fronts because, well, why not. "He told me he wouldn't hurt anyone."

Giles didn't respond at first, but he didn't have to. What he thought was all over his face. He was still looking at her, too, so she saw all of it. "He told you he wouldn't hurt anyone."

"I know," she said, dropping her shoulders.

"And you...believe him?"

Buffy pressed her lips together, curling her hands into fists. The fact that he was keeping his voice all tempered and even somehow made everything worse. She'd feel better if he yelled. At least then she'd feel justified in responding in kind. Venting some of the jumbled mess that made up her thoughts at the moment.

"I don't know if I believe him. It... It wasn't like I thought it would be."

At that, Giles held up a hand. "Buffy, I know we typically do a thorough review of the actions taken or decisions made in the service of protecting the world, and most of the time, this is a needed step in the process. What you did today is one of the few exceptions."

"Are you completely disgusted with me?"

"No," he said much too quickly. To his credit, though, he seemed to hear himself, for he pulled a face and shook his head. "No," he said again, this time with something like actual tenderness. "Of course not, Buffy. Please forgive me. It's just... They prepare us for quite a lot. Us, in this instance, being those who become watchers. What they do not

prepare us for, we are able to infer well enough. Suffice it to say, nothing has quite prepared me for a circumstance quite like this one.”

“You mean you never read a chapter on what to do when your slayer has to fuck a vampire to save the world?”

A light blush touched Giles’s cheeks. “Surprisingly no, now that you mention it.”

“Kinda figured. It’s okay.” Buffy blew out a breath and wandered over toward the couch. “It’s not like *I* know what to say, either. And if Spike’s a problem after this, I’ll handle it. You know I will.”

“I do,” he replied. She heard how much he meant it, the faith he had in her to do what she needed when called to the task. She also heard the question he wasn’t asking—the one about why she’d left it to chance. And she would have to answer it eventually. Probably tomorrow, once Giles had completely gotten over the weird and started looking at what she’d done as any other tactic in world savage.

Would that it could be just as easy for her, but Buffy wasn’t holding her breath. Her world had shifted dramatically, and it would take a lot of time to shift back.

“I think we can leave the discussion here for today,” Giles told her a moment later. “I imagine you are quite...”

But he seemed to realize there wasn’t a safe way to end that sentence and instead let it dangle, unfinished. Buffy got the hint loud and clear, though, and pulled herself to her feet. Truth was she was indeed *quite* fill-in-the-adjective and had exceeded the amount of energy she could devote to the subject. With any luck, Giles would give her a few days before requesting more information. Or just skip the request and do some creative-but-gross writing to fill in any blanks. It seemed pretty straightforward to her, but hey, what did she know? This was the same man who had later admitted to hounding her about a nonexistent spell just so she’d share the details about the last moments she’d spent with Angel before sending him to hell.

That had been killing a vampire, though. Not screwing one.

As though he heard the thought, Giles cleared his throat before she’d made it all the way to the door. “You did a good thing, Buffy. No matter the steps you had to take in order to see it realized. I hope you understand that. You defeated a god without lifting a finger—”

She didn't know about that. Fingers had definitely been involved.

"—not to mention ridding the world of any number of dimensional interlopers. You've accomplished what few slayers ever could. I am very proud of you."

Well, at least one of them was. Buffy nodded and helped herself the rest of the way out of the townhome, then set out back to Revello Drive. No patrolling tonight. If Giles was to be believed, she'd more than done her fair share of eradicating evil creatures from this plane of existence. She was owed a hot soak, some greasy takeout, and a night spent camped firmly in front of the television.

Whatever she could do to keep her mind occupied on things that weren't the vampire she'd left behind, the things he'd said, or how she would react the next time they were face-to-face.

Though she didn't like her odds.



THE BEST FIGHTS took at least a couple of days to walk off, assuming no major injury. It was no surprise, then, that day three was the first one Buffy greeted without feeling an echo of pain between her legs, and the muscles that had protested even the smallest movements finally started responding to her brain's commands without a physical reminder of the hour she'd spent in Spike's bed. If only the reminders that took place between her ears were as easy to quiet.

But, of course, that would mean giving Buffy a break.

Buffy never got breaks. Buffy got insane spells to perform with her mortal enemy that made her first compromise everything she thought or felt about herself as a person then defy everything she'd ever thought or felt about...well, pretty much everything else. Buffy got the memories of what it had been like to watch someone she'd always considered strong and formidable fall apart the second he realized that not answering him was her way of answering him.

That had been the worst. Opening her eyes just in time to see him understand. The pain that he hadn't been quick enough to catch before it flashed across his face. Then the bittersweet sensation of him moving inside of her again, pulling his cock out of her and leaving her

emptier than she could ever remember being. A sort of empty that hurt, as though he'd taken a part of her with him.

Three days later, Buffy still wondered if he hadn't.

Everything else had gone back to the status quo. Immediate rebound. Giles let her decide how she wanted to approach telling the others why they were suddenly without a boss Big Bad to fight, though Buffy felt hurried to that explanation when an anxious Willow asked if everything had gone well with the spell they'd worked.

"What spell?" Xander asked, abruptly breaking away from the conversation he was having with Anya and leaving her looking rather put out. "You guys did a spell?"

Buffy shifted in her seat and did her best not to tug on her sweater. Her turtleneck, to be precise, as the mark left from Spike's fangs would have definitely raised a question or twenty. The most she could do was hope that neither Willow nor Tara said anything too incriminating.

Which, naturally, was hoping for too much.

"I don't know, we just got a piece of it," Willow replied. "It needed to be performed at a certain time and Buffy had something to do. Spike, too. But it all worked great! At least on our end."

Xander did the expected wiggling—accompanied by shouts and demands for clarification—while Anya went back to counting the money accrued from the day's Magic Box shoppers and Buffy tried to maintain a decent poker face. Something she knew she didn't have. She performed some very sloppy side-stepping of the spell's particulars that, thankfully, were forgotten courtesy of the punchline that Glory was no longer an issue.

"Whoa," Xander intoned, all slack-jawed, before turning to Willow. "You did a spell to beat a god?"

"It was a group effort!" Willow rushed to clarify. "Like I said, Buffy did the actual work. She had this ritual to complete that had steps that, when complete, would generate the right kind of energy. We used that to cast the spell. Believe me, if it hadn't been for Buffy, there would've been no way to cast it."

"Uh huh. And this spell made it so Buffy was invincible?"

"No. It essentially evicted any demon or entity that didn't belong in this dimension."

At that, Anya stopped counting her money and looked up, blinking. "You did what?"

And Giles, thankfully, stepped in at that point, explained that the aim of the spell was to purify the dimension by expelling interlopers back to their world of origin. That since Glory was definitely not of this particular dimension, she would have been among those given a fast pass back to whatever hellhole had created her. All verified through the Watchers Council and their super shady but somehow accurate magic-o-meters and the afternoon Buffy had spent hitting up the homes and complexes near the place where she'd killed the demon that had come so close to carrying Dawn's secret back to Glory.

And that was another thing. Dawn. Now with Glory out of the picture, there was no need to upend Dawn's entire life—either directly, by telling her, or indirectly, by telling the others. She could just be what she always had been in Buffy's and everyone else's memory. No terrible burden placed upon her, just a lease on life she hadn't known she'd been missing in the first place.

That was what Buffy was thinking about, at least, before Anya burst her bubble.

"You sent every creature that doesn't belong in this dimension back to its home world?" She looked shocked. "Have you turned evil?"

"Ahn!" Xander yelped.

"I'm just asking."

"Well, *why* would you ask that?"

"Because there are a number of demons who escaped to this dimension as a refuge from horrors from their home world," she replied with the same characteristic bluntness that Buffy had come to expect. "Survivors of things most of you couldn't imagine. Some entire ethnic groups have sought sanctuary here to escape genocides. If Buffy sent *all* non-native creatures back with this spell, then she almost certainly condemned a good number of them to death. Well, if they're lucky and get to the dying part first. I'm willing to bet many will be tortured for having fled in the first place."

None of that had been in the fine print. Buffy turned back to Giles, whose expression was studiously fixed on a text she'd been certain hadn't been open a moment earlier.

"What?" she barked. "You knew about this?"

"I considered it, yes."

"And never mentioned it?"

"To rid the world of Glory, it was an acceptable trade."

Buffy's stomach dropped, but she didn't respond. Wasn't certain of where to begin, or even entirely what she thought about what she'd learned, just that it seemed wrong. The sort of wrong Giles had to have known was wrong or he would have told her before the damage had been done.

But maybe he was right. Maybe this was a bigger-picture type thing. She'd never know unless they figured out what Glory's ultimate plan had been—why the Key had been created, why it had been hidden, and what would have become of it had Glory not gotten booted back to the pit she'd crawled out of. And Buffy wanted to figure that out, wanted to know what exactly she had condemned other, possibly hundreds, maybe even thousands, of demons to prevent from taking place.

She told Giles that and he nodded, and Xander brought up the possibility of getting together for a post-victory party as was tradition.

"Or we could all go crash at Buffy's and let the First Slayer try to kill us all in our dreams again," he added. "But that's so last year."

Buffy agreed because what else was there? Unless some other Big Bad decided to make a debut, odds seemed good that she had averted the usual springtime scramble to save the world. Granted, there was plenty of time for the appearance of another Big Bad—hell, it was barely February. The first February she could remember spending in Sunnydale without doom looming on the horizon. She might not have a date for Valentine's Day, but at least she didn't have a psycho ex-boyfriend running around out there leaving her love notes with a body count or an evil twin conspiring with local megalomaniacs or a Frankenstein-reject piecing together new horrors from the body parts of slain demons.

No, instead she had the look on Spike's face, the echo of all the things he'd told her—the questions he'd asked, the feelings he'd invoked. She had that and the stupid ache in her chest, like her heart had been bruised, and she knew damn well that it hadn't. Things

hadn't gone the way she'd thought they would, but that didn't mean anything.

Nor did the fact that, if push came to shove, she wasn't really in a celebratory mood. Not when winning felt so much like losing or that the cost had been higher than she'd realized in the start. That possibly, even now that she'd paid it, she still didn't know exactly what it was that she had lost.

Plus, if she said no, Xander might ask why.

So Buffy would run home and grab her boogie shoes, prepare to fake smile her way through a night with the gang.

And if she was very lucky, maybe she'd be able to convince herself that the demons she'd condemned had deserved it. Perhaps find her way back to the comfortable black-and-white that had defined her life before all these confusing colors had shouldered their way into the picture.

Most of all, maybe she'd get her mind to stop venturing back to the graveyard or the vampire whose heart she'd broken.

No harm in trying.



HER MOTHER THOUGHT she was in love, which was completely bogus. Completely. Buffy might be a lot of things at the moment but *in love* wasn't one of them. That Spike hadn't been far from her thoughts didn't mean anything except he was a part of her life, a not-small part, and he'd helped her save the world for the second time. And unlike their first truce, *help* had involved an hour of sex and a lot of uncomfortable revelations she couldn't quite get out of her mind.

But the thought was there. Had been as she'd tried and rejected outfit after outfit, debating the virtues of baring her neck with its fresh vampire bite around her friends or going with another tried-and-true turtleneck to spare her an evening of uncomfortable questions. Now that the hard part was done—the conversation with Giles and the gang debrief—Buffy had nothing else to occupy her mind to keep the Spike-shaped thoughts at bay.

And once those thoughts had started, there had been no stopping

them. Just a constant bombardment of memories and whispered promises, questions she hadn't been able to entertain, let alone answer. The phantom feel of his hands and mouth and...other parts, especially when she leaned a certain way, turned her head just so, or caught a look of herself in the mirror before popping in the shower. Things she knew she shouldn't give any time because, well, they could lead nowhere good, but when had knowing that ever stopped her in the past?

The fact that she was even asking herself that question was worrisome. And what was worse, she knew it.

Nothing changed the fact, though, that the most beautiful thing she'd ever heard anyone say to her had come from the lips of a demon. That being with him, watching him as he'd described how he saw her, had made her feel exposed in a frightening but also kind of wonderful way. She hadn't realized how much of herself she kept guarded until he'd stripped her of that guard, and she wasn't even sure he'd been aware he was doing it. Riley had tried to get close and she'd thought she'd let him in—thought there weren't depths of Buffy he hadn't explored, much less seen, and that the glimpse she'd given him had ultimately been what was too much. Not monster enough for a vampire, not woman enough for a man. Constantly straddling two worlds but welcome in neither, when push came to shove. Always on the outside, doing what she could so her friends could find their people and start their families and live their lives. Lives Buffy would touch but always, in some way, never see from the inside.

She didn't know what it meant that someone soulless saw her as no one else did. Not just her, but the Buffy she wanted to be. The Buffy she hoped she was. The Buffy she'd been afraid she was losing sight of in the midst of juggling expectations, worries, and disappointments. Becoming more withdrawn from the world she was duty-bound to protect.

And it wasn't just now, either. Spike had always seen her. Always cut through the bullshit she'd tried to sell herself and others. Always told her the absolute truth even and especially when she wished he'd keep his mouth shut. Didn't matter what it was about. Angel. Riley. Dawn. Her friends. The possibility of her own death. Spike forced her to confront what was real rather than the lies she tried to wrap herself

inside as only he could, and she relied on that almost as much as she resented it. That was why he lived perpetually under her skin and had from the start.

Also why she was drawn to him. Why it had to be him.

Why he was in her thoughts even now, after she'd settled on an outfit and headed out to the Bronze to shake her groove thing and celebrate that the world would keep spinning another day. No matter how far down she tried to push him, Spike kept clawing his way back to the surface. Spike and his promise to change. His vow to be good. The earnest way he'd spoken, how eager he'd been to give up parts of himself for her, the way she was so often asked to give up parts of herself for the world. It was so much she wasn't sure she could trust him to know exactly what he was saying, but at the same time there were few people who seemed to know themselves better than Spike did.

And wondering if she didn't have feelings of her own. If maybe she hadn't had feelings for a while, confused and muddled and contradictory, for she knew he annoyed the crap out of her but she also knew she admired the way he fought. Valued the way he challenged her. Enjoyed the thrill that raced down her spine every time they clashed because she was addicted to the darkness. That thing Dracula had stirred to life in her in the fall, the primal pieces of *slayer* that were never truly satisfied. The bits of her that scared her shitless but drew her in deeper because she couldn't look away. There was more to Buffy than Slayer, but there was more to her than normal-girl too. And that mattered. It mattered a whole damn lot.

Add to the fact that she knew she wouldn't be thinking about him or this at all if she didn't feel anything, and Buffy could maybe understand what her mother had seen earlier.

Spike had complicated something that should have been simple, straightforward. She didn't want to feel any of this but here she was anyway. The others greeted her with smiles and applause and hugs and compliments on the outfit—she'd chosen something light and strappy, though had caved at the last minute and added a scarf around her neck to conceal the bite marks. Xander offered to get the first round of drinks and then Willow's favorite song came bursting through the

speakers and the couples coupled off as Buffy had known they would, leaving her at the table with a strong urge to drain each of the five glasses they had left behind.

Eventually, Tara noticed that she wasn't partying and wandered over to make sure everything was all right. It was, Buffy assured her. She was just thinking thinky thoughts and not looking to add anyone to her dance card just yet, despite the few guys who had come by to let her know they were interested. She didn't say anything about the way the mark on her neck had twinged each time she'd considered slipping her hand into someone else's, or the relief that washed over her once the hint was taken and she was left on her own again. Instead, Buffy explained that she was thinking about how all these previously dead-end possibilities had opened up to her again. She could move back to campus. Pick up the pieces of her life that she'd been forced to drop. And Tara nodded her enthusiasm, told her how nice it must be to have that freedom, and Buffy nodded in return, all the while trying not to think about how Spike had helped give her that too, at least for a while. Until the next Big Bad rolled into town and she was forced to do this all over again.

And how, if she wanted him, he'd be there to fight with her. Annoying and evil and constantly under her skin, but also making her feel things that she didn't hate. Things she might actually like.

"Hey guys!" Willow practically crashed against the table, giggling and throwing an arm around Tara. "What's going on? Is Buffy still being all mopey. I thought this was a party!"

"I'm not mopey," Buffy argued, straightening her shoulders and trying very much not to feel like she'd just been caught doing something she shouldn't. "I guess I'm just more worn out than I thought by all this. Worn out and extra pensive."

"We were just talking about what Buffy could do now that Glory is handled and her mom is better," Tara explained. "Maybe move back to campus?"

"That would be rad!" Willow agreed before frowning. "Though it might be better to wait until fall semester, right? I know we've only been back in session for a few weeks, but the roommate situation might be dire."

"Oh, I'll definitely wait," Buffy agreed. She wasn't eager to rush into anything just yet. "Moving is kind of the opposite of fun, and I am all about having fun before I completely forget what it feels like. And there's some other stuff I think I want to do."

"Oooh, like what?"

"Well, Giles and I were heavy in training mode. Learning more about the mystery that is me." She tried for a smile. "And it wouldn't hurt to add other demons to the list, I guess. There's so much I don't know and honestly, at this point, it's kind of embarrassing that I don't."

"Is it about what Anya said?" Willow made the same face she always made when slightly drunk and discussing Anya. It was exactly like the face she'd only recently stopped making when sober, if not a little more exaggerated. "I was so mad at her for that. It's not like it's your job."

"You're right," Buffy replied flatly. "Demons? Not my job."

She'd thought her friend might be a little too tipsy to follow the sarcasm. She'd been wrong. "You know what I mean, though!" Willow protested, sitting hard on one of the stools. "I think it's cool that you want to learn, but it's unfair that she expected you to know what demons came here from where? Since when has that been a part of the Slayer handbook?"

"I don't know. Giles never gave me the handbook."

"I wouldn't take it too hard, Buffy," Tara said kindly as Willow helped herself onto the stool beside her. "It sounds like Mr. Giles knew exactly what that spell would do and went through with it anyway. Anya has a unique perspective on this, too. With her history."

"Her definition of a harmless demon might be a breed that traffics in baby skins," Willow agreed.

Tara's eyes widened. "No, she wouldn't think that, would she?"

"I'm just saying I wouldn't put it past her. You remember her ex, right?" And now Willow puffed up and pulled an exaggerated grotesque face. "Just saying, I don't know that anything she tells us can be taken minus at least one grain of salt. And I'm not talking teeny grain. Big, massive, makes-you-choke grain."

Tara placed a hand over hers and squeezed. "Be nice, sweetie."

"I'm always nice." Willow poked out her lower lip but was grinning

again in seconds. Buffy wondered vaguely how many drinks she'd had on the dance floor, as the first round was still here untouched on the table.

As though hearing the thought—and god, what a terrifying prospect—Willow inclined her head toward Buffy. “That spell, by the way, was a doozy. It’s been three days and I’m still feeling kinda loopy.”

Buffy frowned and glanced at Tara. “Is that normal?”

“The bigger the magic, the more it takes out of you,” Tara replied, running her fingers almost absently up Willow’s wrist until her hand was stretching along her shoulders to pull her into a half embrace. “Willow had to do most of it. The magic, I mean. She’s shot right past me these last few months power-wise.”

“That’s not true,” Willow said, though she had all but folded herself into Tara, suddenly looking incredibly sleepy for someone who had been all perky just a second ago. “I could never have done the spell without you, baby. That much power?” She blinked slowly, then grinned when she met Buffy’s gaze. “It was a good spell. Like—it felt good doing it. Just way with the tired.”

“We had to tap into whatever you were doing when the energy hit its peak,” Tara explained. “And yeah, it was better that there were two of us.”

“It was also just a neat thing to share, really. The best kind of magic can be really intense. And intense things are better when you have someone you love with you.” Willow nuzzled Tara’s neck with a drunk little grin, then all at once seemed to remember where she was and pulled herself upright again. “Oh, whoa, sorry about that. Another side-effect of the spell is that I’ve been way with the PDA.”

Buffy worked her throat and let out a long breath. She had no idea how magic worked most of the time, having done very little of it herself, but she got that disorientation. The spell she’d done to determine if there was anything mystically wrong with her mother had taken a lot out of her, and on the grand scale of wonkiness, that had been minimal. A spell that had marathon sex as a main ingredient was more than she wanted to consider. Except now, of course, she was considering it. Wondering if the reason the spell had felt so good was

because of what she and Spike had done to generate the energy, and trying to decide how gross it was if that was the case.

Conflicted feelings aside, though, Buffy couldn't help but think that Willow had a point. Intense experiences were better when they were shared. Not even just the good things, but the scary things too. There had been so many times over the last few months where she'd been in the middle of a bad feeling and stranded on the island of Buffy, left with nothing to hold onto. Riley never there when it was safe to not be strong anymore, and how she'd never clocked his absence because she was used to dealing with life's intensities on her own. Hell, even when it had been Angel, Angel had so frequently been the source of sadness or pain, rarely someone she could count on to shoulder whatever she was going through. Riley was supposed to have been the antithesis of that experience but somehow she'd turned him into a second verse, same as the first.

And though it was beyond insane, Buffy's brain would not be deterred in putting Spike in that position. Then remembering, almost against her will, how he had sat with her, angry as he had been, after she'd learned that her mother was going to be hospitalized for observation. Not asking her to explain. Not telling her it was okay. Not encouraging her to share more than she had to give at the moment, either because he'd known she'd tell him to get lost or because he'd just known...her.

That couldn't be right.

Except she knew it was. She'd already told herself as much. Spike was the person in her life who saw everything.

"You look like you're having thinky thoughts," Willow said. "Is everything okay?"

Buffy shook her head to clear said thinky thoughts away and forced a smile. "Yeah. Just... It must be nice. Doing couple things together like that. Magic stuff."

"Oh, yeah, it's the best!" Willow beamed and regarded Tara with an adoring smile. "It's like oooh, I get to do my favorite hobby with my favorite person. How lucky am I?" There was a pause, then her face fell and her eyes went wide. "Oh god, I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry, Buffy. I know the breakup has been rough but Riley leaving... Well,

that just means he wasn't the right person, right? A-and dating on the Hellmouth, not easy. But there's someone out there for you. I know there is. You're, like, the best person I know! The right guy will come along."

Buffy tried for a smile that felt more like a wince—probably looked like one, too, if Willow's expression was anything to judge by. "I've thought I've had the right one before," she said, choosing her words carefully. "Granted, Riley and I clashed a lot at the start."

"And you didn't even really want to go out with him," Willow added. "After you found out about the demon hunting."

"Which you thought was stupid."

"Not stupid, just...maybe a little shortsighted? I mean, if you're with someone, they're going to have to know all your parts, right? The parts you keep from everyone else? Even me and Xander?" She frowned a little as though displeased by the prospect, no matter that she was the one who had brought it up, then shook her head and glanced at Tara again. "But there's being with friends and being with your person, right? It's different. They see you when you're all...not coiffed and pretty."

"You're always pretty," Tara said with a shy grin.

"But, no, you know what I mean. Just that you should maybe not try to keep the slayage part away from the dating part."

Buffy nodded and lowered her gaze to her drink. Dating another vampire would definitely keep the slayage part front and center, so check. But Willow wasn't wrong—she was just describing things Buffy had never had, which hey, there's a shock to the system. It was true, though. Not with Riley, whom she'd thought she'd shared everything with and had...to a degree. Not the slayage. Not the loneliness or the part of her that gravitated toward the dark. She'd gone on runs through the cemeteries chasing something that he couldn't give her, and she wasn't sure he'd ever known about that. About that burning in her chest that sometimes needed to be embraced before it quieted for a night. And part of it had been on her, probably, convinced that he couldn't understand those parts of her because he was always outside of that world. The same way Xander and Willow were, only Willow

had the magicks and Xander had Anya. Riley's only tether had been Buffy.

And weren't there things she kept from Xander and Willow, anyway? Things they couldn't understand despite telling her they did? Despite claiming that they were as much in the fight as she was, there was always that invisible line that only Buffy could cross. The Chosen One, the only person in her circle that couldn't walk away from a life hunting monsters. Not really. She'd quit without quitting but that didn't make her any less the Slayer. It didn't stop the wild calling inside her or keep the monsters at bay. Nothing about her existence was a choice, and to a degree, no matter how hard they tried or how much they loved her, that was something her friends, even Giles, would never understand.

But Spike did. Spike lived in this world as much as she did. He *was* this world. And he already saw her. Already knew her in that way that was unnerving but complete at the same time. More than Angel had, too, as much as her mind and heart rebelled at the thought, because as much as she'd loved him, Angel had been about the *shoulds* and the *musts* and all the things Buffy already knew. Throwing a tantrum, crying about how unfair it was, lamenting her lack of choice in the most significant parts of her life—he'd hear that, yes, but destiny was still waiting and there was still evil to fight and she was the only one around to answer the call. Service above self and all that, which was noble and great, but would have been a lot nobler and greater if she hadn't been forced into it.

Strange as it was, Spike got that. That and all the other parts of being the Slayer that were less than glamorous. The close and personal relationship with death and what it did to her. How it warped her thinking and scared her as much as it enticed her, despite however much she wanted to live. And the answer was a lot. She wouldn't have gone through with the spell if that weren't the case.

"Buffy?" Willow was frowning extra hard, peering closely at her face the way characters did in movies when wondering if a friend had gone off the deep end. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Sorry I keep doing that. Like you said, with the thinky thoughts. When you're right, you're right."

"I'm not making you think anything bad, am I? Because that goes against the spirit of tonight."

"Nothing bad," Buffy assured her, and it was the truth. Her thoughts might be radical and terrifying and almost certain to cause ripples among her friends should she act on them, but they were not bad thoughts. Just different. "I think I might be having...feelings. Unexpected feelings. For someone. And just now realizing it."

At that, all signs of distress melted away from Willow's face and she let out an excited squeal. "Really? Oh, that's great! Why didn't you say anything? Is it someone I know? Can I meet him? Or have I already met him? Is it that cute doctor from the hospital? Or are you still at that kinda-secret stage that's all exciting and—"

"Sweetie," Tara said, "breathe?"

Willow nodded and inhaled like she'd decided to start hoarding oxygen. "It's just so exciting! I didn't even know Buffy was having lusty thoughts about anyone."

"I really wasn't until very recently," she replied, both heartened by her friend's response and all the more anxious because of it. "I'm still not sure, though. It's not... It's different than before. I'm kinda on edge."

"Why edge? No edge!"

"Well...when you two started dating"—Buffy looked between Willow and Tara—"there was...edge, right? I mean, I don't want to know about—that's not what I'm asking. More just you were worried. While you were figuring stuff out?"

Willow's frown returned only to be blown into a look of wide-eyed wonder. "Oh my god... Buffy, you're not...gay too, are you?"

She should have seen that coming. "No—sorry, I am not explaining this right. It's just you were worried about us possibly being judgmental jerks?"

"Maybe but... Okay, yeah, a little. But that wouldn't have stopped me. Nothing would've stopped me from being with the person I love." She met Tara's eyes and grinned. "And it shouldn't you, either. If you're having feelings and you're worried about how the rest of us react? Buffy, it's your life. You should be with who you want to be with, no matter what."

That was it, then. A choice. Her choice. All she had to do was decide whether or not to go for it. And she'd already come this far. Already asked questions that couldn't be unasked. Too much of the cat was out of the bag to begin trying to stuff it back inside.

"What if it's Spike?" Buffy asked in a rush, then sat back and waited for the world to end.

The world, however, did not end. It kept moving forward. Granted, it seemed to have taken the wind out of Willow's sails as it went, but at least Buffy had not started another apocalypse. Or not the sort she had to rush to avert.

It was strange how quiet loud places could be—how the intensity of the music from the stage and the surrounding chatter of lucky non-slayer people could sound like nothing at all.

Then Tara squeezed Willow's hand. "No matter what," she told Buffy. "Even if it's Spike. Right, honey?"

At last, Willow moved. A nod. Short and terse and clearly performative—and she must have sensed that, caught it or herself, for she paused halfway through her encore nods and dropped her shoulders. "Yeah, of course. Even if it's Spike. But don't think I won't have questions."

Buffy watched her for a beat, determined to catch her in a lie, the heaviness in her chest beginning to lift. And before she knew what she meant to do, before she could begin to fathom what the next step might be beyond simply admitting this much to herself, she was slipping off her stool. Body moving without input from brain, something that had been tense and caged inside of her set free. All she understood in that moment was that she needed to be somewhere else. She had a feeling where but wouldn't know for certain until she got there.

"I'll answer all your questions later," she promised, grabbing her purse off the table. "I just... I gotta go."

And so she went.

I KNOW THAT IT'S GONNA TAKE SOME TIME

SPIKE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT HE'D BEEN THINKING. THEN AGAIN, when it came to Buffy, he rarely did. Not like he had a brilliant track record for following through with plans in the first place. The few he'd managed to pull off had been by the skin of his fangs, if not outright accidental, and that went doubly for anything involving the Slayer. And to his credit, he'd known as much. Understood that there would be no going into this with her in a way that didn't end with his heart ripped out of his chest, but he'd still been daft enough to hope. To think that maybe knowing that he was in over his head would help him not lose the little bit of pride he had remaining.

But there had been no accounting for it—for the way it would feel in the moment, Buffy over him, under him, surrounding him, Buffy looking at him with her beautiful Buffy eyes as he made her come apart again and again. How it would hit when he understood that she was feeling something more than his cock, that he was seeing her as so few people ever did. That she was letting him in as deeply as she had.

He'd known better than to fall apart the second she'd kissed him, known not to let those meager defenses he had crumble. He'd known better, and berk that he was, she'd still managed to hurt him when it was over, but only because he'd let himself believe for a few glorious

seconds that things might end differently. That perhaps she did feel something—that there was a sliver of a chance.

Christ, he could hate her for letting him get that far. Only nothing had changed. He still loved her too much to hate her. All the hate he had was reserved for himself.

Not that hate did him any good. Hadn't even helped him consider what his next steps ought to be. Spike had already survived longer than he'd anticipated following that spell, and he supposed he could thank Buffy's big heart for that much. She might not like him but she'd left here loathing him a little less—enough to not put any of those threats she'd shot at him into practice in the days that had passed. Still, he wasn't so daft that he thought it meant anything beyond her being good enough to give him time to do whatever was necessary in packing up the life he'd traded for an hour between her legs. She hadn't been by, and he hadn't crossed her on patrol, either, but that wouldn't last. Eventually, Buffy would need to make sure he'd lived up to his end of things in full, or she really would give him the death he'd spent more than a century evading. And he was pathetic enough he imagined he'd let her. He had no secrets from her anymore—she knew how he felt. Best weapon he could have handed his enemy.

Spike drew in a deep breath and lifted his head to take stock of the meager showing he had of his life, as he did whenever his thoughts took this turn. The crypt was in the same state it had been in the last time—no closer to being packed up or abandoned, with the downstairs in a state of disarray he couldn't bring himself to address for worry that the air that still smelled like her might be disturbed and fade. There wasn't much here that he featured he'd take with him, anyway, in the event he ever made it off his arse to start gathering his things. A few mementos that had traveled with him from continent to continent, those composition notebooks he couldn't seem to stop nicking to fill with terrible verse after terrible verse, the coins that had been on his person the night Dru had found him in that alley—he didn't know why he'd kept those, except he had a hell of a time throwing them out. Maybe because he'd intended to buy something for his mum with those coins and had never gotten around to it. Holding onto them was like holding onto her. Or the

woman she'd been before he'd turned her into something truly monstrous.

But that was worth remembering, too. It wasn't just Buffy who had a history of mucking up his plans—he'd been doing that to himself from the bloody start.

Spike sighed and tipped his head back, fixing his gaze on the stone ceiling above him. None of this changed the fact that he didn't want to leave. Never had. He'd agreed to it when pressed because that was what you did when presented with a choice like the one the Slayer had laid out for him, but he'd never seen himself actually going through with it, and not only because he had fuck all places to go. The fact was that he went where his heart led him, for better or worse, and his heart had done a piss-poor job of keeping him out of Sunnyhell for going on four years now. No reason why it would change just because he'd run his mouth. All cards on the table. If she wanted him gone, she'd have to be the one who did it.

As though in response to the thought, the door to the crypt gave a familiar clank, making him jolt to attention.

Christ, was it now? He'd been waiting but still hadn't been prepared for the actual moment. Not that it mattered, because time marched on and the door was swinging open and she was there, all bouncing golden hair and bright emerald eyes, walking into his space as she had a thousand times before. But this wasn't like those times—it was in a sodding category of its own. He'd never once been a part of this play with the knowledge he had now. The way she looked under those clothes, how she sighed and moaned and arched and squeezed, the wonder in her eyes as he whispered all the things he knew better than to tell her, needing her to know it despite what it meant for him. Her scent always heady, always intoxicating, but intimately familiar now in ways it hadn't been before. And knowing that she knew it too, that she clocked it. Buffy didn't barrel her way fully inside as she normally did, rather stopped short as the door behind her surrendered to the law of motion and began to swing closed again, her eyes finding his without effort.

And for a lifetime, they stood like that. The air around them still except for the music her body made, pounding heart and racing blood and steady breaths. At least he had that—the knowledge that no

matter what she said, she felt something. That whatever came next would not be business as usual for her.

Nice bit of cold comfort, that, but he'd take what he could get.

At length, Spike forced himself to relax and settle back in his chair. "All the same to you, I don't feature spending the night in a sodding staring contest. Wanna tell me what you're doing here?"

That, at least, did snap her out of whatever stupor she'd landed in. He watched as she gathered herself, the way her throat moved when she swallowed. A throat done up with a nice pretty bow, almost as though she were gift-wrapped for him. Entirely like she wanted to hide the place his fangs had found just a few days ago.

Of course she'd hide it. Wouldn't want any of her little chums to know the truth of how the Slayer had bested a god.

Then she was parting her lips, and he was bracing himself for what came next. The explanation, the insult, the threat, the excuse—nothing would have surprised him by this point.

"I thought I'd know what to say when I got here."

Except maybe that.

"That a fact?" Spike replied, doing his best to keep his voice level, uninterested, like he didn't give a hoot what came next. "If you're checkin' up on me to hustle me outta town, you can stuff it. Gave it some thought, and I've decided I'm not going anywhere."

Buffy opened her mouth, closed it, then lifted her eyebrows and crossed her arms, and he didn't like it. The uncertainty that had been all over her face just a second ago had vanished and he had fuck all idea what he'd said to make that happen. "Oh, no?" she replied, all high and mighty. "I thought we had an understanding."

"Yeah, well, understood things a bit differently once you scarpered."

"Your chip doesn't work anymore. I'm supposed to just be okay with you hunting down people?"

Spike closed his eyes, his jaw clenching—all of him clenching—in a way that was all too familiar around her. That *holding on by a sodding thread* feeling. It was too much to hope that she would have heard a word he'd said the other day, much less believed it, and less likely that she would believe him now if he glared at her like he could make her

hemorrhage with his eyes alone. "You don't listen, do you? Not to anything anyone says if you think them beneath you."

"I listen, Spike. You told me you would fight with me if I gave you a chance."

"Said a lot of things."

"I know. I remember. But it was all conditional."

At that, he opened his eyes and sprang to his feet, not knowing he meant to until he was balanced against the stone floor, glaring at her—those eyes, that mouth, that face that haunted him in his dreams and nightmares and every sodding waking second of his life, it seemed. More now than she had before. He'd been inside her but she was inside him too, and he couldn't get her out. No matter what he tried or how hard he tried it.

"That's not the way love works," he practically seethed. She'd been here for less than a minute and he was already on the edge of either screaming or sobbing himself raw. Not enough to break a man's heart, but she had to come by and rubberneck the debris. "I don't just switch off because you decide you're too good to roll around in the dirt unless you got a couple witches gettin' chanty somewhere else."

"You really expect me to believe you'd fight evil, try to be good, even without the carrot that is me?"

"No, I don't, actually. Not that thick." He swallowed. "Not like I got anywhere else to go, though."

"No? The chip is deactivated. Wasn't that why you said you'd stuck around Sunnydale in the first place?"

"Yeah, well, you waited a minute too long to decide to flip the switch on it, so the joke's on me. Never been any good at going against my heart." Also not good at saying things that weren't entirely pathetic when the woman he loved was around, but such was the plight of William the Bloody. Always had been. "You want to have a go, love, you know I'll give you a fight. I'm well aware of what I'm riskin' by staying put. But if that's not why you're here, how's about you toddle off until you decide you're ready to dance."

But Buffy didn't toddle. She didn't smirk, either, or start poking fun, or pull out any of the other tried and true methods he might have expected. Rather, the crease above her brow faded, and her arms fell to

her sides. "I thought dancing was all we'd ever done. Didn't you say that to me?"

"Yeah," he replied, drawing the word out, confused. "Remember you didn't take to hearin' it all that well."

"I don't take to a lot of true things all that well the first time I hear them. Sometimes it's just... I have to think. And that's what I did. Why I'm here, anyway." She wet her lips and stepped forward, toward him, dropping her eyes at the same time. "I found a way to beat a bad guy without it getting all apocalyptic, but I didn't want to do it. I mean, it needed to be done and doing it might have saved the world and all, but it involved doing something that I didn't want to do with someone I didn't want to do it with. Except...except a part of me did."

Well, that was something. "Admitting it now?"

"I admitted it before."

"Suppose you did. Just don't know why you're here now if not to make sure I'm on my way out."

"I just... You told me it would happen. That I would think about you, about being with you, after we did the spell. You were right." She grinned at that, the expression somewhere between amused and frustrated. "Somehow, you're always right. Do you have any idea how annoying that is? Of all people, the one person who gets me is *you*."

That sounded like an insult but oddly didn't feel like one. Slowly, the tension in his shoulders started to loosen. "Benefit of being enemies, I suppose. You learn to know someone you hate."

"You hate me?"

"You know better than that."

"Maybe I need a reminder."

Spike narrowed his eyes, his chest heavy. He might get her—and he thought he did—but at the moment, he had no sodding clue. Hell, Dru at her nuttiest had been easier to understand than Buffy was now. There was what his eyes were telling him, his ears and his nose and all the other parts he'd relied on for more than a century to keep him attuned with the world and all its people, but there was also his head, and everything he knew about her screamed that she was not here, asking him to reassure her that it had been real. Not really saying the things it sounded like she was saying.

But Christ, he'd always gone with his gut. That she was the first person in over a century to make him question that was just another hallmark of how crazy she made him.

"I love you," he said. "I hate that I love you, but I love you."

"You hate that you love me?"

"Stuck being head over for someone who thinks I'm filth? Yeah, Slayer, now that you mention it. If I'd tried half as hard to kill you as I have not to love you, you'd've been in the sodding ground for years now."

He expected something at that—a punch, an eyeroll, one of those bitchy remarks that cut to the quick. But her expression didn't change, and she didn't smart back. Instead, she took a deliberate step forward, and god, she was close now. Close enough he could feel the heat radiating off her body, be enveloped in the orbit that was Buffy Summers, pulled into her gravity, the space he knew so intimately. It was doing a number to his head—*she* was doing a number—but she was still there, and not a stake in sight.

"I changed my mind," she said, keeping her eyes on him. "I don't know what this is, Spike. Or if it will ever be anything more than it is right now, whenever we define it. But I want to try. See if we can... If it can be more. If we can make it to a place where you don't hate that you love me and I don't regret letting you show me what being loved by you is like."

The remaining tension fell away at that. Everything fell away. The floor. The walls. The crypt. His stomach. His heart. It all shot down, but he remained where he was, staring, hearing, not believing. Then slowly feeling that buzz under his skin, that stark awareness of self that kept him grounded when nothing else could. It had been there when he'd woken up months ago, jarred from a dream that had reshaped his entire sodding world. Not a question he asked himself but something he now knew. A piece of information that had been scraping at his brain for months, maybe years, that he hadn't been ready to accept because it would ruin him. On some fundamental level, he'd known that.

It might still ruin him. Probably it would.

But Spike had never let a little thing like pride stand in the way of a bad decision.

And through all that falling, Buffy was there. Reaching out again. Stepping closer. Making it so she was all he saw. "It's not too late, is it? You're kinda freaking me out with the whole *not talking* thing. I don't know if you've ever been quiet this long."

At that, a smile tugged on his lips. "Just waiting, I suppose."

"Waiting? For what?"

"Dreams like this, I usually wake up right about now."

She breathed a breath that made the air shake. "I've dreamed about you, too, you know. For a while now."

"Is that right?"

"First time"—she stepped closer, not taking her eyes off him—"it really wiggled me out."

"Just the first time?"

"I guess I got used to them after that." Another step. "Especially after Willow's little 'Spike and Buffy should make out' spell. They got all...technicolory." And another, and suddenly she was so close he could feel her breath on his lips. Close enough he knew she could feel *him*—all of him. The new tension in his body, the delicious sort that built and strengthened before it snapped, the hard ridge of his cock pressing against his zipper. She could feel him and she wasn't running. Rather wetting her lips, dropping her gaze to his own, murmuring softly, "They were a little...intense after that."

"Wouldn't mind hearin' more," Spike replied, and then his hands were on her, starting at her wrists, gliding up her arms and over her shoulders, along the sides of her neck so he could pull off the scarf concealing the bite. He wanted to feel that too, explore the grooves left by his fangs. Show her how much fun it could be when a man knew how to pay those marks proper respect. But first, and he was such a ninny, but he had to do it. Had to say it before he let himself go. "Be sure, love. No spell to perform. No magic to blame. I kiss you and it's just us here, you with me because you want to be. Gonna hold you to that."

"Then get to holding already."

Spike cupped the back of her neck and pulled her to him, crashing

his mouth over hers with a growl that seemed to make the whole bloody crypt shake. And Buffy fell into him, her arms going around his neck, her breasts against his chest, her lips in motion, feeding him those kisses that he'd been certain he was staring down an eternity without. But no, she was here, fighting his tongue with hers, making the little sounds that drove him batty, pushing when he pulled. And he was so light he could have laughed or wept, the cold place in his chest suddenly burning with warmth. He had no idea what had happened to change her mind, what had brought her to him tonight, and he was half-terrified she might yank away at any moment, but she didn't. The flesh under his fingers was hot and alive and real, the scent in his nostrils was *Buffy*, as was the taste in his mouth, the hard twinge in his chest where his inner predator warned *slayer*; and all the things that had been true before. All the things that mattered, at least. No candles fixed in a certain way, no timer, no rules. Just her. Just *them*.

Buffy broke away from his kiss just long enough to pant, "Downstairs?" against his lips, her hands having slipped to tug his tee free. Spike grinned and let her, giddy and lost and found, dragging in air just because it tasted of her, and Christ, she was hot. She was fire. She was liquid perfection and he was parched. And his body must have recognized the craving before the rest of him did, for he shook his head and twisted her around so the green chair was at her back, and then she was in it, falling against the back hard enough the whole thing threatened to topple.

But not yet. Not before he got his taste.

"Spike?" she asked, looking up at him with those doe eyes, all sweet innocence in so many ways. "I thought—"

"You're perfect there," he told her, and lowered himself to his knees. Then he glanced down, realized for the first time that she'd come to him wearing one of her frilly skirts. Better and better. "All of you is perfect. Love the heels."

She shifted as though self-conscious, sending a heavenly waft of slayer musk to his nostrils. "You do?"

He nodded and slid his hands along her calves. "Would love them even more diggin' into my shoulders," he murmured, the fabric of her skirt between his fingers now, inching delicately up her strong legs,

which had started to tremble. Not much but enough to clock, enough to pair with the thump of her pounding heart and the increased intensity of her breaths. "Told you what I wanted, love. The one thing missing from the other day."

"Oh. *Oh.*" Bless her, her eyes went wide and her kiss-swollen lips round, like he'd really taken her by surprise. "You, uhh, painted quite the picture."

"Meant every word." He dropped a kiss on her knee, then higher along her thigh, following the heady aroma of her until he had her skirt bunched around her hips. Would like to get the whole thing off her, but there was something about seeing her just like this, halfway indecent, that he didn't want to sacrifice just yet. Buffy with her quivering legs spread for him, watching him through eyes that were somehow both round and half-hooded, or perhaps that was just dreamlike. Like she couldn't believe where the night had led them any more than he could.

Then there was the matter of her knickers, that scant slip of fabric that was already soaked through at the crotch. He'd gotten to feel her cunt the other day, gotten to see it too, but not at this view, and he'd been serious when he'd told her he wanted to take his time. As much as he relied on scent and sensation, sometimes seeing was believing. Like what he'd seen just a few seconds ago when she'd told him she wanted to try—what she'd said was heaven but the look in her eyes even more so, because that was Buffy. The heart and soul of her, pouring out, giving him what words alone could not. And now he was seeing more, believing more, as he slipped his fingers under the elastic of her panties and truly undressed her for the first time. Then moaned when he brought the knickers to his face after they were free of her, first to sniff, then to taste. Just a quick sample of where her juices had flavored the fabric.

"You smell this good for me, precious?" he asked hoarsely as he tucked her panties into his pocket. That was one pair she was not getting back. "This *wet* for me? You get yourself all worked up knowing your Spike would take care of you once you were here?"

"I didn't need to get myself worked up. You did that."

He grinned, seized her by the hips to pull her closer to the edge of

the cushion. "What about last night? And the night before? Your bed feel extra big? Get lonely in it, Slayer?"

"What do you mean, lonely?"

"I mean..." Spike sucked two fingers into his mouth to wet them, though there was truly no need—she was soaked enough for the both of them. Still, he was nothing if not considerate, as he might have hoped she'd have learned by now, and it made his skin glide extra nice the second he began spreading her open to take that look he'd wanted so long. And she was just as he'd imagined. Pink and swollen, her honey spreading along the back end of her skirt, and his fingers made a pleasant wet sound when he pushed into her. One that went straight to his dick. "Did you play with this pussy while thinkin' of me these last couple nights?"

"I'm not telling you that," she said, clearly going for the same bitchy air that made him want to bite and snog her at the same time. Lucky for him, both options were on the table. Unlucky for her, she didn't quite manage the tone. It came out all breathy, like she was in a battle with herself.

"It's all right, love." Spike grinned, watching the way her pussy molded around him as he pulled his fingers back. "No shame in admitting it."

"I'm not admitting anything."

"No? Then I suppose you'll be all right if I take my time here." He pushed back inside her, fighting a groan when she clenched and tightened. He hadn't been lying when he'd told her he wanted to watch, and she was about to find out just how long he could draw something out when motivated. Now that he had her here, warm and wiggling and without the pretense, burning him hot and bright with hope and happiness and other things that might oneday become familiar, he was determined to make good on everything he'd told her. Perhaps overwhelm her with so much pleasure that if he started to slip in other areas, she wouldn't mind.

Only Spike knew it wasn't that easy. Nothing with Buffy ever would be, and as much as that might come back to bite him in the arse, he couldn't say he'd want it any other way. The fight with her was half the fun. Made everything between them feel earned—feel like he'd actually

won. Even now that she'd come here of her own volition, the tension was still there. The knowledge of the stakes she'd set, the stakes he would have to meet to keep her forever.

They were just getting started, him and her. There was so much to explore. So much to do. So much to show her.

Starting with this. Spike couldn't say for certain, but if any of the plonkers who had shared her bed before had ever spent any decent amount of time worshipping her pussy the way it ought to be worshiped, he'd swallow his own sodding tongue. When she began moving, pushing herself into the thrusts of his fingers, releasing those little whimpers, her agitation was almost thick enough to taste. The sounds erupting off her lips varying between hisses and sighs, frantic little grunts and deep, breathy moans. And then, when he decided he'd gone as long as a man could be expected to go without putting his mouth on her, the first swipe of his tongue had her mewling as though he'd nudged her with a live wire. A cry so close to pain he might've been fooled had she not immediately forked her fingers through his hair—he hadn't gotten around to gelling it tonight, so she had an easy go of it—and dragged him down so his mouth was flush with her cunt.

And maybe it wasn't following the exact script he'd given her, but it was close—close enough, at least. Spike growled into her wet flesh, seizing her by the hip with his free hand to tug her to him. She was whimpering louder, wiggling against his face, drenching his mouth and nose and chin, and he wanted to taste her everywhere at once. Run his tongue between her folds, lick her from her opening to her clit, lap up all that decadent wetness, the part of her that told the absolute truth without hiding, and feel her burning his mouth and his throat, and that's what he did. Long, desperate strokes as she writhed and thrust and gasped his name as though she couldn't decide if she was begging or praying or cursing. Angling toward him in such a way he knew exactly what she was after even if she didn't.

"It's this you want, isn't it, love?" Spike rasped, his lips hovering just over her swollen clit. "Need me to lick you here."

To get his point across, he drew a circle with the pointed end of his tongue, and was rewarded with a sharp inhale and a violent thrust of her hips.

"Yes," Buffy panted, nodding hard. "God, Spike, please, there. Please touch me there."

"Can do a lot more than that," he replied before flattening his tongue against her clit, and Buffy bowed off the chair with a howl, tightening her grip on his hair to hold him where he was. And this part he remembered telling her. How he would lick and flick and play while filling her with his fingers, while she tightened and squeezed and made his aching cock hurt with anticipation. Only he wanted to fuck her with his tongue too, so he pulled away from her clit and slipped his fingers free of her pussy. Buffy whimpered again but didn't object, for she must have known what came next. Remembered what he'd said. She breathed and waited as he danced his hand up her abdomen, between her breasts, along the side of her neck, and he dragged his nose down the seam of her cunt so he could thrust his tongue inside her just at the moment she closed her lips around his fingers. Sucking herself off his skin while he growled and lapped and fucked her with his mouth, trying not to go bloody cross-eyed when she hollowed her cheeks and swirled her own tongue in ways that made his cock ache with envy.

"You're amazing," he whispered into her pussy. "You're amazing, Buffy."

She didn't respond with words, rather scraped her teeth along the pad of his index finger, and that was all he could take. He needed her to lose herself now, needed to taste her orgasm, and she must have needed it too, for she let his fingers fall free of her mouth, nodded when they speared inside her again, and was practically vibrating as he made his way back to her clit and closed his lips around her. She might have whimpered, might have arched, might have said *please*, but he didn't hear it at all, too focused on teasing her with his tongue one last time before sucking hard.

And Buffy detonated in his mouth. She spasmed and clenched and drenched, and it was better than he could have imagined. The way she moved and bucked, the little whimpers she let loose, how hot she was and how she drowned him in it. If he hadn't known before that he was damned for all time he sure as fuck did now, for tasting Buffy was something beyond excess, and he wasn't about to stop. He'd be here

again. Over and over until she was as lost as he was. Until they were so entwined they weren't home unless they were with each other.

For now, though, Spike gave her pussy one last lingering lick, then rested his cheek against her thigh to relish the way she felt as she came down. Her heat, the rush of her blood, the rhythm of her body settling after orgasm—all the parts he'd enjoyed before but could indulge in now, with the hope of a future he knew he might not get but would reach for anyway.

Still, she was here. She'd chosen him for now. It was more than he could have hoped. It was everything.

"I do love you, Slayer," he murmured, trying not to tremble when he felt her fingers along his scalp. "God help me, I do."

"Do you still hate that you do?" she asked in a sex-roughened voice.

"At the moment?" Spike lifted his head to meet her eyes. "Only thing I hate is that I might bollix this up, this chance you gave me. But I'm yours, however long you want me. Use and abuse me. Bloody break me. Love me. Do what you fancy, it's your choice. Nothing can change that I love you, and I'm not gonna try to stop anymore. You were always bloody inevitable for me."

Her eyes seemed to shine in the crypt's weak light. "I think you might be inevitable for me too."

"That works out nicely then."

"It hasn't so far, but maybe we've been going about it the wrong way." Buffy paused and wet her lips. "I don't know what I feel, Spike, except what I told you. I meant that. Everything else is... I need time. This is new and... Just wait for me?"

Balls, he was going to start crying like a sodding joke, he just knew it. "Till the end of the world."

"That might be next Tuesday."

"Not with you around."

Buffy smiled softly, then sat up and braced her hands on his shoulders. "Or you," she said, applying gentle pressure until he understood she wanted him on his back, and he hurried to do the rest. Watching with hungry eyes as she tumbled after him, fell over him with a gasp. Ran her hand over the bulge in his jeans before dragging down his zipper. "You made a promise and I'm holding you to it."

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Spike nodded, gasping a gasp that turned into a groan as she fisted his cock. "Yes. Yes."

"Good," she replied, pumping his length once, twice, and then shifting, and he was pressed into her heat and she was swallowing him. Taking him into her, sliding down his shaft until there was no further to go. "Let's get started."

