

SLAY BELLS RING

Seasons Slayings #1



HOLLY DENISE



SLAY BELLS RING

ON THE ONE HAND, it was nice to know he could still make people scream.

On the other, his head was already throbbing its punishment for the alcohol he'd washed down his throat, and this silly chit wasn't helping matters in the slightest with all her bellowing. And since *he* was the one lying starkers on a cold slab of metal with unforgiving fluorescents burning his retinas—oh, and his chest had just been bloody sliced open—her reaction seemed a bit over the top.

Spike hissed and pressed his palm to his brow, fighting to sit up. The room spun a bit, but not so much that he missed the clinical setting, complete with lots of metallic surfaces. A standing tray of surgical instruments was at his left, right near where the wailing woman in mint-green scrubs was, well, wailing. She was still holding the scalpel that had just been about an inch deep in his chest which, complete with the tag he saw looped around his big toe, filled in the hazy bits rather nicely.

His last memory was a streetlight rushing toward him through the DeSoto's smeared windshield. Smeared not because the sun had been out—it hadn't—but because he'd been in such a rush to get out of Sunnyhell that he'd half-arsed preparing his car for a nighttime escape.

No dawdling when he knew the Slayer would be out in full bloody force, hunting him down all over again just so she could manhandle him back to the watcher's flat. There, she would no doubt press herself against him like the sodding tease she was and flood his mind with even more memories no amount of alcohol could drown out.

You're covered in her, Dru had said. Fucking bitch had never spoken so clearly in her life. No riddles, no wacky metaphors to admire and interpret, and it had still taken a sodding spell to make Spike realize what she'd actually been saying.

He might have enjoyed a longer stint in denial had his days not been filled with Buffy afterward. Buffy popping in to interrogate him about those commando blokes, shoving him with a bit too much relish into the watcher's tub, her hot little hands making his skin burn, the rush of her pulse taunting fangs that still wanted to sink into her delicate little throat but not for the right reasons. He knew she'd love it, knew she'd go wild, and knowing that was a more brutal torture than whatever those army gits had done to make him harmless as a kitten.

Put like that, the only sane thing was to get as far from Buffy Summers as he could. Big world, wasn't it? More than one way to undo some government sabotage, and all alternatives were safer than sticking around so he could lose even more face in front of the woman he'd hated discovering he actually loved. So he'd waited for his chance, for Rupert to become comfortable enough with him that he no longer insisted on securing him to the furniture, then bolted. But not before helping himself to the watcher's stash of spirits, because god knows Spike had needed as much help forgetting that he was lost for the Slayer as he could manage.

The first stretch of the drive had gone all right, most of his attention fixed on making sure he cleared Sunnydale without incident. He'd cranked the volume on his radio up as loud as his sensitive vampire ears could tolerate and belted out the lyrics to whatever blasted through the speakers, trying and failing not to wonder how the Slayer would react when she came in for her nightly torment only to discover he'd up and left. No more Spike for Buffy to kick or taunt or, in the event of a spell, snog. Or more than snog. Not that she'd gotten very far, but he'd have to drink a whole hell of a lot more before he forgot

the way her hand felt around his prick, the strength she'd *just barely* teased him with. *Just barely* because it had all been a sampler, hadn't it? Buffy dragging him off to the loo, flushed and giggling, telling him she'd hurry back from the magic shop so she could show him just how well a girl like her could bruise a bloke like him. Smirking that saucy little smirk of hers when he'd called her a tease, and singsonging that it was all she could do to pay him back for the potshots he'd taken after finding her moping around about that Parker git.

In the middle of remembering the way she'd pumped and stroked, Spike had done what any rational slayer-hating vamp would have done at that point—kept one hand on the wheel and reached for the sodding scotch with the other so he could hopefully drown out the parts of him sick enough to wish the spell had gone on longer. Or worse, never ended.

One bottle had become two. Then three. Then things got a bit blurry after that. Up until the streetlight, that was.

And if he was waking up here, his head ringing where it wasn't pounding and vice bloody versa, that likely meant he'd missed one hell of a funny show. One involving paramedics and flashing lights and some sod with a stethoscope trying to find a pulse or a heartbeat and coming to the obvious conclusion.

Fuck.

Spike again eyed the bint who had been about to slice him open. She was still screaming, her face almost purple with the effort, and in the old days, that was what he would have considered a serious invitation for a good being killed. But these weren't the old days—these were the strange, new, bloody awful days and he didn't have the option of letting his monster out. He had to play this careful-like.

Because his life had become a fucking nightmare.

"Look," Spike said, raising his hands in a gesture of surrender. The barmy chit just screamed louder, hitting a pitch that he was certain would have his brain leaking out his ears if he had to take much more of it. Fortunately, his voice was also evidently what she needed to be startled into action. Less fortunately, she only got as far as crashing against another metal surface, adding the clatter of medical utensils hitting the floor to the ongoing shrill. Before he could do so much as

roll his eyes, the door to the small room flew open and a whole host of new wankers spilled inside. And once they took a gander at him, they all *also* began screaming at the top of their lungs. Lungs that Spike, very unfortunately, could not rip out from between their ribcages.

Somewhere, he was sure Dru was laughing her little black heart out.



THE TRULY EMBARRASSING THING WAS IT DIDN'T TAKE HIM LONG TO buckle.

In fact, it took less than ten minutes.

Once the screaming stopped, once Spike was allowed to get in a word edgewise, he was given a selection of clothes to wear—not his, as they had literally cut the jeans and T-shirt off him—and hustled from the morgue to the sheriff's department, where he learned the name of the town where he'd marooned himself—Mistletoe, California—and that the only piece of clothing they hadn't outright ruined was the duster. Bloody good thing, too, as he'd have risked more than making his head explode in pain to avenge his most hard-earned trophy. Then he'd be facing more than just a good tongue-lashing from the Slayer for his efforts.

As it was, the tongue-lashing he was looking to get from her wasn't going to be the fun sort, anyway. After listening to his explanation, she'd growled something about her watcher never going for it—*it* being bailing Spike out of the rather remarkable mess he'd made—only to call back a few minutes later, having spoken to the watcher in question and learned that he would indeed chip in the dosh to bail Spike out. Likely the path of least resistance, when the alternative was letting the whole town in on the existence of vampires.

Which was what she showed up to do some five hours later, and in the sort of towering temper that would have lesser men shaking in their boots. But Spike was not a lesser man.

"Took you long enough to get here," he snarled.

Buffy drew up next to where he was handcuffed—both wrists looped through one of the chair's arms—and favored him with one of

those holier-than-thou glowers. "It's two days until Christmas," she spat as though that meant anything to him. "You know what I should be doing right now? Making holiday cookies. Watching Jimmy Stewart romance Donna Reed on repeat. Taking a hot bubble bath. Or hell, maybe getting all the shopping done I've had to put off because of the never-ending crisis that is my life. Instead, I get *you*."

"Sounds like I saved you from bein' bored outta your mind. Think the words you're lookin' for are, 'thank you.'"

It was the wrong thing to say, which was exactly why he'd said it. Buffy's eyes narrowed into slits, her nostrils flaring and her flushed skin turning an even deeper shade of red. He had to fight the urge to adjust himself—she was beyond gorgeous when she was this fired up.

"Spike, I had hours on a bus with nothing to keep myself entertained but wondering what would happen to a vampire if I decided to take Scrooge's advice and shove a stake of holly in your heart. You know, to be festive. Get in the spirit of the season." She flashed him a flat smile. "If you know what's good for you, you'll keep your mouth shut."

But Spike didn't know what was good for him, or he didn't care enough to let it have a vote. And hell, it wasn't like the Slayer was the only one with a license to be pissed off. He sure as fuck hadn't asked her to turn his world on its head and make him realize the only kind of *eating* he wanted to do involved her cunt, the bitch.

"Bullying creatures who can't hit back? Pretty sure that'll land you on the naughty list, Slayer." Which was something he so shouldn't have said, because *naughty* and *slayer* in the same sentence did barmy things to his head. And his cock. Mostly his cock. Which she *couldn't* notice, or she might actually follow through on one of her little threats. "Keep on like that and someone's getting coal this year."

"Well, as long as I can lob it at your head."

"Would match the stake up your arse. Give you somethin' else to squeeze into a diamond."

"Spike, and I mean this with all sincerity, zip it or I will zip it for you." She looked around, all aflutter, and it happened again. That raw surge of pure bloody lust that had his dick swelling and him without much recourse to hide the fact. The red in her cheeks and the fire in her eyes,

the way her hair looked just slightly ruffled—hell, he even fancied the way she smelled under the less-pleasant odors she'd carried with her from the bus. Her blood was hot, and he caught a whiff of pure slayer sweat, but the skin beneath that smelled of fresh soap and lotion. He wondered if she'd just hopped out of the shower when he'd first rung her up for this yuletide errand, and the image of a wet, pink Buffy dressed only in a towel and holding a phone to her ear redefined pain and suffering.

Fuck, maybe he would be better off if she just staked him. If all he had to look forward to was salivating over Buffy, then what point was there to living? The conceit of a vampire mooning after the Slayer had been insult enough when the vampire in question had been saddled with a soul. Spike had no such excuse. Hell, he couldn't even blame the government prats for whatever they'd done to his noggin. Everything he felt had been there before. It had just taken a spell to become obvious.

To him, at least. God help him should it become obvious to anyone else.

Thankfully, the tosser who had cuffed Spike to the chair came stumbling out of a nearby office before his thoughts could become any more depressing. "Are you Miss Summers?" the man squeaked. He was a lanky sort with vibrant ginger curls and a pockmarked face to match. "I hope so, because I want to get out of here before nine."

Buffy transformed in a blink, going from raging bull to soft school-girl. He hated how much he liked it—how much he wished that smile was aimed at him.

"Thank you for waiting," she said as though the bloke had done her a personal favor. "We'll be out of your hair in a jiff."

Spike snickered and settled in.

He doubted that.



IT WAS A BURDEN, THIS *BEING RIGHT ALL THE TIME* BUSINESS.

Turned out Spike and the Slayer were grounded in Mistletoe for a few days, all courtesy of the piece of town property he'd rammed into.

Oh, and the minor fact that he'd been driving under the influence. How the wankers could prove this, he had no sodding clue, considering he'd been a bit too dead to give a breathalyzer and any of those fancy tests they used on blood would have funny results. Still, the open bottles in the passenger and backseats, as well as the general alcohol stench of the car itself, had built up a nice circumstantial case that he couldn't bite his way out of.

Thankfully, the watcher had prepared for all this and sent Buffy with a good amount of dosh to calm everyone down. Why, Spike had bugger-all idea—Buffy had a hard time explaining it too and ended up muttering something about him being a valuable resource in trying to learn more about those commando blokes. The excuse seemed weak but hell, he wasn't in a place to complain.

Still, settling the bill was only the first part of the problem. The second was that the DeSoto wasn't drivable. It wasn't a lost cause, but it'd take a few days to get the parts needed to make the repairs. Buffy could hop a bus home, but that would defeat the purpose of her marching her cute little slayer arse down here to bail him out. So she was stuck with him, and even though Mistletoe wasn't a hotbed of tourist activity, the town's only inn was packed thanks to out-of-towners visiting for the holiday. That left a pitiful motel, of which there was only one room available.

Even worse...

"There's one bed," Buffy intoned, her overnight bag hitting the floor. He didn't know why she felt the need to say as much—his eyes were working just as well as hers. "I have to spend Christmas in a motel room with *you* and there's only *one bed*."

"What's the matter, Slayer? Worry I'm a cover hog?"

She whirled around to turn her brilliant glare on him, her eyes all but glittering in the weak light that poured in from the street. If he were less of a bastard, he might have felt a pang of remorse. But he wasn't less of a bastard—he was the man he was, just as brassed and bitter as she was, only he had more right to it, being the hapless sod who had discovered he was in love with his mortal enemy. Misery loved company, after all, and Spike had gone through enough of his life

miserable and alone. Might as well extend it to the Slayer. He could think of no one worthier.

"You're taking the floor," she informed him in a brusque, business-like tone. "And not a word."

"The hell I am. Not like I asked for this, is it?"

"No, Spike. It's a lot like you escaped Giles's place, climbed into a tin can you call a car, then destroyed both that car and public property because you couldn't keep your hands off the booze long enough to get far enough away from Sunnydale that you would officially stop being my problem." Buffy stormed around him and gave the door a good, hard slam that made the walls shake. "It's a lot like you forced me to leave right before *Christmas* to bail your undead butt out of jail, and I'm going to be stuck here with you until your stupid car is fixed. Forget Christmas—my entire winter break is ruined. Do you know how many breaks I get?"

It was the wrong thing to do, the wrong way to reply, but Spike, by virtue of being himself, couldn't be bothered to care. Instead, he made a show of glancing around—looking over her, behind her, a frown firmly fixed in place.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Tryin' to see if there's anyone here who cares." He could swear he heard her blood boiling, and god, it was delicious. "Seems to be just the two of us."

The Slayer wasn't about to stake a creature that couldn't fight back. She'd made that perfectly clear. She was, however, not above punching such a creature with every ounce of preternatural strength that came with her calling. So when her knuckles crashed into his nose, when his feet parted ways with the floor and his body went barreling into the door she'd just closed, he wasn't surprised. A bit miffed, yeah, because he didn't have the pleasure of paying her back, but not surprised. Buffy liked to pretend she played fair, but she got her jollies just the same way he did.

"One more word," she said in a low, dangerous voice. "One more word, Spike, and I swear. I'll tell Giles I tripped or something. And I'm willing to bet the only reason that would make him even a little

grumpy is that it will mean he paid to bail out a pile of dust. You wanna see if I'm right?"

Spike rolled his eyes, climbing back to his feet. "Look, it's not like this is my idea of a good time," he snapped. "The whole bloody reason I left was to get away from you lot. You think I wanted to ring you up?"

"Then why did you?"

"Know anyone else who would've dropped everythin' to come to the rescue?"

"This is *so* not a rescue. This is retrieving a resource. Sure, that resource is probably spent up and all kinds of useless, but you know, leave no stone unturned."

That was a bunch of bollocks and he knew it. He thought about telling her as much—it would be nothing less than what she deserved—but decided that he'd tested her patience enough for one night. And they did have a ways to go, especially if he wanted to get out of this situation with all his parts in working order.

Worse fates, he supposed, than being stuck in a room with the woman he loved. Even if he was hard-pressed to think of any. Which was the whole sodding reason he'd been keen to skip town in the first place. He'd needed to put as much distance between him and the Slayer as possible and now here he was, shacking up with her, even if only for a few days.

Fuck, maybe it was time to part ways with the DeSoto. It had been a good car, faithful and all that, but he wasn't sure it was worth hanging around here just for the dubious honor of escorting her highness back to the Hellmouth. He could wait until she conked out, find a set of wheels to hotwire, and be halfway across the country before she caught on that she'd been ditched.

Anything was better than this torment.

"What is that look for?"

Spike started, forcing himself out of his thoughts and back to the present. "What look?"

"You had a thinky look."

"Did not."

Buffy stared at him for a dull moment. "You're right. My mistake. A

thinky look would suggest you know how to use your brain and clearly”—she waved a hand at the room—“that’s not the case.”

“Oooh, kitty’s got claws.”

“Just do us both a favor and don’t do it, whatever it is.”

“Have to know what the bloody hell you’re talkin’ about first.”

She groaned and rolled her head back as though he were the most frustrating person on the planet, and that couldn’t be the case because that honor was hers. “Whatever it is you’re planning. Just drop it.”

Spike scoffed. Knowing slayers was his business, not the other way around. “You’re off your rocker.”

“I mean,” she continued, speaking as though he had not, “on one hand, your ideas tend to backfire rather spectacularly. On the other, I am unfortunately in the splash zone and I am not in the mood to get wet.”

Oh, that was a delicious bit of wordplay. “There’s a pity,” he drawled in a low voice. “Seem to remember you smelled particularly delectable when you were...hot and bothered.”

Buffy took a wild swing at his nose again, but this time he saw it coming and caught her fist before it could make contact. Squeezed his cool hand around her warm skin and fought back another laugh when her cheeks flushed like she was suddenly thinking things reserved only for the naughtiest of naughty slayers. If only.

Or maybe not if only. He fully expected her to give him another less-fun version of a tongue lashing, but when she opened her mouth, there was a wobble in her voice, one slight enough for most people to have missed. He wasn’t most people, though. He was the bloke who knew her better than she knew herself, whether she wanted to admit it or not. The one who had made the study of the Slayer, of *her*, his most pressing priority. So when she said, “And here *I* have this crystal-clear memory of telling you to never say anything gross like that to me again,” he heard what he wagered only he could.

Which made him do something very stupid.

He grinned. “What, hot and bothered?” he asked, firming his grip on her fist when she tried to pull it back. “You have somethin’ to be ashamed about, Slayer? Or are you just too shy to admit you didn’t get

as much of the Big Bad as you were hoping? Pity that spell didn't last just a teensy bit longer, innit?"

"One more crack out of you and your only ride back to Sunnydale will be in an ashtray."

"It's all right, pet," Spike purred, leveraging his grip on her fist to tug her closer. "Our little secret, yeah?"

It would have been easy for her to pull free—she was, after all, much stronger than him—but for some reason, she didn't, and that fact made his undead heart constrict. That and the realization that she hadn't been this close to him since the spell. The one that had started with them sniping at each other, ready to tear one another's head off, before she'd been in his arms, and he'd been moved to drop to his knees so he could ask her the question he'd never gotten to ask in life.

No one had discussed the spell since the witch had baked up a tray-full of apology. Beyond the normal blustering, Buffy hadn't said much to him at all, and nothing he'd call important. She'd gone back to status bloody quo, leaving him to wonder if that *forgetting* spell she'd hinted at had been more than just a thing she'd said.

Well, he had his answer at last. The wobble in her voice a moment ago could have easily been a fluke. The ears playing tricks on him, and all that. But what was happening now, *this* moment, was something else entirely. Time's past, he would have already been sent head-first into the nearest wall just for holding onto her like this. For daring to touch her with his filthy vampire hands or some rot. She would have quipped something at him that made him both want to rip her tongue out and shove his own down her throat and they would go like that for a bit, taking the mickey out of one another until someone forced them to stop or one of them truly ended up dead.

Buffy wasn't quipping, though. She seemed caught, captured. So much so she didn't tug herself free, even when he lowered his head or when his lips brushed the warm skin along the back of her hand. Instead, he felt a tremor rush through her, as though she were fighting something he couldn't see. Something that wasn't a beastie at all.

And god, it was delicious.

"What's our secret?" Buffy asked what seemed like an age later, long enough he'd forgotten what he'd said and had to run his mind

back. That her voice sounded more like the girl she tried to be than the Slayer she was didn't help matters. Made a man think things he knew he shouldn't.

Either he pushed his luck or he backed down. And Spike never backed down.

"That you're not over...what'd you call it? The bad boy thing? Can help wean you off if you need a hand. I'm a giver like that."

That did it. Whatever spell had settled over her broke at once, but not before he saw her cheeks bloom with deeper color or before he caught a whiff of what he was certain *wasn't* disgust. And that was more than curious—that was downright neat. Here he'd been teasing, and it seemed he might have accidentally stumbled across the truth.

"You're bent," she told him, stepping back and fixing him with her reliable glare once more. "And delusional."

"And you're—"

"No. That's it. No more talking for you." Buffy backed up a step, then another, each one seeming to come easier for her. When she had more than half the room between them, she huffed out a deep breath. "In fact, those are the new rules. Talk and dust. Think I'm bluffing? Feel free to put that luck of yours to the test. It's done so much for you lately."

But she didn't give him a chance to talk. Instead, she plucked her overnight bag off the floor and made a mad dash for the privy in one smooth, seamless motion, and slammed the door closed behind her.

Leaving Spike to stand there like a dolt, blinking at where the Slayer had stood just seconds ago, wondering what the hell had just happened. If it was possible after all, this insane notion that the Slayer might actually fancy him. That the spell the witch had cooked up had made a mark on her that was anything like the one it had left on him.

And if that was true... Spike inhaled and eyed the bed. The single bed.

Could be this had the makings for a happy Christmas after all.



HE WAS GOING TO BLOODY KILL HER.

Spike turned on his heel to pace back up the strip of floor along the bed, sparing the door another glare as he did so. It remained stubbornly closed, as he'd known it would, but the sight still pissed him off. Five hours and seventeen minutes she'd been gone. Five sodding hours in this pissant town knowing full bloody well he couldn't go anywhere and that he hadn't had anything decent to eat since he'd left the Hellmouth. The bitch was doing this just to punish him, and fuck if it wasn't working.

Never mind that the accommodations were terrible—Spike had slept on many floors over the last century, but this one must have been mopped with holy water for as much kip as he'd managed to grab, and all of it had been her fault. Never mind that, as a vampire, he hadn't been able to nod off until close to dawn, but he'd been stuck listening to the rhythm of her breaths, her sighs, the little sounds she made when she shifted or turned and the rasp of sheets against her skin. Angelus could take a few lessons in torture from this bitch, and he was sure she'd known it too. It was what she lived for, tormenting him, and she did it with a flourish he'd admire were he not the sorry sod on the receiving end.

Could have been worse, he supposed. She might have actually caved and let him rest his weary bones on the actual bed. Spike doubted he would have slept at all, even if it was the cushiest mattress in all the land. Being that close to her would flood his mind with even more ridiculous fantasies than those already there—that maybe she'd snuggle up next to him in the night, cover him with her warmth. That she'd realize she liked waking up with his chest under her cheek. Or she'd study him, decide he was an all-right bloke after all, and that she wanted to give him that blowie she'd teased him with all night during the damned spell that had ruined everything.

As it was, he'd snagged a couple of hours and woken up to a rumbling stomach and a familiar itch in his mouth, his fangs looking for any excuse to slide out and into something soft and warm. That Buffy had been prancing around in a towel, bringing what had only been a daydream earlier into startling life, hadn't helped matters. He'd seen a glimpse of creamy thigh before she'd whirled around and caught him, and then the shouting had started.

It wasn't his fault she'd assumed he'd be out like the dead until sundown like a good little vampire. She still had made the decision to throw caution to the wind and flaunt all that supple flesh in front of a starving man. Would have served her right if he'd taken a bite out of her, migraine or no.

Damn, he needed blood, and he needed it now. When he'd relayed as much, Buffy had rolled her eyes and told him to suck it up. He'd been hungry and desperate enough to suggest that she suck something else and had won a nose that had yet to stop throbbing for his efforts.

Bloody bitch was going to be the death of him.

He'd been left to stem the flow of blood from his nostrils and inform her that licking that up wouldn't count as lunch, only to earn a look like he was some sort of thing she'd scrape off her shoe. Well, excuse him for trying to be informative. For all he knew, Buffy assumed that any blood was fair game and he could nourish himself just fine by bleeding some on his own. Once he'd quelled the urge to kill her—as best he could do, seeing as that was the sort of thing that never went away—he'd asked her nicely to find him something to nibble on. Couldn't do it himself, being that the sun was out, and Buffy had begrudgingly agreed. Had a bit of last-minute Christmas shopping to do, herself. And since they were stranded here until the DeSoto was back in working order, odds were good she wouldn't get another chance. So she'd gotten herself all dolled up and flitted right out of the room and into the sunlight where he couldn't follow. And that had been that.

Five hours and twenty-one minutes ago.

Spike snarled again and threw another glare at the door. Vampires had a considerable arsenal of abilities on their side but willing a person to materialize was not among them. Not that he trusted himself to greet her in any manner other than the sort that would earn him another nose punch, but even that would be welcome, as it'd be *something*. Anything. The only thing to do in this hovel was flip between the two functioning channels on the telly or crack out the proffered Gideon from the nightstand drawer, and bored as he was, Spike wasn't quite that desperate yet.

Yet.

God, he hated her.

If only he could hate her in the right way.

The sun was only an hour or so from setting by the time the familiar thud of her heartbeat reached his ears. Spike glowered at the door, torn between wanting to pounce on her the second she crossed the threshold and play like he hadn't noticed she was gone at all. As hungry as he was, no one would mistake his enthusiasm for anything other than the need to tame the bloodlust, but he knew the real reason he was steamed had nothing to do with the tummy rumblies, and even if *only* he knew the truth, he was becoming increasingly paranoid that she'd be able to look at him and see it. Ridiculous as that was.

Not ridiculous enough to risk it, though, he decided. And so he flung himself at the last minute into the chair positioned at the small folding table the motel had decided to deem the writing desk, hitting it hard enough that it tipped onto its back two legs. Buffy opened the door just in time to see him lose balance and tumble back, his feet swinging wildly over his head, hovering for a second in midair, before giving in to the wrong direction's gravity pull and sending him crashing to the hard-as-rocks floor he also got to call a bed.

Then the bitch started to laugh and didn't stop.

Yeah, he was going to kill her. He was going to undo whatever those government prats had done to him, snag him up a slayer, and take his time unburdening her of the calling she resented so much. Make her remember who he was, and more importantly, who he wasn't—someone to bloody *laugh* at.

It was only that thought, that *promise*, that could have convinced him that he was better off getting up than waiting out the night on the floor. So Spike, mustering up whatever dignity he could summon, sprang to his feet. "Where the hell have you been?"

Buffy was still laughing, though, her face flushing so brilliantly that he felt his anger begin to chip away. Then surge again when he realized it was chipping away. Out of his head in love with her or not, Big Bads didn't turn into soft, purring kittens just because a pretty girl was radiant when she laughed.

Only *radiant* was too tame a word for the Slayer. She was something more, something purer. And he hated that he'd noticed that, too.

Finally, after what felt like an age, the laughter began to dissipate, and Buffy lifted a hand he belatedly saw was weighed down by several fat plastic shopping bags to wipe away the tears that had started to gather in her eyes. She managed to clear those tears away using her knuckles, though awkwardly, before she moved toward the bed again. "Oh man," she said. "I really, really needed that."

Spike grunted rather sulkily. "Glad to be of service. Wanna answer the bloody question?"

"That question being?"

"Where have you been all sodding day?"

Buffy snickered. "Where do you think?" she replied, depositing both handfuls of bags onto the ugly comforter. There hadn't been quite as many in her other hand, but enough that she looked relieved when she let them go. "I told you, I still had some Christmas shopping to do."

He eyed the bed, which was now more bag than mattress. "*Some.*"

"Okay, so, most." She wrinkled her nose in a way he would *not* find adorable. "I do my best work under pressure. And it's not like I'm going to have any time when we get back to Sunnydale since, thanks to you, that won't be until after Christmas is officially over."

She'd picked the wrong bloke to trot out the guilt trip with. "Yeah, well, you can go ahead and cough up whatever you bought for *me* now, so long as it's red and rich in iron." Spike held out a hand. "Been waiting all day. About to gnaw my bloody arm off."

Buffy made a face, rolling her eyes as though it was unreasonable to want to eat at least once every twenty-four hours. "Well, maybe next time, you'll think before you drink, drive, and plow your car into a streetlight."

The *next time* he got behind the wheel, she'd be right there with him. In the seat beside his, which, dear oh dear, didn't have one of those safety belts that had become the rage in the sixties. Maybe if he was lucky, he could stage another crash—the sort that would send her hurtling through the windshield. It wouldn't be the best way he'd done in a slayer, but he would make sure the history books recorded it anyway. Creativity ought to be acknowledged.

Before he could say any of that, though, a pack of bagged blood hit his chest and thunked unceremoniously to the floor.

"Make it last," she said in her holier-than-thou voice that couldn't help but turn him on. "Small towns apparently don't love it when a stranger rolls through and buys blood by the gallon. I'd really like to not have to go back and ask for seconds."

Spike looked from her to the blood lying at his feet and back again. She couldn't be serious. "That's it? Your new plan to starve me into submission?"

Buffy rolled her eyes and upended one of the many bags so that a cascade of red went tumbling over the mattress. "I would say that bleach has fried your brain, but I'm starting to think you don't have one to fry," she said through her teeth. "One more time—make it last."

Well, he thought, surveying the goods with some relief, that was a bit better. Except... "Uh, Slayer?"

She answered in the form of a glare.

"You do know blood spoils if left out, right?"

"Yep. I wrote that down on my 'things that aren't my problem' list."

He sucked in his cheeks, tamping down the urge to take a mad swing at her too-perfect face. Not worth the headache. Literally. "You're right. It goes bad, I'll just dump it out. Explain to the miserable sod who owns this dump that it was a heavy flow month for you. Way you're actin', I'm sure that wouldn't—"

Her knuckles crunched into his nose before he could choke anything else out, which, pain aside, was likely for the best. Picking a fight with the Slayer was always dangerous business, but never more so when he couldn't fight back.

But it was this or *something else*, and *something else* was even more likely to get him staked, seeing as *something else* was seizing her, pulling her to him, and continuing where they'd left off before the sodding spell had ended. All that build-up, all that anticipation, the taste of her still burning in his mouth, and now she was here and all around him and there was fuck all he could do about it. Couldn't thrash her around until his better senses took him over again, couldn't throw her on the mattress and show her what it was like to have a real vampire between her legs, couldn't do anything but *wait* while she did her bloody *shop-*

ping and hope she brought home enough table scraps to keep him from turning into a walking skeleton.

Whatever he'd thought he'd seen there the night before had been his own head trying to trick him into thinking he wasn't as alone in this as he was. That maybe the spell hadn't just affected him. But it had, and he couldn't do this. Couldn't be with her, couldn't be without her. Not here. Not when there was no end in sight.

"Say one more thing like that to me," Buffy practically snarled. "I dare you."

He didn't know how or why, but his first instinct was to laugh, so hell, he went with it. "Just one?" he replied, cupping his nose, which was once again bleeding freely. "That'll do it, then? You'll put an end to this?"

"Wanna try me?"

"Don't need to. Already know you're all talk."

She shoved him hard enough that he went skittering back until his spine collided with the wall. And he'd give it to her—it was a good shove. Good show of force. But, like everything else she did when it came to him, ultimately more bark than bite. Buffy was a lot of things—and if anyone needed a list, he'd be more than happy to provide—but what she wasn't was someone who killed just because she was pissed off. The girl had a heart bigger than anyone he'd ever known. Even room in there, somehow, for creatures like him.

Just not the way he wanted to be there. Not sodding charity or whatever else.

"Look," she said, prowling forward in a way he knew she didn't mean to be seductive but was anyway. "I know you don't care. Believe me. Memo received. I know that you hate me, and hey, all with the mutual. And I get it. I've threatened your life a time or two and even when you've really, really deserved it, I've been lenient. As in way. But this, Spike? You came to *us* for help, which we had no reason to give but did anyway. Even though the information you have on those commandos is the opposite of useful, we *didn't* throw you out on your undead ass and tell you to fend for yourself. We bought you blood. We made you comfortable—"

"Comfortable?" Spike sputtered. It wasn't the first time she'd used

the word to describe being chained and tossed in the tub, but it somehow managed to surprise him all over again. "Think you've taken one too many blows to the head, Slayer."

"Oh, that's right. Forgive me for not letting the mass murderer walk freely in my watcher's home. How inconsiderate."

He rolled his eyes, wiped away the last of the blood trickling out of his nose and tightened his hands into fists. The urge was there again to take a swing right back at her—let her see how much she liked it—but the shock of pain he knew would follow would diminish that fleeting bout of satisfaction. Not worth it. "Might have been a decent excuse once," he said instead. "Things are different though now, aren't they? Ever hear that you catch more flies with honey, honey?"

"Ever hear that beggars can't be choosers? You're the beggar in this scenario."

"And even though you're the goody-good guys, I've still somehow been tortured by blokes more considerate than you lot." That much was a flat-out lie, but a little exaggeration never hurt anyone. "So yeah, if you think I was keen to stick around while you let me rot in some tub or let a fledgling witch use me for magical target practice, you're even dizzier than you look."

"Well, if you don't like it, feel free to *not* come crying to us every time you need help," she shot back. "I didn't have to do this, you know. Giles said it was up to me. And idiot that I am, I decide to drop everything and take *my* precious free time to help your sorry, pasty—"

"Why's that?"

Buffy paused in mid-insult, her mouth hanging open and her eyes a bit wide. Then she blinked and shook her head, stepping back. "Huh?"

"You said it was up to you." Spike arched his eyebrows, intrigued. Of everything that had happened since he'd made the phone call that had brought her here, this was the only thing to have truly surprised him. Hell, it more than surprised him—it made him feel...something. Something he knew better than to feel but felt anyway. "Why'd you do it?"

She blinked some more, this time in a way that betrayed she was searching for something to tell him, which was beyond intriguing. Had she even stopped long enough to consider the answer to that, herself?

From the phone call she'd made the night before to bring her watcher up to speed, Spike knew Rupert had told her, much to her consternation, there was no point in hopping a bus home and just trusting that Spike would point his car the right way once it was fixed properly. But then, she was the one who had made the decision to come in the first place, even with free time being the hot commodity it was. A more desperate man might read something into this.

"Because I'm clearly out of my mind," Buffy sputtered at last. "The point, Spike, is that you asked for help."

Really? He thought the point was that she was ready to stake him for making a crack about her monthlies, and if he ran his mouth again, he could kiss this mortal coil goodbye. The poor dear couldn't keep her story straight.

He could have said as much. Maybe he should have. But he didn't. The girl was turning him into a right softie, and fuck, he was letting her.

"So that's it, then?" he asked instead. "Reckon you have me at your mercy?"

Buffy didn't answer at first, rather looked away, blinking hard like she was trying to hold herself together, which was bloody humbling. In all the time he'd known her, the Slayer had never been anything other than the picture of absolute resolve and strength. She'd no sooner betray any sort of weakness around him than she would conspire to bring about an apocalypse. Yet here she was, softening right in front of him, the anger and frustration in her eyes fading into a sort of desperate sadness that couldn't help but strike him in the heart. Buffy being vulnerable, being soft, being *human* around him was nothing short of a gift. A piece of her most of the world never got to see.

"This hasn't gone the way I thought it would," she muttered, her voice thick.

"No?" he asked, trying like hell to sound like he didn't give a damn. "Lemme guess. I was supposed to take my lumps like a good little boy."

"You were supposed to help me not care."

"Not care?"

"That this is the first year that I'll be completely on my own for Christmas." Buffy's eyes went wide as soon as the words were out—a

startled sort of wide, as though she'd only just then realized how much she'd betrayed. Then she slapped a hand over her mouth, a pretty red blooming across her milky cheeks, and started to turn away from him. And he couldn't let her—not when she'd given him a tantalizing glimpse of authentic Buffy. Not the bitch wearing her armor, but the girl who had trusted him for a few precious hours with the deepest and most secret parts of her. The girl who had made him realize what he should've known without the help of that stupid spell because the fact that he was in love with her was bloody obvious.

Spike released a slow breath and took a step forward, reaching for her wrist before he could stop himself. Not wanting to, even knowing there was every chance Buffy would take another swing at him for daring. But she didn't. Instead, she let him drag her hand away from her mouth as her chin did that wobble thing that never failed to strike him dead center.

"Why are you gonna be alone for Christmas?" he asked.

Some of her fire returned to her gaze. "Like you care."

"Pretend for a second I do."

"What? So you can kick me while I'm down?"

"Got no one else to lend an ear, do you?" It wasn't the right thing to say, and to his credit, he realized as much almost at once. "Won't poke fun. Not like I have much room to talk, right? I'm the sorry git whose one and only phone call happened to be to the bloody Slayer. Don't think a vamp can sink much lower." Shell of a loser, she'd called him one time, and it had been right then. Weeping, moaning, crying his fool heart out over Dru, and having no clue it could get worse. That it *would* in just a year's time. Now he didn't even have being a vampire to fall back on, and he was heartsick for his mortal enemy.

Maybe the same had occurred to her, or maybe she was past the point of caring. Spike didn't know. All he knew was something changed in Buffy's expression. More of her hardness, her cynicism, seemed to thaw, taking the tension framing her jaw and living in her shoulders along for the ride. Then she sighed and looked down.

"It's not like it should matter," she said in a tone that made it clear it mattered quite a lot, regardless of whether it should. "I'm supposed to be this grown-up now, right? All with the independent. And since

my special take on Thanksgiving was such a smashing success, Mom doesn't think twice about agreeing to go to this swanky art conference in LA right before Christmas and decides to stay over so she can meet with a few potential suppliers right after. So no making of gingerbread men or reading 'T'was the Night Before Anything' on Christmas Eve for me. She didn't even decorate the tree because she didn't have time. Meanwhile, Xander's gone to his uncle's with the rest of his family, and Willow's dad is *really* cracking down hard on the observations of any gentile holidays because he thinks college will have her brainwashed so she *has* to come home. The closest thing I was going to have to a normal Christmas was Giles...or so I thought, but it turns out he was going to ask me to take over vamp-sitting duties anyway so he could fly back to England to see some niece or nephew or cousin or something. Not sure what I would've asked him to do anyway. Watch schmaltzy movies all day? Make Christmas cookies? He'd do it for me, but it'd still be with the weird."

Something in his chest gave a powerful lurch. "So when I called..."

Buffy offered a little half-shrug. "Perspective, I guess. Like it doesn't matter that everyone's bailing on me because I had slayage duty anyway, my life being the textbook definition of unfair. I wasn't even sure you'd be here when I got here—you had plenty of time to make with the getaway. And then I'd have to track you down and everything would be your fault." She pressed her lips together. "Same thing today."

"You thought I'd light out while you were doin' your shopping?"

Another little half-shrug. "Seemed possible."

"Even with the sun out and me down one set of wheels?"

"You showed up on Giles's doorstep wearing a blanket. I'm pretty sure if you wanted to be gone, you would have found a way to do it."

Fuck. If he'd had any circulation, that might have made him blush. "And you dropped everythin' to come to my rescue with the hope that I'd give you a decent chase."

"At least I can admit I'm pathetic."

"Not pathetic, pet. Nothin' wrong with bein' a bit glum you don't get to spend the holidays with the ones you love."

The look she gave him was pure Buffy bewilderment. Open and

vulnerable, yet tinged with enough suspicion that he knew it was him she was seeing. Just not the him that she expected. And if she asked why he was being so bloody nice, he'd have nothing to tell her. Nothing except the truth, and *that* he could barely stand to tell himself. Wanting to shag the Slayer was one thing—wanting to comfort her, give her what she was missing, make everything that was wrong in her world right, and more than that was bloody unnatural. So much so he'd decided that staying to have the army blokes set him right again wasn't worth the risk of becoming even more of a git than he already was.

Even if he feared that was a battle already well and lost.

Just like the rest of him.



FORGET LOST. HE WAS WELL AND BUGGERED.

Ever since their little talk, ever since she'd let spill her seasonal disappointments, things between them had been different. Hell, he'd go so far as to say they'd been civil, which was something he and the Slayer had never been. It was enough to make a man think things he shouldn't, which was especially dangerous when his head was already full of the same.

Fact of the matter was, there was a part of him, a very real part, that existed solely to find a way to give the woman he loved exactly what it was she said she wanted, no matter how he had to go about it. So it was of no surprise to him when, after Buffy ducked out of their shared room a second time, Spike started thinking of ways to make a run for it.

Not because he actually wanted to run, mind. He wasn't sure he did anymore. He *was* sure he wanted Buffy to not be miserable about her Christmas. Because he loved her, and even if he hated that he loved her, that didn't make the actual love part any less real. Buffy wanted him to be the bad guy? Suited him fine. He could do that.

Only he hadn't. Not then, at least. Which meant he'd been there when she'd come back maybe twenty minutes later, dragging an over-sized cooler into the room.

"For the blood," she'd said at his bemused look. "So it won't spoil

and I don't have to make repeat trips and become the creepy blood lady they tell stories about to scare the local children." She'd flipped the lid off to reveal a cavity almost bursting with ice. "This'll do until we get the car, right?"

It hadn't been a gesture, he'd told himself. Not something she'd done to be nice or make him comfortable, but that was a hard thing to force his lovesick heart to believe. But he had to believe it—he *had* to, or he would start to spiral.

Not an option where Buffy was concerned.

That conviction had worked for a bit, long enough for her to order nosh and find some cheery holiday program on the telly. Then it had been time for good little slayers to catch their kip again, and Spike knew the dance. Grab his patch of floor and try hard to ignore the way she breathed and the hum of her pulse and all other things *Buffy* until sleep finally found him.

He'd been in the process of making up his space when he'd said it. Hell, he couldn't even remember the way the words had run together now. Something about the floor being unforgiving at the best of times, but especially when he was walking off the punches she'd thrown at him on top of nearly being sliced open at the morgue. However he'd said it, he'd meant for her to crack a grin. Maybe roll her eyes, tell him he'd earned whatever he got, and to take it without complaint.

He hadn't expected her to say, "We can share the bed."

And that had been it—he'd known it then, like he knew it now. He *had* to get out. Not because Buffy needed a distraction over the holidays and he was here to provide, but because if he stayed, he'd spill. He'd give her everything he had bottled up and she'd destroy him as a result, probably without even trying. She was just that good at destroying things. He should know.

Running for the door at that moment would've been a bit of a giveaway, though, so he'd forced himself to slow down. Do this right, which included climbing onto the bed beside her. Onto, not in, because he didn't need the blankets and she did, and that invisible line had been important to respect. He'd waited until her breathing had evened out, then popped back to his feet, shoved as many packs of blood into the pockets of his duster as he could manage, and bolted.

Only he hadn't gotten as far as a block into Mistletoe proper. Walk around a town this close to the Hellmouth with blood in your pockets, you're asking to be jumped by a vampire. Or, in his case, three.

For a second there, Spike had been sure that was the end of his story, and he'd been fairly furious at the fact. More than a century of carving a name for himself, being the one who ran toward danger rather than from, only to go down in history as a muzzled has-been done in by a team of sodding fledges over blood that they didn't even need to steal.

And he might have dusted screaming that very fact had the Slayer not chosen that moment to make one of her brilliant entrances and save the bloody day.

Just like she always did.

"Seriously," Buffy snapped at him now, blocking the incoming blow of the first ugly fucker while kicking her leg out in a perfect arc so that her foot smashed into the stomach of the one behind her. "Willow had the gall to call *Xander* a demon magnet. What is it about me, huh?" She whirled around, pinning Spike with a glare and holding up a finger. "Don't answer that."

Spike couldn't help it—he laughed. God, but she was brilliant when she was this angry.

"I'm sure you'll tell me what's so funny once this is over," she ground out between punches. "And it *won't* make me want to stake you."

"Wouldn't dream of it, Slayer." He tilted his head, watching as the vampire from behind made to grab her wrists and pull her hands around her back, knowing all the while that he needed to get moving if he meant to run but finding his feet unwilling to budge. *All* of him unwilling to budge, because Buffy was here, and these particular wankers were proving more difficult to put down than the average fledge. And as he was the reason they were here, the reason *she* was here, the thought of leaving her like this had his dead heart twisting.

Life had been so much simpler before he'd come to Sunnyhell. Back when the only thing he'd feel upon hearing a slayer had snuffed it was the small twinge that he hadn't been the one to deal the blow.

Spike was stalking forward before his mind could catch up with

him, balling his hand into a fist and gritting his teeth in the expectation of pain. He caught Buffy's eye over the shoulder of the vampire in front of her, took in her grimace, and let himself admire that she had the wherewithal to look *that* pissed at him while inches away from becoming a footnote in her watcher's dusty journals. Then he sighed, tapped the vampire on the shoulder, and greeted him with a punch when the ugly sod turned around.

The vampire went down. And there was no pain.

Spike started, whipped his head back up to Buffy, who was staring at him, ignoring the vamp who still had his mitts tangled around her, her jaw hanging open.

No pain.

"Looks like demon is on the menu," Spike crowed, and just like that, everything changed.

Everything.

He had fought her now more times than he could count—taken swings she'd blocked, others that had landed, felt all the fury of her hands and feet, memorized her habits and the patterns that shaped even her most spontaneous moves. Never, though, had he fought by her side. Well, not unless one was counting that business with Angel, and he wasn't. That had been scattered and disjointed, not like this. Not with her at his back, relying on him to catch the blows she missed, to leverage her knowledge of the way he fought into a weapon of its own. It hadn't been her tossing him stakes when she was done with them. Like it was nothing. Like they were a team. And Spike, for the first time in what felt like an eternity, got to experience the rush of shoving something lethal into a heaving chest. Got to feel that bloody thrill of surviving another fight, besting another enemy, and he would get to keep doing that, because *of course* the army blokes didn't give a fuck if a vampire attacked a demon. Of course they didn't.

He might be chained up, but his leash had some length to it. Just enough that he could snap his jaws at other critters.

How long would it have taken him to realize this if he hadn't lit out of town?

Then it was just the two of them, him and the Slayer, panting in the aftermath of the skirmish. Buffy from exertion, Spike from elation.

He knew a lecture was coming, that she'd let him bloody have it for having tried to escape but he was too buzzed to care, and not in the mood to listen. So when he heard her inhale, instinct took over again.

He dropped the stake, whirled around, and kissed her.

And that was it. Everything else slid into place for him, and he no longer cared. His life had changed on a turn before and it just had again. It didn't matter if he was a traitor to his kind—he could be a traitor who had this.

And there was nothing better than this.



IT WENT ABOUT AS WELL AS HE COULD HAVE EXPECTED.

Better, even, considering those few blissful seconds during which Buffy had kissed him back. But they had been only seconds. Seconds after which she had shoved him away, given him a confused, searching look, then stormed off. Back toward the motel, apparently uncaring now whether or not he made an escape. Unlucky for her, he cared very much, so he trailed after her.

In all the time since the spell, the few occasions Spike had let himself wonder what might happen if he decided to throw caution to the wind and snog her, he'd always arrived at the same conclusion. Punch to the nose, perhaps a stake to the chest, ashes to ashes. That she'd respond by snogging him back had been too ridiculous even for his own sappy imagination.

But she had. Fuck, she *had*. And he was a man with a new lease on life—one he'd decided he wanted her to be a part of. Sure, just a few minutes ago, he'd been willing to leave all behind, but that was how quickly things changed, and he'd long since learned to stop fighting them.

Plus, he was tired of deluding himself.

Spike let himself back into the motel room, his heart in his throat. The clothes she'd been wearing littered the floor, trailing to the loo, and the shower was on again. She was buying time—he knew it. That was all right. As it turned out, he had all the time in the bloody world. She was worth the wait.

Lucky for him, though, Buffy apparently wasn't keen on a long shower. She emerged just a few minutes later, all wet temptation wrapped in a towel, and though she paused when she saw him standing in the middle of the room, he could tell she wasn't surprised. More hesitant, a thing she'd never been around him. As though she, too, knew something had changed forever.

Then, finally, she blurted, "You kissed me."

"Yeah."

"Why.. Why would you—"

"Just found out I'm not as toothless as we thought." Spike gestured at the door behind him, though he didn't take his gaze off her. "Got caught up in the moment."

Buffy nodded, doing a job of keeping her expression impassive. "And...that was all it was?"

"Why?" he asked. "Were you hopin'?"

"What? Don't be gross."

"Gross, am I?" He took a step toward her, drew in a breath, inhaling her as much as he could. "I was there too, remember? Felt the way you—"

"Shut up." Her skin, already flushed from the shower, went a deeper shade.

"Nothin' wrong with wanting me, Slayer."

"Shut up! You were trying to escape."

To anyone else, that might have seemed like a change of subject. To him, it sounded like a plea. And again, that impossible thought swelled. That thing that couldn't be true, that he was barmy for entertaining. But she was standing here, wasn't she? In a bloody towel, looking at him in a way that begged explanation.

If he wanted her honesty, perhaps he should give her some of his own. Her and himself, because he wasn't fooling anyone.

"Was tryin' to give you what you wanted," he said.

"What I wanted?"

"The chance to pin it all on me. The chase."

"And I should believe you, why?"

Good question, that. She shouldn't. He didn't even know if it was

true. Not anymore. Only it felt true, more so than leaving for his own bloody pride ever had.

There was no getting out of this unscathed now. He could either lie or lash out in a mad attempt to break her before she could break him. Or he could say *sod it* and throw everything on the table. Make what happened next her decision. She'd at least know where he stood.

It'd be a bloody brilliant way to go.

Put like that, there was only one option.

Sod it.

Spike closed the remaining distance between them, seized her by the shoulders, and dragged her to his mouth.

He'd had it wrong back in the cemetery, thinking there was nothing better than learning he could hit without experiencing pain and steal a kiss without catching a punch. There *was* something better—there was this, and this was everything. Buffy against him, entangling herself around him, her body still warm from the shower and nothing but a damp towel separating her from his hands. It was better because it was truly her—Buffy battling him with her mouth, chasing his tongue and nipping at his lips, kissing him like she meant to leave a mark. Like she was as starved for him as he was for her, and the thought that she might be had him trembling when he tangled his fingers through her hair and cupped the back of her head. When he groaned and rolled his hips, his cock straining against his jeans and Buffy there thrusting back with all her warmth and her softness and her pure bloody *good*.

The towel began to slip, and he worried that when it did, she might snap back to her senses. Shove him back or pop him in the nose or just have it over with and stake him good and proper, and maybe he'd deserve it, but he couldn't stand the thought of coming this close and not having more. And since fortune favored the brave, Spike tugged the towel down the next second, dragging his mouth over her collarbone, her breasts, and then captured one of her perfect rosy nipples between his lips and gave it a good tug.

"Unh," Buffy whimpered, rolling her head back.

A hint of delicious slayer musk hit his nostrils, emblazoning him with the sort of awareness she couldn't explain away. She was wet—

soaked, actually. She wanted him as much as he wanted her, and that knowledge was intoxicating.

Especially when her fingers sank into his hair. "Spike...this is...insane."

He fought the urge to laugh. He'd left *sane* a few turns back the other way. "Mhmm," he agreed, loving the way she gasped when his mouth rumbled around her. "We've cracked, you and I. Might as well enjoy it."

She didn't respond for a second, and when she did, it wasn't with words. Rather, Buffy shoved his duster down his shoulders, then pulled the borrowed T-shirt he'd gotten from the morgue over his head and pitched it toward a corner, her eyes bright and uncertain but the rest of her knew what she wanted and thank his lucky stars, it was that part that seemed to be in charge at the moment. Then her hands were on him, all that warmth and life exploring the contours of his arms and chest, shaking as though it could possibly mean to her what it meant to him. It didn't, but a bloke could pretend. *He* could pretend.

"You hate me," she said hoarsely as she turned her attention to his belt. "You hate me, I hate you. That's the way it works." The whip of leather through the denim loops sounded oddly illicit against the otherwise still air, the slide of his zipper even more so. "We shouldn't do this."

"Even if I can't get you outta my bloody head?" Spike demanded, then *Christ*, the Slayer's hand was around him. Squeezing and tugging and so hot he thought he might just combust and bugger all if he gave a damn. Especially as long as she kept doing that, pulling along his shaft, her thumb caressing the head on the upstroke. "Fucking hell, Buffy..."

"You can't?"

A whimper scratched at his throat as he rocked into her hand. "Can't what?"

"Can't...get me out of your head?"

Oh right. Spike pressed his brow to hers, shaking harder still, transfixed by the sight of her small hand wrapped around him—a hand he was more used to seeing in fist-form, flying straight for his nose, breaking and smashing and causing nothing but pain, now stroking his

cock in the slightly fumbling way of girls who didn't quite know what they wanted but knew they wanted something. Unless his facts were wrong, it had only been twice for her, and both experiences had left her wounded. Yet here she was. With him. Trying.

If he hadn't loved her before, this would have been the moment he fell the rest of the way.

"Since that spell," he said, ran his palm across the nipple still wet from his mouth, before he slowly slid his hand down her stomach. Felt the way she shook with every inch of flesh he touched, then her encouraging gasp when he parted the slick folds of her pussy and slipped a finger inside of her. No polite testing, no waiting—just into molten heat that clamped around him at first blush. A growl tickled at his throat, but he shoved it back. "Wanna know why I took off? It was to get away from you—from wanting you. Wanting *this*."

Buffy's breaths came harder, her pulse louder, but she didn't speak. So he went on.

"Turns out it's too late for me, Slayer. I'm gonna drown in you and I can't stop."

She squeezed him so hard it would have hurt—should have hurt—but all it did was make him groan at the thought of what it would be like when he sank inside of her. "I think," she said, still in that strangled voice. "I think I don't want you to stop."

"No?" Spike brushed a kiss against her cheek, nibbled a path back along her chin until he had her mouth again.

"I... Spike..."

"Don't tell me the Slayer's been havin' naughty thoughts about yours truly."

Her brow furrowed like it did when she was in battle, making his dead heart twist again. He rumbled a little growl, pushing another finger inside her and damn near losing his grip on his remaining control when the silken walls of her pussy clenched tight. The thought of all that strength, all that hot wetness strangling his cock, was almost too much for his head—as though he could feel it pressing along the inside of his skull, suffocating under its own intensity. He skated his teeth down her neck and along her shoulder as he pulled his hand back, his drenched fingers slipping out of her with a wet sound, and

then she mewled and nodded and rolled her hips and whispered, "Yes, dammit, is that what you wanna hear?" before he pushed back into her, his thumb finding her clit this time. Buffy jolted and gave a throaty little cry and tightened her grip around his cock almost as an afterthought, as though she needed something to ground her and was holding on best she could.

"More," Spike murmured before catching her earlobe between his teeth. "Tell me more."

"It's so embarrassing..."

"Think we're a step or two beyond embarrassing." He kissed his way back to her mouth, and she was there, ready and desperate for him. All that fire and anger and resentment, Buffy fighting him the way she did with her fists, now with frantic pulls of her lips and even more frantic whimpers at her throat. He wasn't going to last, having her cunt around his fingers and his cock in her hand, and fuck, if they were really doing this, they'd do it the right way.

Spike broke his mouth from hers with a gasp and stumbled back far enough that he lost his hold on her, and she on him. "More, Slayer," he snapped before he could help himself. "Or I won't give you what you really want."

It took Buffy a couple of seconds to find her footing, but when she did, she narrowed eyes that had gone dark. "And what's that?"

"Think we both know the answer there." He winked and wrapped his own hand around his prick, trying not to react when his fingers—warm and wet from having been inside of her—met his cool skin. "You tell me you've wanted this as much as I have. Me. This cock. Tell me you've been cravin' it, or this ends here."

The fight he loved so much returned to her then, fierce and brilliant and so beautiful he could weep. But it didn't last—her gaze dropped the next second, followed the strokes of his hand up and down his shaft, and glowed with hunger she couldn't hide. Not from him.

And Christ, she better never hide from him again. Now that there was more than a space between them, he could see her properly. The full picture, Buffy bare to him. Her smooth skin, flushed with excitement. Her hair, still damp, hung loosely around her shoulders. Her rosy

dewdrop nipples hard and waiting for his mouth. All of her, the softness and the strength, the girl and the warrior, ready to fuck or fight, whatever he threw at her.

He'd never stood a chance, he realized. Not against her. From the second she'd danced her way into his life, he'd been lost, his heart just waiting for the rest of him to catch up. He could try running but she would just follow, if not in person then in every other way. Buffy would chase him no matter how much space he tried to put between them. She would chase him, and he would want to be caught because knowing her was worth the pain of loving her.

Then he didn't care if she admitted it or not, he had to touch her again.

She must have seen that in his face, that understanding, or maybe she was just at the end of her own tether—either way, Buffy launched herself at him the next second, and now she was all hellcat. Raking her nails down his chest, along his arms and up his neck as he swore and worked to kick off his boots, finish the job of shoving his jeans down his legs. Bloody hard with Buffy trying to climb him but he didn't care. Never been one to step back from a challenge, especially when her name was Buffy Summers. Spike caught her mouth again, snarling when she scraped her teeth along his lips, hauled her properly into his arms, relished the burn of her skin against his, then tossed her onto the mattress hard enough the bloody thing gave a whine of warning—one he barely heard, more interested in the way her tits bounced.

But he didn't look long. As fabulous as her breasts were to watch, they were even better when under his tongue. He pounced, caging her in beneath him, pressing against her softness and her warmth and that essential *Buffy* quality he'd been searching for his whole bloody life without realizing it. There was so much of her he wanted to explore but he wasn't sure how much time they had, or how much she'd give him. If later, he could bury his head between her thighs, if she'd let him learn the parts of her he was only now getting to see.

"Not gonna be nice and gentle," he warned, holding her gaze as he seized his cock and teased the head along her fiery cunt. "You want nice and gentle, ask me for it next time."

"There will be a next time?"

The question, and the way she said it, was possibly the only thing that had a chance of breaking through the lust-filled haze he was swimming in. It would have been one thing if she'd spat it out, snarled with challenge—the audacity that he'd think she'd let this happen again. That she was even letting it happen now. But there was no bite in her voice, more tremulous amazement. He'd had it wrong before—*this* was the moment he would have fallen all the way. Or maybe that was just his life now, falling in love with her again and again, having that moment constantly redefined.

“Oh baby...” Spike dipped his head and kissed her again, felt the vibration of her whimper as he pushed inside the hottest, tightest pussy he'd ever known. And despite what he'd told her, he couldn't help but just hold himself for a flash, savor the exquisite feel of her pulsing around him with all her fire and strength—this most remarkable girl he couldn't keep and would never deserve, this girl to whom *a next time* sounded a novelty.

“I get my way, Slayer,” he growled against her swollen lips, then hissed as he drew back, her vise of a cunt clenching around his cock, making him fight for every inch in the best way possible, “the rest of your life will be made up of our *next times*.”

Maybe that was saying too much—probably it was, but for now, he didn't care. Couldn't. Not while staring down into her wide, wondering eyes, watching her watch him when he rolled his hips and speared his cock into her once more. He planted his hands on either side of her head and took her mouth again as he began to move inside her. What happened after this was over was a question for another day, for this was a moment he was determined to live within. The way she felt, the way she burned, the rich, warm scent of her filling his nostrils and his throat. Then there were the soft gasps he earned with every thrust—as though she were caught off guard. It went fast, of course, because all good things did, that primal need of seconds before seizing him all over again. Overwhelming him inside and out, until he had been reduced to little more than pure instinct. Not just thrusting but pounding, pounding so hard the bed frame shook and thumped in rhythm against the wall, filling his ears with its steady cadence, which was offset by the wet smack of flesh and the small gasps that spilled

from her lips. And Christ, there was so much of her to explore and he wanted all of it all at once. Wanted to soak her into his every sense. He ran his tongue down her throat, across her collarbone, over her breasts—first one, then the other, sucking and biting and teasing her nipples and growling every time she rolled up to meet him. Tentative at first, as though she didn't trust her body, then with growing confidence and *god*, if that wasn't a privilege to watch. The uncertainty melting into something that was more her.

"That's it," he whispered, not realizing he meant to speak until the words were out. She had an arm curled around his neck and both legs around his waist, hugging him with her ankles to pull him harder into her. "That's it, Slayer. Don't hold back. I want all of it."

"Be careful what you wish for," she retorted, tugging him down for another kiss. He loved the way she kissed—had missed that the most of everything else the spell had cost him. How she'd seemed hungry for him. Hell, not just hungry, but ravenous. No one had ever kissed him like that. And he was so lost in that, in the way she battled him with her tongue and body in equal measure, that he was caught completely unawares when she put that marvelous strength to its proper use and flipped him onto his back.

"Oh god!" She threw her head back, looking every part the goddess, and started undulating in rhythm.

"You're perfect," Spike rasped, palming one of her breasts and stroking his thumb over her nipple. He swallowed and hissed as she rode him, her hair swaying around her face, the weak light in the room making her seem damn near ethereal. His cock, slick with her juices, being swallowed again and again by the most beautiful pussy he'd ever seen. "Fucking perfect."

Buffy steadied herself with her hands on his chest, gave her hips a swirl. And he started talking. Not really sure what he was saying, not trying to keep up, just letting whatever crossed his mind spill from his lips. How she looked, how she felt, how much he'd wanted this—wanted her—and how he was ruined as a result. That it should have been simple, straightforward, but that he'd known from the second he saw her that something in him had changed forever and there was no going back. All the while staring at her face, taking in the way his

words hit her, how she tensed and trembled, how she clamped hard around his cock, squeezed him damn near to dust in the most brilliant marriage of pleasure and pain he'd ever known.

He was right. She was perfect. And the thought of never having *perfect* again, that the next time she'd asked him about might never come, about made his chest shatter. There was no going back, though, and he knew it. He just had to make sure she did too.

He palmed her arse, dug his fingers into her skin, and worked her harder up and down his cock. Felt the base of his spine began to tingle, his balls to throb, his gums aching with the pressure of his fangs. She was growing tighter and wetter by the second—her need as tangible as his own. Chasing a high with the same gritty determination that had stolen his heart from the beginning. He dragged a hand over her sweat-damp thigh to nudge her clit every time she sank onto him, soaked in the way her eyes widened and the little, surprised 'O' she made with her lips. And then—*fuck, yes*—she choked out a sob and trembled hard, her pussy pulsing and choking his cock, and he couldn't hold back if he wanted to. Couldn't have stopped. He'd been telling her the truth when he'd said she was drowning him, and he'd never been happier to die. Spike grasped her by the back of her head and drew her down to swallow the last of her orgasm as he bucked, jetting his own release into her. Felt her tremble anew around him when he did, as though she were as lost as he was.

Fuck, he *hoped* she was. It would be nice not to be alone in this.

They lay in a tangle for a time, Spike dragging in gulps of air that tasted of her and him and them together. Thinking about how it was they'd gotten here and not seeing it, but also seeing nothing else, nor what the next day might bring. All he knew right now was Buffy was in his arms, panting into his chest, surrounding him still with her warmth and light, and somehow the burn didn't hurt. It just made him want more.

He would always want more.

"Spike."

He couldn't help but grin. Her voice was a tad hoarse, and that was because of him. "Yeah?"

"You...you really meant what you said about another time?" Buffy

lifted her head, though it seemed to take some effort, and met his eyes. "I haven't had the best luck with those."

There it was again, that twist in his chest. The one that bore her name. He could tell her now, he supposed. Give her the words, let her know just how much of him was hers. He could, but then she would have everything she needed to destroy him, stake or no. He wasn't sure he was ready to give her that sort of power. So, instead, he worked his throat and nodded. "As many times as you want, love."

"That might be a lot. You kinda ruined my Christmas."

"Did I?" Spike hesitated, then drew his hand around her head so he had her cheek against his palm. "Wager there's some way I could make it up to you," he murmured, running his thumb over her lips. "Turn this whole holiday around for you. If you'll let me."

Buffy held his gaze, dragging her teeth over her lower lip. "I like presents I can enjoy all year. One-and-done is kinda lame."

His breath hitched. Was she saying...

"And I like knowing where my presents are at all times," she went on, still looking at him, though he could tell it was costing her something now. "I-if I have to go try to find it because it decided to take off, well, I'm going to be cranky."

"What if I fancy you when you're cranky?"

"This is the kind of cranky that comes with a stake. Doubt it'd be your thing."

"Guess I'll have to stick around then."

"I think you owe me."

He couldn't help it—he grinned, his lips pulling so wide it nearly hurt. "And one doesn't want to be indebted to the Slayer."

"Very much with the no."

She talked a good game, he'd admit, but he knew her too well to miss the uncertainty in her eyes. The part of her that was soft and still tender from the times she'd entrusted it to others. If there was a road ahead for them, it wouldn't be an easy one.

But god, every step would be worth it if she was still at his side when they made it to the end.

"Looks like you're stuck with me." Spike lifted his head to kiss her and almost bloody melted when she responded with enthusiasm.

When the tension in her body relaxed, the second he felt her start to believe. His cock swelled once more, and she groaned and wiggled her pert little arse, but before she could begin moving in earnest, he seized her shoulders and rolled her over.

The second he slipped out of her pussy, Buffy pulled away with a gasp, blinking up at him, her brow knitting in confusion. "What? I thought we had an agree—"

He kissed her again. "Stuck with me," he whispered against her lips. "Which means I want me a taste."

"Taste?"

Spike flicked an eyebrow, nipped at her mouth, then began a slow, nibbling slide down her body.

"Oh." Buffy breathed out, then hissed and arched as he licked and stroked, and was ready to part her thighs in welcome by the time he settled between them. Letting him close, letting him see exactly what he did to her. All wet and pink and perfect. "I think... I think I'm okay with that," she said at last.

He chuckled as he stretched one of her legs over his shoulder. "Thought you might be," he said, and dragged his tongue from her clit to her opening. "Now let a man eat in peace. Got me a bell to ring."

A sound that was half-sigh, half-giggle erupted off her lips, unlike anything he'd ever heard from her before. Soft and playful and full of something that he felt instantly he'd spent his years trying to find, even if he hadn't heard it until now. Until that very second. The certainty hit him with such power that he was trembling when she tangled her fingers through his hair and rubbed herself along his face. "I am"—she whimpered and rolled her hips again, digging her heel into the small of his back—"so not good with the taking of orders but...exception. I can make one. This time."

Spike gave his head a shake and earned another of those delicious moans. "I *did* ruin your Christmas."

"Uh huh."

"Any way I can make it up to you?"

There was a pause, then Buffy grinned, opening her eyes and meeting his own. And perhaps he was a fool to hope, but hell, he hoped.

It couldn't mean to her what it did to him. Not yet. But that look made him think that maybe it would, someday. If he was very lucky. If he did everything right.

"Yeah," she said, her voice soft. "Try."

Spike held her gaze, held all of her, and smiled.

That he could do.

