

SLAYER BOUND



HOLLY DENISE



THE LIGHTS WERE GOING WONKY AND THE PHONES WERE RINGING OFF the bloody hook, and everyone was screaming at him as though he were the one responsible. As though he had asked for any of this.

But even so, Spike couldn't slow down. Couldn't let himself. He'd made a promise—a vow to whatever was out there pulling the strings—that if he had the chance, if he was given a new lease on life or unlfe or life of any bloody sort, that he wouldn't be so daft as to throw it away.

The last few weeks had been some of the most trying of his existence, being here but not really here, watching other people take for granted the things that made life worth living while Angel kept nattering away about his certainty that Buffy was better off not knowing about Spike's return. That contacting her would be selfish. That she had just started living life free of complications like vampire ex-lovers and that Spike would be a right git if he thought about bollixing that up. That dragging Buffy into his mess would prove Spike's soul wasn't much use after all. A cheap parlor trick when it came to certain, less-worthy vampires. And he'd been eating it up, too. That's what killed him. Angel spouting off, filling his head with second thoughts and doubts that would have been there anyway, but at a decibel low enough to ignore.

But it wasn't like Spike had anything to lose. Even if all he got upon showing up was a firm handshake, that was better than nothing. Better than trailing after sodding *Angel* like a stray looking for a new master.

It had been that ordeal with Pavyne that had set Spike's head back on straight. The tenuous tether that kept him bouncing back and forth between some desolate hellscape and the world to which he'd no longer belonged. If an eternity of torment was what waited for him at the end of his miserable existence, then he had a lot of living to do in the interim. Memories to keep him company in the long expanse of forever.

He had to touch. Bloody had to. Touch and taste and smell and feel. As a spook, he'd been everything but invisible, cut off from the world around him the way Buffy herself had once imagined she was cut off. Only she *had* been invisible then; invisible but still able to touch and taste and smell and feel—he'd experienced that last part intimately. She'd felt dead, maybe even craved it, but she'd been alive. Whereas he hadn't felt at all, existing in his in-between of not dead or undead. Not alive, either. A half-life. A whisper. A phantom. One that couldn't touch.

Except now... Christ, now he could. And he had a slayer to find.

"Right," Spike said after he'd pulled back from the hug he'd launched at a very bemused Fred amid the surrounding chaos. "Think that settles things nicely. I'm off."

"Off?" Angel barked at him, rushing to put his own hulking body between Spike and the bank of elevators. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"Where do you reckon, mate?"

"You can't just leave here now!" He waved a hand at the office, which was, indeed, in a state of highly comedic disarray. "We need to know what the hell happened. Who did this and why."

"Gee, as borin' as that sounds, think I'll have to skip it." Spike rolled his eyes and darted around the brooding git, striding firmly once again for the elevator. He had bugger-all idea where to start his search—well, that wasn't true. He'd start in Angel's fancy garage—nick one of the penis metaphors he had in his collection and hock it for some dosh. That ought to give him enough to get moving.

And then...

Well, he didn't know right yet. Wasn't like the old days when he'd just follow the screams of the locals to see what Dru had gotten herself up to. Angel had mentioned that Buffy was in Europe, last he'd heard, which really meant bollocks because that had been months ago. But fortunately for Spike, Buffy Summers was a rather famous name in the circles he ran in. Even now, with the globe overrun with slayers, she would be the one who stood out. The name everyone knew.

After all, she'd changed the bloody world.

"You can't really be this selfish," Angel yapped behind him. "Really, Spike, there are things to figure out. We don't know who sent that package. You could be playing right into their hands."

Spike stepped onto the lift and turned, stifling a grin, albeit not very well. "Seems to me that's your problem," he said cheerfully as he pressed the button for the ground level. "Wouldn't have to take off if you'd just called her from the start. Bloody hell. Wonder how she'll take *that* news. Me bein' alive and... Well, not *well*, but not as dead as she thought, and you knowin' but refusing to ring her up. And why was that, Angel? Couldn't be that you're jealous, now, could it?"

“Spike—”

“Oh, sorry, mate,” he said as the lift doors started to close. “Not fast enough.”

The last glimpse he had of Angel was one he reckoned he’d savor until he was properly dust. Brow all screwed up, beady eyes so narrow they practically disappeared into his face, hands on his hips. It was a bloody wonder the oaf hadn’t pulled the lift’s emergency brake, but Spike wasn’t going to complain. The quicker he got out of here, the better.

He had a slayer to find.

And a declaration to return at long last.



OF COURSE, it couldn’t be as easy as all that. Nothing involving Buffy Summers ever could.

The first part of the plan, if one could even call it a plan, had gone decently enough. There had been a merry selection of vehicles waiting in Angel’s private garage, all with a street value that fattened Spike’s pockets almost to the point of excess. Only travel itself wasn’t exactly cheap these days, and getting anywhere while also dodging the sun was one of those tricks that just kept going up in cost.

But not for nothing was Los Angeles a demons’ town. There were any number of bottom-dwellers with a hand for the mystic arts if a bloke knew where to look. And as it happened, Spike was just such a bloke. He didn’t much like relying on the tricks that had served him as a soulless bastard—the warlock or whatever he’d done business with last year when the aim had been to get to Africa rather than Europe hadn’t been the sort that Buffy would approve of. He’d known it then, too, but the task of landing himself a soul had outshone any potential moral gray areas that he had been bloody shite at navigating anyway. Just add it to his list of sins. One more certainly wasn’t going to tip the scales.

That had been then, though, and this was now. He was a new man... or trying to be. Trying to be the sort who would be worthy of her, if not now then someday. So Spike opted against darkening that particular warlock’s doorway once more, easy as it would be. Fork over the dosh, step up to the door, twist the knob, and find himself on the other side of

the world, minus all the pesky travel time and jetlag. Nice in theory but not in what it would cost.

Which was how he found himself sneaking back into Wolfram and Hart. Not that he was daft enough to think Angel wasn't made aware the second he stepped back on the premises—he'd stood about enough in the time since being spilled from that amulet to know that there was a whole bloody warning system that went off whenever an unaccounted-for vampire was suddenly on the grounds. But if Angel was bothered with his presence, Spike heard nary a word, rather headed with intent toward the wing where Jolly Green headed up the firm's entertainment division.

If anyone knew someone who knew someone in this city, it had to be Lorne.

"Let me get this straight, gumdrop," Lorne said, steepling his long, green fingers and leaning back in his chair behind one of the most ostentatious desks Spike wagered had ever been commissioned. An ostentatious desk on which the demon also had his Armani'd feet propped. "You're lookin' for a ticket to ride across the Atlantic?"

"That's right."

"And you don't know where."

"Europe."

"Yeah, honey, I'm not from this dimension but even I know *Europe* is a pretty darn big place." Lorne shook his head and lowered his feet to the floor with a regretful sigh, as though it had cost him something. "Can't we see if we can narrow it down just an eensy bit? Angelkins—"

"Doesn't need to be involved. He's already done enough."

Lorne favored Spike with a patently condescending smile. "Look," he said. "I know you two've got your beef and it's all very Beverly Hills 90210. But sweetie-pumpkin, bossman ain't gonna stand in your way because if he does? He knows it'll get back to Buffy. And even though she broke his Tuscaloosa heart a few months back, I'm fairly confident that he still wants her to be happy."

Spike fired up, retort at the ready, then frowned. "The Slayer did what now?"

"Oh, he didn't tell you?" The smile on the demon's face turned into a smirk as he leaned conspiratorially across the desk and said, softer,

“Little Miss Buffet rolled through town after Sunnydale went bye-bye. I wasn’t there, myself—talent scouting, as I am now wont to do—but from what I was told, Fred accidentally let slip the deal we made with Wolfram and Hart and... Let’s just say, I gather ears are still ringing from the fuss she made.”

“Didn’t know the Slayer was familiar with Wolfram and Hart.”

Lorne waved a hand. “I don’t know how it all went down, dollface. Like I said, had other places to be.”

“And all this time I’ve been bloody tethered to the place and no one thought to mention Buffy lost her bloody head over me?”

“Whoa, ego check there, poodle. I didn’t say it was over you. Just that she made it clear to Angel that things between them were far from okey-dokey. After all that, I imagine our hunka brooding boss won’t have the nerve be the reason you two kids are kept apart.” A pause, then Lorne inclined his head. “It’s one thing when it’s your choice, but when he’s calling the shots? Well, let’s just say I’ve learned since teaming up with the devil that there’s a reason they call certain contract clauses CYA.”

Spike raised his eyebrows.

“Cover your ass,” Lorne said, nodding sagely. “Seriously, pudding, go talk to Angel. He might twist and shout but ultimately, he doesn’t want to be the reason Buffy the Vampire Slayer is hacked off.”

That didn’t seem likely, considering the state he’d left things in the day before, but in retrospect it was a bit barmy to go about this the other way—traipsing across Europe and thrashing various beasties for information. Just a step above going door to door and asking if Buffy lived there. So not twenty-four hours after he’d helped himself to one of Angel’s cars and secured a bit of financing, Spike strolled right into Angel’s office, ignoring Harmony, who started barking things like, “He doesn’t want to see you,” and “Go away,” and “Aren’t you supposed to be cuddling up to your slayer girlfriend right about now?” the closer he got. He didn’t so much as glance over his shoulder before kicking the door closed in her face.

“I don’t suppose you returned the Jag, did you?” Angel drawled without looking up from whatever busywork taking up his desk.

“Sure you could get it back,” Spike replied, hooking his thumbs

through his belt loops. “Sellin’ out to the biggest bloody evil on earth oughta come with deep pockets.”

“What do you want, Spike?”

“You know what I want.”

Angel was still for a moment, then slowly lifted his head, his expression stony. “And you know what I wanted. Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

“It’s a bloody car, *Angel*. Didn’t look like you were hurtin’ for wheels, either.”

“I’m not talking about the car, dammit. I’m talking about you.” He kicked up from his seat, heaving one of his trademark no-one-understands-me-aren’t-I-tragic sighs as he did. “About *us*, actually.”

“Dunno how to break it to you, mate, but I’m just not that into you.”

“There’s a prophecy, William. About the vampire with a soul who plays a pivotal role in the apocalypse.” Angel rounded the desk, crossing his arms. Another classic favorite—the power pose. How this wanker had ever convinced himself he and his alter ego only shared a body was a study in self-delusion. “It’s pretty vague on the details, admittedly, and it doesn’t specify what side the vampire fights on, but the takeaway is this vampire will, at the end of it, turn human.”

Spike blinked. Whatever he’d been expecting, it hadn’t been that. “Is that right?”

“Yes. And we need to determine which one of us the prophecy is talking about. I’m sure it’s me, but—”

“And why is that, exactly? How many times have you saved the world?”

He waited, watched Angel work his throat. Yeah, that’s what he’d thought.

“I helped stop Wilkins from Ascending,” he said after a long beat. “And Acatla—”

“Don’t think you get the rights to that one, mate.” Spike didn’t really get the rights, either, but he came a lot closer. And the Hellmouth, well... “So that’s what this is about? You’ve been gunnin’ for some prize trinket as a reward for bein’ a good little boy and are afraid ol’ Spike swept in to steal your glory?”

“No, because you didn’t. You’re clearly still a vampire.”

“Also clearly one world-savin’ up on you, and that’s got you riled, hasn’t it? What, have you been keepin’ score? ‘Save so many lives and get a shag’? ‘Save the world and get the girl’?” He shook his head, barking a laugh. “You’re pathetic.”

“*I’m* pathetic? I’m not the one who got a soul to get into a girl’s pants.”

Spike bit back the retort that wanted to come—something about how he hadn’t needed a soul to get into the Slayer’s knickers at all—but that felt cheap, making Buffy a prop more than anything else, and that wasn’t his game. Maybe it was Angel’s. Maybe it was Angel bringing out the worst in him. Hell, *probably* it was Angel bringing out the worst in him. The wanker did have a knack for it.

“Take the sodding prophecy,” Spike said, waving a hand. “If that’s what you’re so worried about, you can have it.”

“You can’t just give it to me!”

“Says who?”

Angel opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again. If he had a pulse, this would be about the time he’d start going red around the ears. “It’s not yours to give!” he snapped. “It’s whoever earns it, and now there are two vampires in the running.”

“Your math’s still off.”

“Spike—”

“I don’t bloody care!” Spike practically screamed, planting his hands on Angel’s over-large chest and giving him a hefty shove that sent the git stumbling back against his desk. “Not my problem, is it? I’m here ’cause I need to know where Buffy is. Preferably an answer a mite more specific than *Europe*.”

Angel was looking at him as though he’d suddenly started speaking Fyarl. “Buffy?”

“Yeah. Heard of her, have you? ’Bout yay tall. Blonde. Calls herself the Chosen One. Bloody nuts about me.”

“You’re still assuming she wants to see you.”

Spike shrugged, though he looked away quickly, not wanting to give the question the chance to sink into him the way he knew Angel intended. Yeah, he could be setting himself up for heartbreak. Probably even was. But after everything with Pavyne, he knew—he

bloody *knew* the only true hell would be never trying. "Didn't say that," he replied at length. "Could be she tosses me out on my arse. Her call. But I need to hear it from her. Not one of her insipid exes. Would never forgive myself if I found out I had a chance and didn't take it."

Something flashed across Angel's face—something small and easy to miss, unless you happened to be someone who had known the prat as long as Spike had. "This business with the Shanshu—" he began a moment later.

"Gesundheit."

"The prophecy, you moron."

"Well, stake me, pops, how the bloody hell was I supposed to know that?"

"Don't tempt me," Angel replied through his teeth. "We need to settle the Shanshu before you leave."

"Says who?"

"Says me, dammit. I'm the one holding the cards, aren't I? You need me to know where to go and I need to get this mess fixed."

"And how do you propose we do that?"

Angel didn't answer right away, though he clearly didn't need time to think. He knew what he wanted. It was there in his eyes. "I've had a few meetings with our prophecies division," he said once he'd decided the pause had been dramatic enough. "And it is possible for anyone who might be subject to a prophecy to forfeit their right to it."

Oh. Convenient, that was. Also contradictory. "Didn't you just say it doesn't work like that? I can't give it to you, or what all?"

"This isn't you giving it to me," Angel replied through his teeth. "This is you signing away the chance for it to mean you."

"Amounts to the same thing, doesn't it?"

"Not if I don't earn it. Or if there are even more souled vampires running around."

That was a thought. "Reckon there are?"

"We can never know how many times that curse was used, can we?"

Spike just stared at him for a moment, then snorted and looked away. "Just can't bloody stand it, can you? Thinkin' you might not be the Powers' special boy after all."

"This isn't about me."

"Bollocks."

"What does it even matter? You said you didn't want the prophecy."

"No, I don't. Gotta wonder, though, do you?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Why *would* you? Forgettin', *Liam*, I know you better than most, includin' what you were before."

"You weren't there," Angel snapped.

"Maybe not," Spike retorted, "but I did happen to have a perfectly fine pair of ears, so as not to miss those times Darla started blabbin' about the day you swept her off her feet and made her realize you were the one for her. Pathetic, useless waste of a man's what your pop used to call you, innit?"

A shadow crossed Angel's face and for a second, Spike thought he might throw a punch, but then the second passed and his grandsire's fists remained at his sides.

"Things are different now," he said. "I'm not the man I was then. I *wouldn't* be again."

"So you do want it. Or you've convinced yourself you do." Spike paused, considered. "When'd you learn about this Shanshu bugaboo? Since you signed on here or before?"

Once more, Angel didn't answer right away, which in itself was an answer.

"Havin' a little competition really has got you runnin' scared, hasn't it?"

"Do you want Buffy's location or not?"

"You think you're the one pillock standing in my way? I can find her without your help."

"So you want to keep your name in the running. And here I thought you didn't care about the prophecy."

"I don't," Spike said, and it was perfectly true, but that didn't mean he was keen to let Angel snap it up, knowing how it'd make the Slayer's head spin. He hadn't quite stamped out the memory of that snog the two had shared right before the big battle, no matter how hard he'd tried. There was a lot there—too much that he and Buffy hadn't discussed before the apocalypse that had claimed his life. Neither one of them had wanted to waste time wondering about the future or arbitrating the

present, trying to determine what they were or would be. Well, she'd started to ask and he hadn't let it get further than that, because seeing beyond the fight with the First meant believing, and he'd been too bloody terrified to believe. The thought of an after with Buffy had been too heady, and the potential fall too much for a heart held together with ruddy masking tape.

Even if Buffy wanted something with him, would she always be waiting for the apocalypse to come and turn her first choice into a real boy? Was he delaying heartbreak for the potential of a few stolen days, months, years before the penny dropped?

Could he live with himself if he didn't try?

"Right, fine," Spike said after a moment. He couldn't live his bloody life looking over his shoulder either way. He'd find her, offer himself up, but make it clear he wasn't anyone's replacement. If she wanted to toss him to the dogs then, that was her choice. At least he'd know.

"Fine?"

"Yeah, fine. Take the sodding prophecy if you think it's your ace in the bloody hole. A gimmick might be flashy, but it's still just a gimmick in the end."

Angel made a face like he'd tasted something foul. Likely swallowing whatever retort had come to mind, believing he didn't need it. He'd gotten what he wanted, hadn't he?

"I'll let them know to expect you in the prophecy office," he said instead with strained politeness that fooled no one. "And once that's done, I'll put you on a plane to Europe."

And that was that. All it took. Negotiating away his right to be the subject of a prophecy Spike hadn't known existed, with a prize he didn't want. He marched his way down to the office, where a demon wearing a human suit waited with the contract—all typed up and ready to go, how's that for convenience?—and one of those fancy pens that Angel so preferred, cap already off. Spike gave the language a quick read then scrawled his name on the line.

He thought briefly about telling Angel where he could shove the private jet he did indeed have waiting for him after the deed was done, but took one look inside—both the plane proper and the minibar—and decided his principles could survive a little bending.

After all, he was about to see Buffy again for the first time in months. For the first time since she'd told him she loved him and he'd told her she didn't.

He could use a bit of comfort for what he thought might be coming at him.



THE SLAYER WAS ON A DATE. Or that was what it looked like from this angle.

Who the hell was he kidding? She was with the sodding Immortal. Of course it was a date.

The pair was seated at a small table outside of a quaint bistro just a couple of blocks down from the Colosseum in a patch of radiant sunlight. Blinding, really, even from Spike's vantage point across the street, the shades he'd been handed as he'd stepped off Angel's private jet doing little to dull the glare or ease his growing headache.

Buffy on a date with the Immortal. It was a punch to the gut, or a stake to the heart. For whatever reason, it hadn't occurred to him that *Italy* would put her within sniffing distance of that otherworldly Lothario, but obviously it had. Any slayer would be a conquest but Buffy Summers? She was something more. Something damn near legend. The Immortal wouldn't be able to help himself.

And it certainly seemed he was having the time of his life now. Flashing those pearly whites, raking his hand through the long chestnut locks of hair that, according to Drusilla, felt simply decadent when wrapped around one's neck. He'd adapted to the twenty-first-century concept of fashion about as well as Spike had expected—wearing one of those ridiculous shirts that looked at least three sizes too small so each of his rippling muscles was displayed to its best advantage.

Spike wanted badly to believe Buffy could see right through the ponce. If anyone could, it would be her. She'd already experienced the raw side of having a lover that was something other than human. Unless she didn't know the Immortal wasn't human—Spike had never sussed out whether the prat used a glamour or not. It hadn't mattered in the end. Dru had still insisted on riding his prick.

If Buffy was suspicious, though, she wasn't showing it. Instead, she was doing the coy flirtation thing that Spike had witnessed her affect more times than he could sodding count. The shy smiles, the hesitant hair tuck, the light touches and the full-on laugh that, busy crossway or not, couldn't help but meet Spike's ears anyway.

It looked like she was having the time of her life.

It looked like he was too late.

Spike sucked in a breath and forced himself to tear his gaze away. He wasn't sure why he was surprised, or if even *surprise* was the right word for what he felt. The decision to find her, to see if he hadn't been imagining everything between them last year, to gamble that she might have meant it when she'd met his eyes and told him she loved him, had seemed like the hard part. Not that he'd deluded himself into thinking all he'd need to do was show up and spread his arms for her to come dashing in to them, but that he knew what he was potentially signing up for in making the journey. Ditching the prophecy. Leaving behind the chance of a life he didn't want anyway but was at least safe from heartbreak.

There had been two possible outcomes, in his way of thinking, to letting her know he wasn't as dead as she'd thought. The first and most likely—she was happy to see him, might even give him a hug, but all that *maybe when* talk, not to mention the nights spent in each other's arms there toward the end, had been left behind in Sunnyhell. If he wanted to find them, all he had to do was descend into a crater and look.

The second and most hopeful—she'd look at him the way she had when she'd rescued him from the First. The same way she'd looked at him right before their hands had caught fire. Then she'd throw herself into his arms and snog his lips off.

It was called a *fantasy* for a reason, right?

Regardless, neither scenario had her already charmed by another bloke, and he hadn't the foggiest idea why. Wasn't like Buffy hadn't done the moving on thing before. She'd tried with Wood. She'd even chatted up that doctor who had turned out to be sharing the hellgod's body. Attempting to restart her life after having lost everything was the expected thing. Even if she was out with a bloody demon.

Wonder if Rupert'll try to have this one offed too. Then I'll really be jealous.

Well, he'd come this far, hadn't he? Nothing was over until it was over. Even if there was another man warming the Slayer's bed, that didn't mean he should leave without at least letting her know he was alive. She might not want him, might not love him, but she had cared, hadn't she? Learning that he'd only spent a couple of weeks more-dead-than usual was something she'd want to know. And there was always his lack of pride in the matter. If the decision came down to throwing his weight behind Angel or the Slayer, Spike knew what side he would pick every day, every time, no exceptions.

Resolve in place, he sucked in his cheeks and hazarded a glance back across the street, preparing himself for the worst.

And still somehow coming up short.

Buffy was staring at him. *Right* at him. The smile that had been on her face just seconds before had fallen into a slackened expression of pure shock, and her eyes had gone so wide they practically glittered even with the distance that separated them. Her date hadn't noticed, of course, and was prattling on about something that Buffy was clearly no longer listening to. And dangerous or not, Spike felt himself begin to hope.

Then she was coming toward him, and with a fierce *slayer* intent that Spike couldn't help but admire. It was one of those rare cinematic moments, when the flow of traffic was just right so that she didn't have to bob and weave or pause or adjust her speed, just kept moving forward at the same pace while cars flew and bicyclists flew on behind her. At some point, the Immortal realized he was yammering at an empty seat and stood as well, turned to scowl at Buffy's back as she closed the distance between herself and the vampire standing in the shadows.

And just like that, she was there. Standing just feet away, separated by a few tables occupied by clueless tourists who had no idea that everything in Spike's world had just narrowed to the real estate upon which Buffy's feet were planted. Where she was looking at him like he was the ghost he had been up until two days ago.

"Is this a dream?" she asked in a voice that shook.

The question made something in his chest drop. "Dream of me often, do you?"

"If it's a dream, it's..." She lifted a hand as though to touch him but

dropped it before making contact. "It doesn't feel like a dream. You...you usually disappear by now."

Spike swallowed and lowered his sunglasses. "Can disappear now, if that's what you fancy."

"Just answer the question," Buffy shot back, and it wasn't his imagination. Her lower lip had started to tremble. "Tell me that you're real. Because if this is a dream—"

"It's not a dream. I'm real."

She inhaled sharply and nodded, though he could tell she didn't entirely believe it. "How?"

"Bit of a story." He hesitated, then glanced at the scene behind her across the street, where the Immortal still sat, now gazing at Buffy's back with an expression of mingled longing and resignation. "You two been seein' each other long?"

"Huh?" She wrinkled her brow, and her lip stopped trembling. "Who?"

"The sodding Immortal, who else?"

"The Imm... You mean Anton?"

Spike couldn't help it. He rolled his eyes. "Anton? That's the name he gave you? Bloke got me thrown in the clink for tax evasion, but you, he lets call him *Anton*. Must be quite the happy couple."

"Tax evasion? What are you talking about?"

"You and your new beau."

The frown on her face deepened. "You think I'm—Spike, I'm not *with* Anton. And how is it you've been back in my life for thirty seconds and you're already driving me crazy?" She stepped back as though to take in the sight of him, shaking her head, a small, almost tragic smile tugging at her lips now. "You're really here, aren't you? That's how I know I'm dreaming most of the time. You say all the right things instead of being Spike."

Buffy raised her gaze to his again, and the vulnerability he saw there nearly had him on his knees. The tension that had taken residence between his shoulder blades, traveled with him across the sodding world and kept him company as he'd followed the last of the information Angel had given him, started to lift.

“How’s this dream of yours normally go?” he asked, the words coming out somewhat strangled.

“Like this, but you disappear. Or I blink and we’re back in Sunnydale and that amulet has started to glow.” She sniffed. “Or we’re in Los Angeles.”

“Los Angeles?” Fuck, could she have been dreaming about him there this whole time?

She nodded. “You’re there, with Angel for some reason. But you’re also not. Not really, at least. I can never touch you in those dreams.” Buffy blinked hard and looked away, but not before he caught the shine of tears sparkling in her eyes. “You’re really here, though?”

“I’m here, love.”

“Then I can touch you.”

Spike inhaled sharply, the backs of his eyes suddenly stinging. And it was all worth it—everything he had been through. Dying. Coming back. Glimpsing into the hell that awaited him. Pavayne might have been a bloody sadist but he’d also saved Spike’s life.

“I came around the world so you could touch me,” he replied.

For a moment there, he really thought she would. That it could be that easy. That Buffy would break into tearful sobs and throw herself into his arms, hands and mouth in motion, just like in his fantasy. Feeling him the way he hadn’t been able to feel himself in so long, and they wouldn’t have to say anything else. They would simply know, and all the hard talks could be skipped over in favor of a happy reunion.

But she was Buffy. *His* Buffy, not the girl who had once worn her heart on her sleeve, rather the woman he’d fallen in love with. And so she didn’t leap forward, didn’t start snogging him, didn’t even take his hand.

Instead she pressed her lips together and backed up a step. “Okay,” she said. “Hold that thought.”

And so he did.



HE UNDERSTOOD WHAT SHE MEANT. It did feel like a dream. Every part of it. Watching her negotiate her way back across the street, approach the Immortal—*Anton*—and tell him something in a low undertone. The

berk had enough of a spine to throw Spike a sour look before sweeping grandly over Buffy's outstretched hand to kiss the back of it, either misinterpreting or flat-out ignoring how uncomfortable she looked at the gesture. Then Buffy was sprinting toward Spike again, flexing her fingers like she might take his hand when she fell into stride beside him but not actually reaching for him.

That felt very much like a dream. Standing within a breath of what he wanted most in the world but not getting it. A dream or cruel and unusual torture. With Buffy, he reckoned it could go either way.

It was slow getting around Rome while trying to avoid the sun—had been a few years since he'd visited, and never under circumstances like these, where someone was trying to lead him somewhere without leaving his side, for Buffy patently refused to do that. She seemed to be of several minds at the moment—that he was definitely real and he was definitely a hallucination, that leaving him alone would give him time to pull the vanishing act she was sure was on the horizon, that trying to touch him would give the question a firm answer that she couldn't walk back. Every now and then, she looked over her shoulder to see if he was following, and always with surprise when he answered with a grin. Spike wasn't sure he got it—was actually pretty damn sure Buffy was used to straddling the line between life and death. Wasn't every day someone popped back up from the great beyond but it also wasn't out of the question. He should know.

It wasn't until they were inside the building she'd been leading him toward that she broke the silence between them, and as only she could.

"I know I'm being weird."

"Not a usual day for you," he replied.

"No."

"Me neither."

"I don't know if I know what a usual day is anymore," she went on, stopping in front of a door and producing a set of keys from her pocket. "It's not like it's been... It's not easy. The spell we did activated every girl in the world who had the potential to be a slayer. And it sounded great in the middle of the apocalypse, but now Giles wants me to rebuild the Council, and here I thought that there being so many slayers meant that I didn't have to be in charge anymore."

“So don’t be.”

She barked a dry laugh, turning the lock. “You make it sound so easy.”

“Can make it as easy as you like, love. You don’t—”

But then she was stepping through the door and into a space—a cozy flat that smelled faintly of Revello Drive, if only for the people who lived here. Buffy and Dawn, sharing cramped but comfortable quarters in the middle of Rome. Seemed like the sort of thing that had brilliant odds of going pear-shaped, knowing how those two got on, but it warmed him nonetheless. After the past year, they deserved some space of their own. Space that wasn’t overrun with walking hormone bombs, especially if those hormone bombs happened to have superpowers on top of everything else.

Buffy tossed her keys onto a coffee table that sat sandwiched between a cushy sofa and the telly. Then she turned and looked at him—really looked at him. All wide-eyed and vulnerable, though not without skepticism that he still didn’t understand, but also did, in a strange way. She was nothing if not an eternal dichotomy at odds with herself. And him.

“I wasn’t kidding when I said I’ve had this dream,” she said hoarsely. “A lot of times. And it always... When it’s here, when it’s in Rome, this is where it ends. Where it always ends. Sometimes you come straight to this apartment and I get to say all the things I’ve been saying to you for the last few months, and then I wake up, or I don’t wake up but I turn around and you’re not there anymore.”

Spike stepped toward her—or tried. The invisible resistance, the reminder that he hadn’t been invited, pushed back at him. He scowled and raised a hand, felt along the surface of the thing he couldn’t see. So this truly was home for her now.

“You can’t get in?”

He returned his attention to her, offered a half smile. “Know how it works, don’t you? Been the Slayer for a minute now.”

“I—in my dreams, you’re always either just here or you can get in. Just walk on in.”

“Dreams play fast and loose with the rules sometimes.”

“The ones of you in Los Angeles weren’t like that. Unless you really were a ghost.”

Spike opened his mouth, closed it. He didn't know what she wanted him to say. What she was asking for, then decided, sod it. "Not a ghost. Not really."

Her eyes rounded, but she didn't speak.

"Least not that we figured."

"We?"

"Yeah. Been haunting your ex for the last few months."

"*Months?*" This she croaked out hoarsely, and barrier or no barrier, he didn't miss the tears suddenly filling her eyes. "You've been back for months? And I'm just hearing now?"

"He didn't think you'd care."

"Yes, he did," she snapped, though he could tell immediately she wasn't arguing with him. "He should. I went there... We went there right after Sunnydale. Straight to that hotel he runs his business out of—"

"Angel's moved up in the world since you saw him last."

"Yeah," Buffy said, not bothering to hide her bitterness. "I heard. He came to save the world but with a doohickey that he got from what Giles tells me is the evilest evil that ever eviled. Funny he didn't mention that when he handed it over. And then my town was gone. My house. All my stuff. My mom... I'm not crazy, I know she was gone already too but I sometimes visited her on patrol, you know? I never said anything to her—that always wiggled me out—but I knew I could. I could be near her if I wanted to be. And all I wanted to do that night was find you and go to sleep, and then you weren't there, either."

Her voice cracked and she slapped a hand over her mouth, and everything in him screamed at him to move. Take her into his arms and hold her until the memory didn't hurt anymore, though he suspected it always would. But the barrier remained, Buffy standing just a few feet away but somehow also miles away. Almost more apart now than they'd been since he came spilling out of the sodding amulet.

"Angel knew," she went on a moment later. "I told him. He told me I was in shock or something and that I didn't mean it."

"Mean what?"

"I don't remember what all I said, just that I wanted him to know that I didn't trust him. Yeah, what he gave me worked to save the world

but do we know what the price is yet? Besides you.” Buffy raised her eyes back to his. “I just... I don’t get it. You were a ghost and now you’re not?”

“Somethin’ came in the mail the other day. Turned me solid again.”

“What? How?”

Spike lifted a shoulder. “Bugger if I know. Didn’t have a mind to stick around, funny enough. All I wanted was to get to you.” He paused and considered, then figured hell, maybe it was better to put all cards on the table, so long as they were sharing. “Almost didn’t, though.”

“What?”

“Angel, he... I couldn’t get away from him. Mean that literally, understand. I tried to leave town and some sodding thing kept pullin’ me back. Hang around the big pillock enough and some of the rot he spews starts to stick. Like how you were better off without me.”

Buffy’s expression hardened. “He said that?”

“Not in as many words.” Though Angel had never really needed anything more than suggestion. After all, the best manipulation was the invisible sort. Thoughts and decisions that felt like they were yours when they had been placed there by someone else. And now that Spike was standing here, saying these things, really thinking, he felt like the world’s largest dolt. “He knew what I wanted to do, and I started... Balls, I don’t know where my head was. I started thinkin’ how you’d looked at me right before I snuffed it and that I didn’t think I could top that. The look you gave me when I was dying.”

She didn’t move except to blink. “But you’re here.”

“Yeah. Got reminded what hell is, and it’s wherever you’re not. So I came.” He paused again, thought about spilling everything. More of his doubts, his certainty that he was too late—or that there had never been a time at all. Not for them. Just some delusion he’d let himself get trapped inside. Then there was the prophecy that he’d signed away and the possibility that sometime down the line, Angel would be all pulse-having and ready to resume their grand romance. How that could’ve been Spike, perhaps, if he’d stayed and played his cards right. Or just been patient enough to find his own way to Buffy.

What would Buffy say about that? Did he even want to know?

“So,” he said, more to distract himself. “You gonna let a fella in? Said

you wanted to touch me before. Hard to do that without bein' in the same room."

Buffy met his gaze again, working her throat. "If you disappear, I'm kicking your ass."

"Don't tease me, honey."

"I mean it, Spike. If this is a dream, it's the meanest dream I've had yet."

"Only one way to know, isn't there?"

She breathed out, looking anything but convinced, but nodded all the same. "You're right. God, why is this is harder than it should be?"

"Maybe 'cause it's real this time."

"I swear, that better be it." Buffy closed her eyes for what he knew would be the last time, recognizing the expression that fell over her face. The calm. The preparation. The acceptance that she might be going into battle, if only with herself. Calling on all the strength she felt she always needed, even in the quiet moments. Then, finally, she looked at him. "Come in and prove that I'm not asleep."

If life imitated art, this was the moment when his heart would have started to beat in bold defiance of the natural world. Not because he had been made human but just because he was overfilled with anticipation and hope, insecurity and his own lingering doubt. After all, how could anyone really know that they weren't dreaming? He'd had some that had turned him on his head for as real as they'd been, and others—one, in particular—that had changed his life for good. Maybe all a man had to do was trust and keep trusting. Like he was trusting now. Like they were trusting each other.

He moved forward and the barrier was gone. Then he was inside the flat, inside the space that was Buffy, and she was still standing there, reflecting back everything that had started to swell inside. Disbelieving but also believing because what else choice was there?

They studied each other for a long beat before breaking. Moving as one, her to him, him to her, and then his arms were around her and she was solid warmth. Heart beating and blood rushing and lungs pumping, and her breath was at his ear, in his hair, followed by her lips. Over his chin and cheek until he captured them with his own. And everything inside him went up in flames, but this time he did not burn.

Not to death, at least.
And not alone.



OVER THE LAST YEAR, Spike had convinced himself of a number of things, one of the foremost being that if he and Buffy ever made love again, it would be different than before. Softer, sweeter, more tender. Closer to that time that had been their last time in his crypt, right before she'd shattered his heart. The urgency and need and passion would still be there, of course, but manifest in different ways. Their days of making a mess on their way to missing the bed again would be behind them. A chapter of a bygone era, left to versions of themselves that no longer existed.

He'd never been happier to be wrong in his bloody life.

It had happened fast. Much faster than he would have thought possible. Buffy nipping at him with increased hunger, her disbelief and her absolute belief on a collision course with each other. The more she realized that he wasn't going away, the harder she fought to keep him there. Her hands at his face, then his chest, then pushing his duster off his shoulders and letting it pool on the floor. Walking him backward while seemingly forgetting the setup of her own flat. Stumbling over her feet as she tried to kick off her shoes, colliding with the back of the sofa that took up most of the space in that front room. Toppling over it and grabbing him so that he went with her, and landing with a soft gasp on the sofa cushions before they went rolling again. This time to the floor, knocking the coffee table into the credenza that held the telly. Rolling over each other until she emerged the victor—some things never changed—and began tearing at his clothes with increasing impatience. And hell, he'd been no better, in a rush to see who could get there the fastest, which was how he'd ended up with his jeans pried open and shoved down just enough to free his cock and her trousers in a few tattered pieces courtesy of his impatience.

Buffy hadn't minded, though. Hadn't so much as snapped at him for not being softer on her clothes. Just taken his cock and lifted so she was just above it, teasing the head up and down her soaked folds just enough

to make him whimper before sinking onto him with a strangled cry. And then the fight had really started. Buffy bucking and Spike thrusting and Buffy slamming his wrists and Spike stabbing up inside her and Buffy punching a hole in the floor and Spike letting his fangs tear free. Then rolling again, crashing into the coffee table so hard the wood fractured and Buffy using her legs to flip him back where she wanted him. Hands on his chest then, fingers digging in, and rolling her hips as she tipped her head back and teased him with that hair that drove him nuts, the smooth line of her throat, the breasts that were still hidden beneath her shirt and that wouldn't do. Wouldn't do at all. So he'd ripped the bloody thing down the middle. And she grinned a bloody feral grin at him before giving his own shirt the same treatment, and was ready when he moved to flip her over—not thinking, never thinking, and pounding into her pussy with such reckless abandon that her orgasm sneaked up on him. He hadn't been touching her the way he normally did, just watching her eyes, the fire in them, as she drove herself up to meet his thrusts, the air filled with the guttural sounds of them, and then finally trembling and squeezing and telling him to come with her. Follow her. She needed to feel that, too. And so he had.

For a long time after, they'd lain in each other's arms, panting. Not talking. Just listening to the rhythm of mutual existence. All the things he'd taken for granted when he'd been a dumber man. The symphony only he could hear, her body working to keep her alive. Keep her warm. Keep her.

There had been a lot to discuss, he'd known. Plenty to keep them occupied beyond the thrill of rediscovering just how electric they were together. But when Buffy turned to him and brushed her lips across his, softly at first and then with growing need, he'd thought the talk could wait, and so it had. She'd rolled him onto his back and slid back onto his cock and they'd gone right back to destroying her living room, and doing a bloody good job of it.

"Do you think Dawn'll buy that the place was struck by a very small but very focused tornado?" Buffy asked later, regarding the debris. "One that just happened to drop you in the middle of the room? Like the *Wizard of Oz*?"

"Nibblet's in high school now, so what do you think?"

"That it's about as believable as you playing checkers with the bot."

"Me doin' what now?"

Buffy grinned and looked up, meeting his eyes. And for a moment they held like that, regarding each other, all the things left to say still there, waiting to be picked up but also comfortable where they were. What she had been doing with the Immortal, what he had given up to find her. The uncertain future, hazy but for the very certain present. The dream that wasn't a dream at all.

"If I say it now, will you believe me?"

Spike didn't realize he was shaking until he breathed, until he felt the air leave his body on a quake. "Guess we won't know until you try."

"I guess we won't," Buffy said, her eyes warm. "But before I do, just so we're clear, I'm going to kick your ass if you disappear on me again."

"What'll you do if I stay?"

"Kick it even better."

"You might be brassed when you hear what I did."

"What'd you do?"

"Gave up a prophecy."

"What kind of prophecy?"

"The kind where if I play my cards right, I could be a real boy again."

Buffy furrowed her brow, dropped her gaze to his cock, now again safely behind the zipper of his jeans. But not for long if she kept looking at him like that. "You're, uhh, pretty real to me. Unless this *is* a dream and so help me, Spike—"

He lifted a hand, grinning in spite of himself. "Not a dream, love. Angel's bloody fixed on this prophecy, see. Vampire with a soul does a number durin' the apocalypse and at the end, he gets his heartbeat back." And just like that, the words were out, there between them. Nowhere to hide anymore. Spike shifted his weight between his feet, glanced to the floor and up again. "Wager he thinks you'll take him back if he has that to offer. Didn't fancy the competition, so he pulled some strings at that law firm of his and got me to take my name off the list of contenders."

The look on Buffy's face was inscrutable for a long, terrifying beat. "Why?"

"Didn't much want it, to be honest. And it was worth it. To see you."

"You had to give this up to see me?"

"Didn't know where you were. Those were the terms. He'd tell me where to find you if—"

"Oh my *god*, I'm going to kill him."

"It's all right—"

"No," Buffy snapped, and for a second, it seemed honest flames might flash behind her eyes. "No, it's not all right. He knew. I told him, and *he knew*. He had no right to keep you from me when I *told him* I was in love with you. I told him I didn't think we were people who could ever be together again. I told him cookies are off his diet anyway. And he kept you from me as a ghost and then made you jump through hoops to see me when you were solid again? I am going to kill him. He has gone too far. He...what?"

Spike didn't realize he was grinning like a sodding loon until she narrowed her eyes at him. And then it didn't matter. Nothing mattered—not the things they hadn't said yet or all the things to come. The only thing that did matter was right here, and god, he would never doubt again.

"Nothing," he said, moving toward her. "Just love you, too, is all."

Buffy studied him for a long beat, then her face fell into a shy grin. "I was getting there."

"I know."

"I'm still going to kill him."

"Slayer, I'm not gonna try to stop you." Spike leaned forward, pressed his brow to hers. Breathed her in. Warm and fierce and real. All the things that would keep him tethered to this world. "Just gonna wait until you say it again."

He thought she might tease him. She did not. Instead, she raised a hand to his face, her skin soft and warm and right. Just like the rest of her. "I love you, Spike."

There it was again. That feeling, that sensation in his chest. That knowledge that he had just experienced something singular. That there was so much he wanted to tell her, and he lacked all the tools for it. All he could do was lean into her touch, into her kiss, and think one last time about the cold expanse he'd almost lost himself inside. The damnation he'd nearly been convinced was his.

Whatever he and Buffy did, whatever they had done, and whatever the future brought—this was the moment. The one that would carry him forward. The one that would chase away the chasm of hell if it came down to it.

He'd come home at last.

