

SOUL KISS



HOLLY DENISE



HE WAS DAMN CERTAIN HE'D TRY HIS HARDEST TO SEE THE AFTER OF this. He had a slayer to kiss.

Assuming, of course, she remembered making the offer in the morning, and that might be a tall order.

"You're pissed outta your mind, love," he said, taking her by the shoulders in an effort to keep her upright. He was, as he wagered, a mite responsible for her here. It had been his idea to take her to a demon hangout, and while he couldn't say he'd *let* her drown her sorrows in booze, he certainly hadn't discouraged it. How could he when the face and the sound she made were so bloody adorable?

Not easily, that's how.

"Well, wouldn't you be pissed?" Buffy shot back, squinting as though trying to concentrate on him. "I-if you were pulled out of your grave just to be shipped off to work? And then some...some *thing* or whatever just started screwing with you for no reason? I deserve to be pissed."

"Not that kind of pissed," Spike said, giving her shoulders a squeeze. "Meant sloshed. *Drunk*."

She lifted her chin, high and mighty slayer till the end. "And you're not?"

"Well, yeah, a little. Not so much I'm likely to forget what you said."

"What did I say?"

"That if I suss out who's testin' you like this, you'll give me a snog."

Buffy stared at him in the time-honored way of drunks everywhere trying to follow the thread of a conversation. "Snog?" she echoed loudly a second later. "What's a snog? I thought I said kiss."

"Yeah, that's what a snog is."

She screwed up her face in another of those impossibly sweet Buffy expressions that he had somehow become privy to—that part of her that she was suddenly trusting him with, and fuck, if that wasn't heady. Also intimidating. Spike was all too aware of just how easy it would be to bungle this chance she was giving him. At least, he was when he was all the way sober. Fog up his thinking with the sauce and he was liable to do something completely barmy like invite Buffy to a round of kitten poker.

"So pissed means drunk and snog means kiss," she said, and would have stumbled over her own bloody feet if he hadn't been there holding her up. "You Brits don't know how to speak English."

“Yeah, *we’re* the ones who bugger it up.”

“There you are again! What’s *bugger*?”

“A rompin’ good time if you’re open to it,” he muttered, though he didn’t let his mind linger there. Slightly pissed or not, he knew better than to follow that particular white rabbit. “Don’t reckon you meant it, though,” he said instead. “I fix this problem for you—”

“And I’ll kiss you. Here.” She brushed her fingertips over his lips like it was nothing—like the feel of her skin didn’t do things to him. Like he couldn’t taste her. “Or wherever you want me to kiss you.”

Christ, she couldn’t say things like that. Spike pressed his eyes closed and clenched his jaw. “Buffy—”

“This isn’t a drunk thing.” She turned and waved in the direction of the van that had been there just a moment ago. “I’m trying to fix my stupid life and I can’t do that with demons and funky time and mummy hands. But that’s the punchline—my life *is* demons and funky time and mummy hands, and I was done. I was *done*, Spike. I was way with the done, and I’m supposed to know how to handle this when I can barely get out of bed each morning. So yes, you do it for me. You figure out who’s messing with me and why, and I’ll plant a big ol’ smackeroo right on your stupid sexy mouth.”

If he’d had a heartbeat, it’d have skipped right about now. “Think my mouth’s sexy, do you?”

“Oh, shut up. You know you’re sexy.” Buffy slapped her hands against his chest before dropping to rest her head there. Her head that would be pounding in a few hours’ time, and perhaps missing the memory of this conversation. “How am I going to get home?”

Spike stared down at the back of her head, soaking in the feel of her. How warm she was, how she seemed to burn him where they touched, even through layers. The scent of her hair, her skin, the echo of her heartbeat in his ears. And she came to him every night. Sometimes they talked, sometimes they were alone together in the quiet, but each time she gave him something, and he liked to think he gave something back. Even if this having her by degrees was driving him out of his mind—even if he didn’t know exactly what this was to her, or if it was anything at all.

But she knew how he felt about her. She knew. And she knew he’d do

anything she asked, whether or not there was a kiss for him at the end of it.

"I'll get you home, love," he said, and, not able to help himself, pressed a small kiss into her hair. "Spike'll handle everything."

Buffy drew back then, blinked her bleary eyes as though trying to remember what they had been talking about, before finally giving a sleepy nod.

Yeah, she wouldn't remember this conversation tomorrow. And that was just fine.

He would remember for both of them.



SPIKE WASN'T sure how anyone could catch their kip on a motorbike but he'd felt the instant she'd gone slack. And, despite his own incredulity, he'd been at least somewhat prepared. Enough to have situated her at his front rather than his back so he could keep an eye on her, less concerned than he'd been earlier that she might feel something pressing into the curve of her arse that would win him a bruised nose. Buffy had listed forward at some point, and Spike had snaked an arm around her middle to keep her from toppling all the way off. Wishing he'd thought to insist on the helmet he'd kept for the Nibblem but, upon getting a face-full of the Slayer's hair, deciding it wasn't a big loss. He wouldn't let her fall off for anything.

She hadn't stirred when he'd pulled up to Revello Drive, either, rather melted into him with a sort of naked trust that he shouldn't take as anything other than drunken exhaustion. Which was how he ended up balancing Buffy in his arms, listening to that heartbeat and the soft sleep noises that tumbled from her lips, as he tested the front door and found it unlocked. Tomorrow he might have a word with Dawn and the witches about taking proper precautions, but tomorrow was hours away and he was just glad he hadn't had to jostle the Slayer too much and risk waking her and ruining this quiet moment that was all for him.

Over the last few months, Spike had become accustomed to having an open-door reception at the Summers place. He'd learned all the family

tricks—where the house key was hidden, that lights on in the dining room meant the witches were home, that the telly being off meant Dawn was sulking in her room, the way the floorboards moved and settled. And most especially, how it felt to be in Buffy's space without having Buffy there.

Only Buffy was here now, replacing the last memory he had of her in his arms. That awful night when the others had come knocking on the crypt door, insistent on taking Buffy's body to lay it to rest. He'd known they would pop by sooner rather than later. The business end of death, what happened to people when there was no one left inside, would set in and steal away their last memories of what Buffy had been if too much time lapsed. So Spike had gathered her into his arms—his stiff, lifeless love—and carried her to the coffin the others had either fashioned or bought, he'd never asked. And he'd watched the lid slide over her still face through a sheen of tears, wishing desperately that he'd never made any buggering promise. That he could be in the dirt with her. He couldn't help but think about that now, relishing the lively heat of her body as opposed to the cold. The soft way she breathed, how her nose twitched, the steady thump of her heart most of all.

Having that memory so fresh while Buffy was tucked against his chest was one of the most surreal experiences of his very surreal existence, and Spike wasn't ready to let it go just yet. Didn't want to mess with the others fussing over him, taking the Slayer and her warmth away, so let out a breath when he realized there was no light on in the dining room. That the house itself was the sort of quiet that houses only became when everyone inside was tucked into their beds. He made sure the door was closed then started up the stairs, experience telling him where to step and what spots to avoid. Still, he needn't have worried. Dawn was bloody impossible to stir once she'd dropped off and the lack of sound from the witches' room indicated more of the same. Spike didn't wait, rather turned and made his way toward Buffy's room.

He hadn't been in here all that much, and rarely invited. He'd snagged her knickers and sniffed her sweaters and made himself mad with thoughts of her lying nude under all her blankets, but those memories seemed distant. Far longer than just a few months in the past. The

last time he'd crossed the threshold had been to help Dawn, at Dawn's insistence, find something to bury Buffy in. She hadn't wanted to do it alone. And like Buffy herself, the room had seemed lifeless. Hollow. Almost indecent in its continual existence when the person who belonged inside of it was gone.

Turned out the room had had the right of it all along.

Spike stepped across the threshold with the Slayer in his arms and allowed himself a breath. He'd never been in here while touching her; the sensation was as heady as it was dangerous, and he knew better than to linger. Rather, he carried her across the floor and toward the unmade bed—seemed the Slayer had been in a rush to get out of the house that morning, which made the task of sliding her under the blankets easy. He thought she might stir the second she touched the mattress, *wanted* her to grunt or scowl or do something to indicate she preferred being held by him, but Buffy was beyond reacting. Beyond bloody out. She fell into her pillows and blankets without effort, and almost immediately started to turn onto her side.

That might have well been the end. What happened next could have *not* happened very easily. But it did happen. A few strands of her golden hair had wound themselves around one of his rings and snagged hard with the movement. Hard enough that Buffy's brow furrowed when the strands tugged free of her scalp. It was a slight thing, harmless really, but it brought a frown to her face—those two cute little lines forming above her nose—and that struck him as odd, though he didn't know why for a long beat. Stood there like a prat, staring at her and trying to hunt down why he should feel unsettled until the answer came.

Pain. Pain was missing. His pain.

Spike froze, studying the hairs still clinging to his skull ring—the same he'd slipped onto Buffy's dainty finger once—and willed his mind to cooperate.

The chip hadn't gone off.

He'd discovered the year before that intent could matter, but only in certain situations. Namely, when he was trying to throw a punch. There was no accounting for the times he'd bumped into people and still earned a zap to the noggin, only that the chip made sure discomfort for

others meant pain for him. Plucking a hair from the Slayer's head should have triggered a response. If it was enough for her to frown at him through the haze of booze and sleep, when she was otherwise out like a sodding light, then that should have been enough for the chip.

Something was wrong.

For a long moment, he didn't know what to do. Easiest thing would be to call it a fluke and head home, but if it was a fluke, it was the first fluke that had ever happened where the chip was concerned. There was a growing awareness under his skin, an excitement he wasn't sure he wanted to pursue—the thrill, the hope that this sudden, wonderful thought might have some legs to it. Nothing lasted forever, right? Nothing except creatures like him. Whatever hardware had been shoved inside his cranium had to have an expiration date. That was simply the way it was.

The excitement started to fizzle, though, the longer he stared at the Slayer. For if the chip was out of commission, everything would change with her. He couldn't imagine Buffy throwing a bloody ticker tape parade at learning he was off the leash. There would be no more nights like this one. No more watching her throw back drinks and make that adorable face. No more of her clinging to him as he escorted her about town on his bike. No more softness, not from her.

Not unless he could prove himself.

And how to do that?

He already knew. She'd told him.

Spike released a long sigh, turned toward the door, then stopped. Best to check so he could be sure. Maybe it had been a fluke. Maybe that time, intention had mattered. Wasn't like he'd been thinking anything murderous, and he couldn't say that for certain when it had happened before. He approached Buffy, trying to focus on bringing her pain—and ignore the fact that his traitor heart rebelled at the idea alone—then drew a golden strand of hair off her forehead.

"Sorry, love," he muttered to the quiet room, and pulled.

Again, Buffy made a face. Again, the chip didn't fire.

And Spike's world was suddenly wide open once more.



BUFFY HAD INDICATED that the van she'd spied had been following her around. Therefore, logically, to suss out who was causing her all this bloody grief, Spike needed to tail her, too. Not that it was exactly fool-proof, but it was the only lead he had. All he had to do was manage it without the Slayer cottoning on, since, as became very evident over the next few days, she didn't remember making the offer at all.

True, he could clear up that matter right quick. Might even be worth it to see her go pink in the cheeks and squirm. Ultimately, though, Spike decided it'd be better if he just delivered. He didn't want to give her the chance to walk back her promise of a snog, or tell him she'd been too drunk to have meant anything. If he went ahead and found the wankers who were mucking with her, there was every chance she'd get swept up in the moment and lay one on him without thinking. And if she didn't, well, he could bring it up then. See where it took them.

So Spike started tailing her. No hardship, that, except the part where he needed to escape notice. The Slayer's routine varied from day to day, seeing as she hadn't settled on what it was she wanted to do with this version of her life. There were times she didn't leave the house at all, other times she was up and out the door not long after the Nibblet. Sometimes she went to campus and sat in classes with her mates; sometimes she wandered around downtown Sunnydale, gazing into shop windows in a way that made him think she wasn't actually looking for anything but a distraction. She'd wander into the Magic Box but turned down offers to have another go as a shopkeeper—all from Rupert, as Anya didn't seem keen on it, either.

A few times, he caught her wandering toward the cemetery and would have to resort to peeking at her from inside mausoleums as she visited various notable graves. Her mum once or twice, but most often the disturbed earth above the coffin that Buffy had clawed her way out of. She'd stand there and stare at the headstone, her expression blank but her eyes focused, and she'd be in sunlight, too far for him to come up to her. Place a hand on her shoulder, the small of her back, or anywhere she'd let him.

It was during the last visit to the cemetery that anything strange happened. Spike stood wedged in the safe dark of a nearby crypt,

watching Buffy run her hand over the back of her headstone, and it might have been a trick of shadow and light, but he thought he saw a flicker of movement to the right. Too far right for him to take a proper look without setting his head ablaze. But it was enough to make him think he ought to wait, hang back after Buffy decided to move on. Just to see if anything happened the second she'd cleared out.

Eventually, Buffy let out one of those deep sighs and started back toward the cemetery gate. Spike watched her go, slide out of his periphery. It was a toss-up where she'd head from here, though his money was back to Revello Drive or the shop. Depended on the mood she was in. At night, when she was truly his alone, she'd tell him bits about her day. How sometimes the need for solitude was like a sickness—that she'd go out of her way to avoid running into anyone desperate to do a temperature check and make sure she was all right, because sod it, she wasn't. Other times, she'd get the urge to surround herself with life, voices, anything to fill the quiet. And often what happened in either circumstance was she'd get exactly what she'd thought she wanted and decide it had been a mistake. The other was better.

Spike forced his gaze from the place where Buffy had left his line of sight, tightened his jaw and waited. It didn't take long. Less than five minutes after the Slayer had departed the place, three buffoons lumbered into sight, two of whom he recognized. There was the short git who had bespelled the whole bloody town that one time into thinking he was some last action movie hero, and tougher than the Slayer to boot. Then there was the other, taller and a bit on the gangly side—the prat who had pieced together the Buffybot what felt like a lifetime ago. Sandwiched between them was some bloke with sandy hair and a voice that grated on Spike's nerves even from a distance.

The lot of them gathered around the grave, staring at it as Buffy had. And started talking about her.

"This is weird," said the antsy blond. "Why would she have a grave? Is it, like, a slayer thing? Throw off the vampires or whatever?"

"I kinda doubt vampires spend a lot of time reading headstones, nimrod," said the robot-builder. *Warren*. "But she's clearly not dead."

"Buffy would be really hard to kill," said the short one. Spike couldn't

recall what he was called but that didn't matter. "Though from what I've read, slayers don't live that long. Maybe it's, like, you know. She bought the plot for when the time comes."

"That's idiotic," Warren said, waving at him.

"Yeah," chimed in the blond. "Grow up, Jonathan."

"I guess the question is, what do we do with this information?" Warren started pacing in front of the grave. "Or is there anything to do with it? She seems kinda...aimless. I really thought she'd be more interesting than this."

"Does it matter what we do with it?" Jonathan asked. "We're wasting a lot of time on her that we could be spending developing, you know, a plan for taking over Sunnydale. The only reason we'd need to worry about Buffy is if we get powerful enough that she gets on our case."

Warren paused, turned and aimed a glare at his lackey. It was clear he fancied himself the leader, and clearer still that the others did too, though Spike thought it likely that the Jonathan bloke might resent the idea, even if he wouldn't cop to it if put to the test.

"If?" Warren barked. "If we get powerful enough? Where's your ambition, Whineathan? Did we or didn't we agree to take over Sunnydale?"

"We did!" the blond rushed to agree. "Of course we did. And we will."

"Exactly." Warren smirked. "And *when* we do, we're definitely going to need to deal with the Slayer. We need to know what we're up against. What her weaknesses are. And, I don't know, coming here and staring at her own grave kinda seems like a weakness to me."

Spike balled his hands into fists. It was insulting, knowing he had the ability to tear these gits' heads off their necks. No more chip harnessing him. No more blasting pain to keep the monster at bay. These three walking insults to the name of villain thought they had a chance against Buffy, after everything she'd faced, everything she'd done. And they might actually have a sodding point because they were human. Because Buffy didn't move against humans.

And there was something else. They were separated by a good stretch, and the sun was still blazing in the sky and assaulting Spike's senses, but even through that, he thought he caught a gleam of something in the bastard's eyes. Something he didn't like, because part of him

liked it quite a lot. There was a hunger there the other two didn't have. Hunger and more than hunger—a need to prove himself. To punish. He'd targeted Buffy for a reason and that reason had little to do with her being the Slayer.

It hit him. Angel. That's what he was seeing. Or rather, *Angelus*, as he preferred to be called when he was lacking his soul. The darker, more entertaining version who had a mind to punish Buffy for daring to exist. She hadn't been singled out because of anything she was but everything she represented. That she'd exposed the parts of him that were soft and human, made him feel weak when Angelus was used to being king of the bloody castle. Buffy had been that for him.

Buffy was that for Warren, too. Maybe not because she made him feel anything in particular but because he knew she was stronger than he was, and he wanted the thrill of toppling her because of that. He wanted to punish her for his weakness.

And Spike could end him. Quickly and effectively. There was nothing holding him back.

Nothing but the look on her face when she realized. When she understood exactly how he'd dealt with her problem. Far from giving him a snog, he'd be lucky if she didn't dust him. And because he was bloody lost for her, that wasn't even the worst part. No, the worst part would be dying with the knowledge that he'd hurt her. He'd failed. He'd shouldered her with the burden of a man's death, for he knew his slayer well, and she would feel responsible. She'd feel like she had killed Warren, herself.

He couldn't do that to her. Whatever happened next had to be all above board.

And who knows? Maybe learning he could have taken a chunk out of the wanker's neck the entire time would earn him more than a kiss.

Maybe it'd earn him a chance at her heart.



WITH SLAUGHTER no longer on the table, the question became how, exactly, Spike aimed to keep Warren and his mates off the Slayer's back. And how was he going to do it in such a way that the Slayer knew he,

Spike, was the reason her life was suddenly un-meddled with again. That he'd done what she'd asked, fixed something that needed fixing, and he'd take his snog anytime she fancied, thanks.

Spike's impulse was to kick in Warren's door, flash his fangs, maybe throw the boy around a bit. Scuffling the lad up was hardly the same as ripping out his throat. It seemed as good a tactic as any and it would do wonders to make *him* feel better. Furthermore, he couldn't imagine Buffy thinking that all that monstrous. She'd done the same before to plonkers who had it coming less than this git did. Still, something—and he didn't know what—held him back. Just a feeling, a lurking sensation, and though Spike wasn't prone to giving those much thought, everything was on the line here. He couldn't afford to take risks when the reward was as sweet as it was.

Wasn't easy, though. Knowing he could give the prat the thumping he deserved and still holding back. Playing nice. Playing human.

It wasn't the airplanes—it was the Slayer that tamed the Spike.

So he wasn't thrashing Warren or his lackeys the way he would have liked, but knowing the identity of the gnats buzzing around Buffy gave Spike something else to focus on. Sure, it wasn't nearly as fulfilling as tailing his ladylove had been, but he felt he was onto something now. Pushing forward, ahead, and eventually an opportunity would present itself. Either he'd be in the right place at the right time to make the right decision or he'd know what to look for those times he was with the Slayer, which was almost nightly at this point.

The sun sets and she appears.

It was a special kind of torment, that. Buffy showing up almost on cue. No more stalking the cemeteries in the hopes of running into her—she came to him freely, and usually hours before she took to her normal routes to patrol. Never would he have imagined having so much of her, being so close, being the person she felt she could do more than simply exist around. It was electric and unnerving all at once.

And on a certain night she came calling, he couldn't help but tell her just that.

As in he literally couldn't help it. It came spilling out of his mouth, the words rhyming and set to a melody provided by the air itself. Spike's eyes widened when he realized what was happening—he'd seen it just the

night before with a Chirago demon, wagered some Broadway demon had swept into town and was having a spot of fun with the locals, but hadn't thought, hadn't bloody *dreamed* that he'd be in a position like this.

Spilling his secrets. All of them. How much he loved and loathed being near her these days. How he was bending over bloody backward trying to solve this problem of hers in a way that she would approve of. That yeah, he wanted that kiss she'd promised, but it was more than that to him. Helping her meant showing her that he was the sort of man she could trust. Depend on.

Oh, and that the chip wasn't working anymore. Couldn't leave that out.

And just as quickly as they had come, the chords of the song from hell faded and he felt the urge—the bloody *need*—to unburden the nonexistent soul of his go with it. Then all he was left was a tomb for a home and the stricken look on the Slayer's face.

For a long minute—the longest of his life—she said nothing. Just stared at him, her eyes wide and seeming to grow wider with every beat. Her breaths coming hard, too, her chest rising and falling with the effort. And all he could do was stand there like a dolt, wait for her wrath or her despair or her disgust. Maybe all three if he was truly lucky.

At last, she swallowed, inhaled, and nudged them out of this bloody limbo.

“The chip's not working?”

Air punched out of his useless lungs as though he'd been struck. “No.”

“H-how do you know?”

He didn't want to tell her. He had no choice. “Night you got sloshed, I brought you home. Carted you upstairs.” The combination of shock and horror that overtook her expression was indication enough of what she remembered about that. Namely nothing. “Tucked you into your beddy-by all safe and snug. Couple strands of your hair got caught on my ring and came loose. Nothin' for it.”

Buffy blinked. “That's it? Just...you pulled my hair by accident and that's how you figured your chip's not working?”

“Not just that.” He brought his hands up. “Haven't been munchin' on

anyone, love. Haven't even tried, so keep your stake where it is. Heard me sing as much, didn't you?"

Something flickered in her eyes and she relaxed. "I guess you did."

Yeah, and he'd thank Rodgers and Hammerstein later, if he was still around and not floating in the air as so many particles. "I pulled another hair," he admitted. "On purpose. You made a face but nothin' went off upstairs. Had it figured then."

"You pulled my hair?"

"Just a strand or two."

"While I was *asleep*?"

Spike brought up his hands again. "Would you rather I have tried to take a nibble of that neck of yours? Could have if I wanted." *And I wanted*. That part seemed obvious, though, and didn't need to be voiced. "Decided to be a good boy instead. For you."

Buffy dragged her teeth over her succulent lower lip. "Then why didn't you tell me? This entire time—"

"Hell, Slayer, why *would* I tell you? Made it bloody clear that the second this chip's not a factor, you'll dust me."

"And you thought you could, what, just keep it a secret forever? That I would never find out? Explain it to me, Spike, how well do you think it would have gone over for you if I found out any other time?"

Well, she had a decent point there. One he should have arrived at himself, and likely would have eventually. Likely at precisely the wrong moment. Spike lowered his gaze to the stone floor and let out another breath. "Yeah, I'm a berk. Just...don't know how to be around you. Whole bloody life is balanced on a wire. You know how I feel and I know what I am. That no matter what, I'll always be beneath you, reachin' up and gettin' nowhere. And I've accepted it, love. Hell, I could've lit out of town. Could've had myself a right old time and given you a reason to come at me with a stake. Could have done anythin' I liked. What I did was this."

He broke off before he could betray more, though it seemed likely the damage was well and done. Everything was in her court—always had been, but perhaps not like this. Their relationship had never been quite so nebulous, so fragile, and he had no idea what came next. Whether

these seconds were his last or the start of something else. Something he couldn't begin to fathom.

Much like the girl in front of him. Rather than react in any of the ways he would have thought, Buffy stepped forward, her face the sort of unreadable it had only become since she'd died. "Hit me," she said.

"Sorry?"

"I need to know. See it for myself. Hit me."

"You're off your trolley."

"Well, be the person who knocked me off. I need a demonstration, Spike. Now." When he hesitated still, a grin tugged at her lips. The beguiling sort his eyes couldn't help but track. "You know you want to."

Spike opened his mouth, but words didn't come. Bloody figured. There had been any number of times he'd wanted to take a swing at her but had held back; other times when he'd accepted the pain and swung anyway. But despite what she thought she knew about vampires, that wasn't something he was just keen to do the second she barked a command.

Not like that, at least. There was no fun in it.

"Say somethin'."

Buffy furrowed her brow. "Huh?"

"Tell me I'm dirt or what all."

"*What?*"

"You know the tune, love. It's one of your favorites. Just start singing."

"Is this a strange vampire kink I need to know about?"

He rolled his eyes. "You want me to hit you, Slayer, brass me off first."

"You're serious."

"Is it so hard to believe I don't fancy hittin' the woman I love?"

"Says the guy whose grand plan for wooing Drusilla was torturing her back into a relationship."

"Because that's what she likes!" Spike shot back, his muscles going tense. "And you can thank your precious Angel for that. He's the one who gave her a yen for gettin' the stuffing slashed out of her."

"You've tried to kill me how many times?"

What was she not getting about this? "That was before I fell in love with you," he said through his teeth.

"This is insane. *You're* insane."

"Yeah, well—"

Her fist crashed into his nose and shards of blinding, familiar pain splintered through his noggin. The rest was instinct. A roar tumbled free before he could stop it, and Spike was in motion, backhanding her hard enough that she was nearly knocked off those perfect, prissy little feet of hers. And just as he'd known it wouldn't, the pain didn't come. Nothing came except that euphoric rush of delight, the thrill of knowing the next few minutes would be unpredictable and deadly. That he was seconds away from being reduced to dust unless he made the right move, struck the right blows, kept the Slayer off her feet and his own feet steady. A dance he'd danced so many times but never fooled himself into thinking he had the steps memorized. They were always changing. The steps, and the girls themselves, and Buffy. Buffy knew how to keep a man from getting complacent. It was one of the things that made her so damn deadly.

Though she didn't look deadly now, or in a mood to answer his punch with one of her own, and that was all it took for the reality of the moment to snap back into place.

"It didn't go off," she said numbly. "Your chip..."

"Buffy—"

She held up a hand, backing up a step toward the crypt door. "I can't do this right now."

"I haven't hurt anyone," he said, moving forward to reclaim the nearness. "I'm not going to. You heard what I sang—"

But she was shaking her head, her lower lip starting to tremble. "I... I need to figure this out," she said. "The singing. The singing is bad, and people are burning up, and your chip doesn't work. Oh god."

"Nothing's changed here, love. Not a blessed thing. Might not have the chip anymore but I still have the choice."

"Stop," she said, and there was enough finality in her voice that he listened. Halted his advancements and rooted himself to the spot. "Keep away from Warren," she went on in that same voice. "From all of them."

"I was never gonna—"

"Spike. I can't do this now. I have a musical to solve. But I also can't

leave here knowing that you... Do not go after Warren. Whatever he's doing to me, I'll handle it."

That wasn't the plan. It was the opposite of the plan. Everything was falling apart, and he hadn't asked for any of it.

The only thing he'd wanted was one simple kiss.

"Don't give me a reason," Buffy said, lowering her hand at last. "Please, Spike. Don't."

The look she favored him with made his insides quiver. It wasn't just fear. It was heartbreak. He hadn't known he could do that. Make her feel that. For him.

And before he could say anything else, begin to try to dream up what he could do to make this better, Buffy had turned on her feet and bolted out the crypt door at full slayer speed, taking a piece of him with her.

She always did, of course. Just never like this.



THE CURTAINS WERE SUPPOSED to close on a kiss, or so the song went, except there had been no kiss—just the tantalizing lyrics that chased him into an alley after he'd swooped in and saved the Slayer from dancing her way back to the grave. No telling if she was actually thankful, or anything, for she hadn't said a word. Just looked at him with those soulful eyes of hers, full of misgiving that would have made a real monster crow in delight, before letting herself get swept away in the big group sing. And he'd had no patience for that, so he'd let himself out, hoping she would follow but knowing she wouldn't. Knowing she was too spooked by what had happened at his crypt.

He wanted to kill something, and he could now. He could kill whatever he fancied, and the bitch of it was, he couldn't even enjoy the knowledge anymore. Not now that he knew he was causing her pain, or that he had the ability to, should he decide to make a go of it. Two sodding years of being trapped in an invisible prison and he couldn't even celebrate his liberation properly. Not without worrying over the Slayer. What she was thinking—what she was doing. If she was sparing him any thought at all, for she sure as fuck had stopped coming around.

That would be a good thing if he didn't miss her so much. Torture as

it was being around Buffy, not being around her was worse. Reminded him a bit too closely of those hundred and forty-seven nights he'd spent trying to make sense of a world that didn't have her in it.

When she neglected to show on the second night following the failed Broadway production, Spike decided he'd had enough and set out to find her so they could settle a few things. Let her know he had no intention of using his fangs on the poor, helpless sods of Sunnyhell—not even on those wankers who deserved it. He'd found her making the rounds in Shady Hill, jumpier than normal, though she hadn't managed to actually lob the stake she'd raised at him. They might have had a nice little chat if she'd gotten over her attitude, and if they hadn't been interrupted by that bloody landshark looking for his sodding kittens.

After that, Spike had decided it might be a decent idea to give the Slayer more space. She hadn't seemed too impressed with his currency of choice. So he'd made the quick escape, cursing his bloody luck that Teeth would get it in his head *now* of all times to bring out the muscle to collect.

By the following night, though, he'd decided maybe this was a good thing. A reason to get close to the Slayer without it being obvious that was what he was doing. Even drum up some fake panic and a ninny disguise to sell the ruse. It had seemed as decent an idea as any, especially since Buffy and her mates chronically underestimated him these days and would be quick to believe that a walking piece of tuna and his cronies would have Spike seriously worried for his life.

God, it would be so easy to dispel that now. And a testament to just how much he loved Buffy that he managed to rein in the impulse to thump Harris on principle the second he was within thumping range.

Though it had been a narrow miss—one likely avoided only by virtue of the fact that Red's latest spell had kicked in and knocked the lot of them out. By the time he'd opened his eyes, Spike hadn't known his own bloody name, let alone that he couldn't stand the glorified bricklayer or most of the faces gazing blankly in his direction. All save Joan, of course, and the girl who called herself Umad. Tara had seemed all right too, if not a little shy. Reminded him too much of someone that he'd been afraid might have been himself.

And then for an hour or so, Spike hadn't thought in terms of

malfunctioning government chips and the impact they were having on his love life—he'd been one of the gang. Fighting alongside Buffy as natural as anything else. Breathing her in, not realizing his senses were sharper than everyone else's, not realizing so many things. And she'd been brassy and beautiful and he'd been bloody smitten, even after discovering he was a vampire. Hell, more so then, because there had been so much he hadn't known, only felt, and the possibilities of what they could do together had lit up his brain.

It hadn't occurred to him to bite her. He'd known he could, had felt the fangs in his mouth. Had scented the blood rushing beneath her supple skin, but the thought of tearing into her throat had made his chest constrict.

He hadn't wanted to kill her. He'd just wanted...her.

And that, he could tell in the aftermath, had her spooked. Not that she'd stuck around to chat about it. No, the second Joan had become Buffy again, she'd run off with nary a glance back at the man she'd briefly known as Randy.

Not that Spike had needed proof of it, that he was the Slayer's bitch through and bloody through. He'd known it intellectually for nearly a year now. Even when stripped down to his core, left with bugger all but thought and instinct, he chose her. He hadn't even lunged for her neck once, despite ample opportunity. That he hadn't pieced together the significance of hearing all their heartbeats and smelling their blood, and that not once had he considered pursuing that hunger or asking himself what it meant. That he'd just had a right good time making the sort of mess he could make nowadays.

Doubtful that Buffy would see it that way, though. Even if she were still talking to him. The tentative *something* that had been building between them forever broken because he hadn't told her about the bloody chip.

He was starting to doubt she'd ever swing by again.



HE OUGHT to give up more often. Might get to see her sooner.

He'd been crossing the street, heading toward the all-night butcher

for some nosh, when she caught up with him. Truly caught up, calling his name and everything. He'd turned to face her, somewhat dazed, as she materialized against the shadows like the vision she was. Her hair was done up in two looped braids and her lips were wet as though she'd just been licking them, which made it bloody hard not to stare. The things he'd imagined her doing with those lips...starting with the kiss he'd been so determined to win.

"Spike," she said again, her voice clear if not a little annoyed. "I... What are you doing?"

Spike furrowed his brow. "What's it to you?"

"Well, dangerous vampire, out on the prowl."

Though he couldn't help but perk up at the *dangerous* bit, he found himself rolling his eyes all the same. "That it, then? You've decided to tail me. Make sure I'm still on your bloody leash."

"Right. Because it's my fault that you're an evil, soulless vampire fresh out of chip-prison and it's completely unreasonable to ask what you're doing when the answer is probably 'not something good.'"

He just barely managed to bite back a growl. This bird would be the death of him.

"I'm grabbing some nosh," he snapped, punching a fist in the direction of the butcher—a place she should know very well considering how popular it was among the bloodsuckers who weren't quick enough to make it to the hospital for delivery night. "Then I was gonna head home and see if any of the sodding holiday specials have started up yet 'cause god knows I've got nothin' better to do with my time these days."

The bint had the nerve to look indignant. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that ever since you found out the batteries are out of my bug zapper, you've been keepin' your distance."

"As opposed to what? Staking you? Of course I'm keeping my distance!" Buffy brought up a finger as though to scold him. He tried and failed not to find it hot. "And if I'm remembering correctly, wasn't it *you* who sang to *me* about how hard I am to be around these days? I'd think not seeing me would be a good thing."

"You know why I sang that," he gritted out. "And if you're so bloody

convinced I'm out pickin' off the townies, any reason why I'm still standin' here at all?"

Buffy sniffed and looked away as though he'd caught her doing something embarrassing. "I don't think you're doing that," she said. "I don't know why I don't think it, but I don't."

"Because you know I love you. You know I'd never—"

"No, I don't know you'd *never*, Spike. I have no idea whether you'd *ever* or not." She met his gaze again, and he nearly sank at what he saw there. The confusion and the defeat. "But I believe you don't want to hurt me. That you... That you care, or something."

He scoffed. "Or somethin', she says."

"The other night when we were all with the magical memories tour, you said... You said you didn't want to bite me."

At that, he softened a bit, but only slightly. It was more of what he'd been thinking, the pieces he couldn't put away entirely. The prat who had called himself Randy Giles had run his mouth quite a bit, after all, and it had all been earnest in the moment. Totally and completely. Though not altogether right, either, as Randy Giles could never have conceived of sinking his fangs into a woman when she was around his cock. Losing himself in that specific sort of ecstasy, her blood in his mouth and her pussy squeezing him to dust.

He wanted to bite her. He just didn't want to kill her. All the difference in the world between those things.

"I've been thinking about that," Buffy continued a moment later, evidently taking his silence for assent. "How you didn't want to... It doesn't make sense."

Spike opened his mouth, but he had nothing to offer. Nothing that wouldn't sound self-serving or defensive; nothing she'd easily believe. "Suppose not," he heard himself say instead. "Just felt right at the time, fightin' there with you. Takin' on the world. Wonderin' how to ask you on a date."

"A date? You wanted to ask me out?"

He snorted. "That really all that surprisin', love?"

Buffy crossed her arms and glanced down. "It's...really confusing, Spike."

"Why? You already know I—"

“I know you think you love me, but—”

A snarl tore through his throat before he could help it—raw and guttural and honest, for *Christ*, she was insufferable. Even now, after all this time, after being treated like a bloody pincushion by Glory, after sobbing himself dry over memories of her lying there dead and small on the ground, after dedicating himself to her memory, protecting the Hellmouth, Dawn, after everything he’d done to care for her following her resurrection, and she couldn’t do him the courtesy of admitting what he felt was love. The bare minimum. The only thing he was completely justified in wanting from her. The only thing that would cost her nothing to give.

Fuck, his life would be a lot bloody easier if he didn’t love her. If everything he felt could be waved away as some obsession that had gotten out of hand. Obsessions weren’t forever, at least. They faded after a spell, got redirected to something else.

When he felt he could safely look at her without wanting to scream his lungs out, he was somewhat mollified to find her unsettled, perhaps even a little embarrassed. Good. She ought to be. Doubt him all she wanted—believe that he was tearing into throats and skipping through town with blood dripping off his fangs. That was less offensive than telling him she knew his heart better than he did.

“There’s this thing tonight,” Buffy said at last. “I’ve been watching Warren the last few days and I think he has something planned. I was... Do you wanna come with?”

Well, grant her one thing, she sure knew how to keep a bloke on his toes. It took a few seconds for the irritation pulsing at his insides to subside long enough that he understood what she was saying. “Goin’ after Warren?”

“Not *after* after. Just kinda hoping to catch him doing something I can call the cops on so he can become someone else’s problem.” She glanced down, twisting her hands together. “I’m pretty sure he has something in the works for tonight. He’s not exactly...quiet when he’s out with Jonathan and that other guy. I know they’re working on some sort of invisibility gun—which sounds ridiculous but so does my life—and I’m pretty sure they at least think they need a diamond to get it to work.”

“All that from my little tipoff?”

Buffy lifted a shoulder as though it were of no consequence, but he knew better. “It wasn’t hard. Harder to pretend like I didn’t notice that *Star Wars* van they drive.”

“Subtlety’s a lost art form,” Spike agreed, sliding his hands into his duster pockets. She hadn’t exactly apologized for the thing she’d said, but an invite to tag along was near the same, and almost as rare. Buffy never asked him to just come with her on outings like this. If he tried hard enough, he could fool himself into thinking it was a date.

“Right then,” he said, and met her gaze again. Caught the vulnerability there, the unease, and something else. Something that might have been relief. “Guess you better lead the way, Slayer.”



WHEN HE’D ASKED her to lead the way, he hadn’t expected *the way* to end at the town’s rather pitiful museum. Made no sense, really. Everyone knew all the really good artifacts were never actually featured on the floor as there was always some baddie in town willing to slash a few humans apart to get their hands on certain antiquities. That was part of the reason why the Sunnydale Herald had stopped announcing the arrival of pieces of notice, like bloody Acatlha. If not for a sodding newspaper item and lax museum security, Angel’s plans of ending the world might never have been realized.

Then again, as painful as the fallout of that fight had been, Spike couldn’t say he was sorry about where it had led him. Even when he was at his lowest, he felt infinitely better for having known and loved Buffy than before.

Well, most of the time. Like now.

The second they got close to the museum, a familiar scent filled his nostrils, and Spike immediately sobered. Right. Well, supposed that tracked. The place was bound to be loaded with the sort of prizes that would have a make-believe Big Bad like Warren creaming his trousers.

For a few long minutes, Buffy just considered the building’s exterior. Frowning at the walls as though debating whether or not to scale them. The front door was likely only as sturdy as whatever lock the place had invested in, but Spike knew his Slayer well enough to know she’d avoid

gratuitous property damage if she could. Silly bird had never fully developed a sense of fun.

Finally, she turned to him, eyes all wide and earnest. "If you were robbing this place, how would you get in?"

Not a question he'd ever featured her asking, but it was nice to be considered an authority on something. "Assumin' you think these gits don't wanna be caught in the act, right?"

"Well, obviously."

"No, not obviously. For some monsters, gettin' caught's half the fun." Because it meant turning the tables on whoever thought they held the power, though he doubted very much she wanted to hear that, or how many throats he'd torn out as a matter of course. Just the price of doing bloody business. "Warren won't have the bloodlust, though." At least not yet—if he ended up getting someone killed down the line, the story could easily change. "So I'd wager he'd try the back or the roof."

"Uh huh," Buffy said, not sounding in the least impressed by his deductive reasoning. "And how would *you* get in?"

Spike shrugged and gestured at the building. "Front bloody door. Any nit can pick a lock."

"A museum lock is likely to be a grade or two above a Magic Box lock."

"Doubt it. Waste of bloody dosh in this area, as often as these places get hit." He started toward the front door, sticking a hand in his pocket to feel around for anything he might use to get the lock to yield. There could be a few security upgrades depending on the sort of merchandise on the other side, but he doubted any would provide too much of a challenge. He'd been in this situation enough times to know the score. Dru had had a yen for precious jewels—or at least he'd had one for giving them to her—and sometimes sneaking into a joint without tipping off the coppers was as much of a rush as stealing whatever was on hand in the first place.

Again, though, not something he thought the Slayer would fancy hearing.

A moment later, he was on his knees, working the sharp point of a safety clip into the first of the three locks these museum gits thought was enough. Buffy was at his side, her heartbeat kicking up with every

second that passed, likely surveying the street to ensure no one caught them doing exactly what they were doing. It was almost precious, the way she believed in the law around here, when she was the closest thing the town had to a sheriff. She'd probably sleep in fits after this was over, all tormented by the thought of the lines she'd crossed.

And he loved her for it, god help him. Every bloody beat.

"You really didn't want to hurt me," she said out of nowhere, jolting him out of his head. "When you were Randy."

Spike threw her a cautious glance but otherwise kept his focus on what he was doing. "That's right. You've got me well and bloody muzzled, Slayer."

"Do you think that was it? That some...some part of you knew there was no point in trying?"

He scoffed and shook his head. "Whatever you wanna believe, I expect."

"I want to know the truth."

"Don't reckon you do, 'cause every time I try to give it to you, you either tell me to stuff it or that I have it wrong."

She didn't reply to that, which he took as the closest thing he'd get to an admission that he was right. Again, he wanted to look at her—see what was on her face, behind her eyes, get a measure of what might be going on in that head of hers. And again, he forced himself to ignore the impulse. He didn't know what else he could do to prove to her he meant what he said.

"It's hard for me."

Spike stiffened. "What's that?"

"You want me to make a list?"

He snickered, twisting his wrist to get the pin at a better angle. Just another moment now and he was certain he'd have it.

"You're the only person I've been able to stand being around since they brought me back," she went on, her voice barely above a whisper, like she was trying to keep herself from saying anything at all. "And part of it is I know it's not safe. I know that... I do know that you love me. I've known that since you let Glory torture you. Maybe it's not love the way I think about love, but it's...real for you. And it's real for me too."

There was a metallic *click* as the lock gave, and Spike shifted to the

second of the three, desperate to keep himself busy. Worried she might stop if he gave her the full of his attention.

“Real meaning I know you mean it,” she rushed to clarify. “But then you do things that just... Like you learn that the chip’s not working anymore and you decide to...what, try to clean up my life for me?”

His damn fool mouth was running before he could stop it. “That’s not—”

“And really with the not telling me right away. I know you want me to just...trust things with you, Spike, but you don’t exactly make it easy. Going behind my back is not the way to earn trust.”

Spike tightened his jaw as the second lock gave way, then moved to the third.

“But maybe I can see it. That you wanted to prove something to me. Get me to kiss you. But it can’t happen like that. I don’t want to feel like I owe you anything.”

“You don’t,” he bit out, twisting his wrist. Just another ten seconds more and he’d have it.

“It’s just not honest,” she went on. “If anything were to happen between us, it should be honest, right? Like you telling me you didn’t want to bite me when you didn’t have your memories. That was honest.”

“I was under a bloody spell, same as you.”

“But you had no reason to lie to me. You were surprised. You thought you had a soul.”

Right. He’d been wondering how long it would take her to remember that bit of humiliation. Stripped of everything he was and he’d still somehow managed to throw himself up against the phantom that was Angel.

“I want that, Spike,” Buffy said, a bit more firmness to her voice. “I want what we were before. I don’t want to kiss you because I feel like I owe you for fixing my life. If I kiss you, I want it to be because I just really want to kiss you.”

At that, he hesitated, even as the pin snagged through the right bit to get the lock to twist open. “That’s not what you said before.”

“Before, meaning when I was drunk off my ass?”

“Wagered it was one of those things,” he said, slowly rising back to his feet. Still, he kept his back to her. Not trusting himself to look at her

fully just yet, lest she stop talking. Lest all of this was just in his head. “They call it truth serum for a reason, don’t they?”

There was a pause. “Well, maybe the *truth* part was that I want to kiss you and I want a reason for it to be okay.”

Now he was turning because he couldn’t help himself. Fully expecting Buffy to be halfway up the bloody road by the time he was facing her again, or else just not there at all. A figment of a lovesick imagination. But she *was* there, meeting his eyes, her own full of so much his chest caught. There was misgiving, yeah, doubt and fear, but something else too. Something that made him hope for the first time in a long time.

And Christ, the last thing he wanted to do was let the thought go unaddressed, give her the chance to pretend she hadn’t said it. The part of him that was more demon than man started whispering feverish little lies. Bugger Warren and the rest, those gits could have whatever they were after. And he wanted to listen to that part; easier and more fun than hunting down humans he wouldn’t even have the pleasure of thrashing, let alone killing. But the other part of him, the part that had been reaching for Buffy since before he’d recognized it in himself, knew better. Knew it wasn’t what she wanted from someone she was with and even if it was, the trouble Warren had caused her couldn’t go unpunished.

All Spike could do was hope that what he saw in her eyes now was still there after this was over. And if it wasn’t, that he could find it again.

“You got that open?” Buffy asked, gesturing at the door, a bit of color in her cheeks. As though she’d just realized they had been staring at each other. “Cause I kinda want to bag me some bad guys.”

Spike jolted and nodded, then tugged at the door. It swung right open. “Right then. After you, Slayer.”

Buffy didn’t need telling twice. She hurried inside ahead of him so quickly he felt the whisper of wind against his face—and yeah, he did take the chance to breathe her in, desperate for anything of that moment he could capture.

Like all things Sunnydale, the museum was modest on the inside, as though unsure of its own necessity, and filled with bits of antiquity that might have been interesting to someone like Rupert, but even that seemed a stretch.

One good thing about it—sound carried. The thieving gits weren’t

going to any trouble to keep quiet, rather arguing loudly about the place's lack of security. Spike didn't need to direct Buffy anywhere; she went, and he followed, moving swiftly and silently until they turned a corner into what was likely the main hall of the place.

Dangling from the ceiling was the scrawny blond bloke who, from Spike's observations, seemed to exist solely for the purpose of agreeing to whatever Warren had to say. Only Warren didn't seem too thrilled with him at the moment, barking orders to disentangle himself from the bloody *Mission Impossible* getup.

"Oh my god," Buffy muttered, crossing her arms. "You can't be serious."

Like the plonkers they were after, the Slayer didn't bother to whisper, and as one, the lot of them—save the blond, who was struggling with the straps tying him to the ceiling—whirled around.

"It's the Slayer!" cried the one who had once fancied himself a pinup calendar.

"Jonathan, you know who I am," Buffy snapped. "And seriously, you're in on this?"

Jonathan went ramrod straight. "I-in on what? I was just...here taking in the Mesopotamian exhibit."

"That is the shittiest cover story I've ever heard." She turned her glare onto Warren. "And you. Really? After April?"

Warren had also gone stiff, though he didn't look quite as worried as his mates. There was movement behind the eyes that Spike didn't like, the same that had given him pause in the cemetery. "Slayer," he said, stepping forward and rolling his shoulders, and Spike saw he had something that resembled an oxygen tank strapped to his back. "Not the way we wanted to meet you again but it had to happen sooner or later."

Buffy rolled her eyes and marched forward, which robot boy clearly hadn't counted on, as he flinched and immediately started to back up. Only there was nowhere to go with the diamond display at his back, which he hit with enough force Spike knew he'd forgotten it was there.

"Don't come any—*freeze ray*—closer!" he yelped, holding up a hand. "We don't want to have to hurt you, Slayer."

"You were pathetic before, but this is just sad," Buffy noted. "Breaking and entering?"

"You—*freeze ray*—broke and entered, too!" Warren threw a half-furious, half-desperate look at his lackeys, who seemed to snap out of their stupor and sprang into action, turning as one and starting to fidget with something between them.

"Yeah, but here's the thing, Warren." Buffy had that singsong quality to her voice that had so often driven Spike around the bend. It was how she sounded when she was at her highest and mightiest, confident of every step she took, of every possibility stemming from any one situation. The master of it. He hadn't heard her like that since before she'd died and fuck, he wanted to enjoy it. "The cops in this town? They know me. We might not be bosom buddies but it's enough that I bet they'll believe my story over yours. Considering I didn't show up looking like a cat burglar."

"Shut the—*freeze ray*—up."

"We're working on it!" the blond one hissed.

And that was quite enough of that. Spike rolled his eyes and strolled forward at his leisure, not sure whether to be offended or not when the little berks didn't so much as tremble at his nearness. "All right, you two," he snarled, seizing them each by the collar. "Daddy's puttin' you in timeout."

"Spike—"

"I got this, Slayer," he assured her with a wild grin. "You take Robot Boy. It's good to be back."

Without waiting, he roared and crashed the two gits' skulls together. Right before his own exploded with very familiar pain.



THING WAS, Spike couldn't remember the last time the chip had fired.

These last few weeks, he'd been driving himself barmy trying to figure when the bloody thing might have stopped working. If it had just recently shorted or if he'd gone all summer fighting with the white hats when he could have been doing what any decent demon would have after losing the woman he loved. Not that it mattered much—not that he would have changed what he'd done for anything. Buffy had jumped and left the rest of them behind and he'd been lost to do anything but try to

find a way to honor her memory. Going out night after night to do what she couldn't. Standing between danger and the sister she'd died to protect. The thought of trying to flex his fangs and find the monster he'd once been hadn't crossed his mind, and not only because he hadn't thought it possible. That just wasn't who he was anymore.

Still, it had been nice, those few days of ignorance. Believing he was making a choice, that he could go out and have himself a right nice time if properly motivated. Nights he'd spent sipping pig's blood while trying to shake off whatever latest insult Harris had thrown his way, mollified by the thought that if he wanted to, he could tear the git's head clean off his shoulders, or at least remind him that Spike wasn't the local punching bag. He was dangerous. Lethal. And the kiddies had been taking him for granted far too long.

Now... Well, Spike didn't know. He also didn't know if his headache, now hours old, was all the worse because he hadn't known it was coming or if he'd simply forgotten what it felt like when his skull lit up. And that brought him back to the question he'd been asking himself ever since he'd limped inside the crypt, made himself a lukewarm mug of blood, and crashed into his lounge chair where he imagined he'd go over the night's events until they drove him the rest of the way out of his mind.

Especially the way she'd looked at him.

Spike drained his mug, hoping to wash the memory down just as easily, but it was there waiting when he lowered his hand again. In truth, what had happened at the museum had been over in seconds, no matter what those seconds had felt like from the inside. Buffy's sharp intake of breath, the confusion in her eyes that had deepened until it had no choice but to turn into horror, and he'd known she'd come to the same conclusion he had.

The chip hadn't worked on her. They'd proven that. But it was clearly still working fine. If the first slamming of those two idiots' heads together hadn't been enough to solidify it, the kick he'd leveled at the last one standing had done the job. Hours later, Spike couldn't say why he'd done it. Maybe he'd just needed to know for certain.

Wasn't all bad, though. Spike might have had a piss-poor night but everything had turned out aces for the Slayer. Warren and his lackeys were behind bars—the museum's security guard had phoned the bobbies

the second he'd heard the commotion. What had happened after that, Spike didn't know, as he'd decided he'd served his usefulness and had the throbbing head to show for it. It wasn't like Buffy needed his help, after all. She'd more than proven she could handle herself.

And he had a wounded ego to nurse back to health.

Spike forced himself to his feet and rambled his way back to the fridge, this time in search of something that would dull the throb in his head. He'd have to deal with that in the coming days too—the chip, the reasons why it had failed to register Buffy as human. Though he thought he might have that figured too, or as close as he'd get without the witches hooking wires up to his skull. He just needed the thought to settle, the buzzing to stop, see if he could make it make sense to himself before he offered it up as an explanation to her. And for that, he'd need time.

But Spike didn't want to think about that or anything else tonight. He wanted booze to drown out the lingering pain so he might enjoy at least one night's sleep before he had to start thinking again.

All this because he'd wanted to win a kiss. Wanted to give Buffy a reason to love him, even if only for a second.

He was well and truly pathetic.

And since he had the sorriest luck of any bloke he'd ever known, he didn't even get the rest of the night to lick his wounds. The crypt door clanged its familiar warning just as he'd plucked a bottle of bourbon off the shelf, and before he could do more than turn, Buffy was there. Invading his space the way she had invaded his mind and heart, bluntly and without apology. She strolled right up to him without so much as a greeting, stopped when she was inches away, her eyes soft and unblinking and on his face.

God, he was not in the mood for this—whatever this was. His head was bloody fried enough without throwing her mind games in the mix.

"Thought we were done for the night," he said when he realized she wasn't going to start blabbing without encouragement. "Not exactly feelin' up for a scoldin', so if it's all the same to you, would just as soon wait until tomorrow."

Her brow furrowed. "I'm not here to scold you. Why would I be here for that?"

“Dunno. Just seemed like somethin’ you’d do.” Spike waited for a beat, then another, then pressed the heel of his palm against his head. “I don’t know what happened, all right? Haven’t done a sodding thing to the chip so as far as I know, it ought to have fired those times with you.”

Buffy dipped her chin and lowered her eyes. “But it didn’t.”

Spike set his bottle on the ledge by the fridge. Looked like he wasn’t going to make that drink anytime soon. “No. And if you came here hopin’ to find out why, sorry to disappoint.”

“You don’t have any ideas?”

“Have lots of ideas. That’s all I have.”

“Tell me your ideas.”

Right, because all he needed tonight was another reason for his head to hurt. The thought that Buffy might have come back a little less human than she’d been before she’d died was not the sort she’d just accept. Moreover, it would wound her, and he didn’t want that. Not like this, at least. Not at the end of her looking at him like he was something other than a monster. Even if she had spent the last few days avoiding him, it wasn’t like he hadn’t earned her skepticism several thousand times over by now.

But Buffy was ahead of him here too, and not willing to back down. “I know you’re thinking something,” she said. “Whatever it is, tell me.”

Spike sighed and considered his options, not that there were many. She had him bloody well cornered.

Like always.

“Unless you swallow the bunk a load of fanatics believe, you’re the first person in the sodding world to be raised from the dead the way you were,” he said slowly, choosing his words with caution. “Not like me. Not the way some pillocks muck around with magic, but fully bloody you. Buffy Summers, right down to the letter. Heartbeat, scent, all of it. You bleed and you bruise and were it not for the fact that I had you in my arms after you jumped, if I hadn’t seen you go into the ground, I’d never believe it’d happened.”

There was a beat. “I was in your arms?”

He nodded, his throat going tight. “Had to put you somewhere, right? Until it was time to dig the bloody hole. Rupert decided against

takin' you home—too hard with kid sis there. Anywhere else and it... Well..."

"It's easier to store a body in a crypt than a home," she said, her tone flat. Her eyes had taken on that faraway look that made it hard to keep himself in check—pain and longing and sadness, all things she was experiencing because she was alive again. That he could feel such joy and relief from the source of her suffering reinforced at times just how much of the monster remained, even if he had a hard time recognizing himself anymore. The man who had once planned to use her bones to pick his teeth reduced to a mere shadow of himself at the thought of living in a world without her.

Spike blinked hard and shook his head, forcing his thoughts away from that turn. "Point is, what happened to you, best I know, hasn't happened to anyone else. Haven't heard many tales of people who went to sodding Heaven only to find their way back. Hell dimensions are a dime a bloody dozen. Everyone wants out, and when they get out, they bring a little of it back with 'em. No reason for you to be any different."

There was a quiet stretch in which she just stared at him, hard and unrelenting to the point his nerves kicked in and he wondered if she'd heard him at all or if he'd bungled the words. After what felt like an age, though, Buffy worked her throat and stepped forward, something in her eyes shifting. The hardness seemed to melt, the rest of her growing warm, soft, and so breathtakingly human the urge to cry came upon him again. She'd never looked at him like that. Not even under that spell they'd been under a few years back, and it was everything.

He just didn't know if he could trust it.

"You think I brought some of Heaven back with me?" she asked, her voice raspy, like she didn't want to put all of it behind the question. "That's why you can hit me?"

He shrugged, noncommittal. "Dunno. Just a thought."

"I don't feel like there's any Heaven here. Not in me. I feel... Spike, I feel so empty all the time. I can't..." She sniffed and dragged a hand under her eyes. "You really think that?"

"The chip works on humans, love. If it's not workin' on you, reckon we oughta look at what makes you different. Would say it's because you're the Slayer 'cept we know it was workin' fine before." He hesitated,

then raised his gaze back to hers. "Only thing that's changed since the last time was where you've been. Don't think anyone could come back from that without it leavin' a mark or what all. Bit you carry with you, even if you don't see it."

Buffy fell quiet again, though her eyes were loud. Then she licked her lips and stepped even closer, the heat of her skin caressing his own. "You helped me stop those guys," she said, her voice a mite lower than before. "I think that means I owe you something."

"What's that?"

"Wasn't it a kiss?"

It was his chest's turn to go tight. Hell, all of him did. "Thought you didn't want to do it like that," Spike replied. "That you wanted it to be because you wanted it."

"Is that what I said?"

"One of the things you said."

"I say a lot of things."

"Drives me barmy."

A soft smile tugged at her lips, one his eyes couldn't help but follow. She was close enough to bloody swim in. "I've been thinking," she said. "And thinking. And thinking. And I'm tired of it."

Spike perked his eyebrows. "That a fact?"

She nodded. "What I said earlier, about wanting an excuse to kiss you. I did. I wanted it to be okay." Buffy sniffed and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, looking more vulnerable than he could remember ever seeing her. "And I think... I think it *is* okay. If you lose your memories and become someone who doesn't want to bite me. Who thinks you're a vampire with a soul."

He scoffed. Couldn't help it. Nope. He'd would never live that one down.

But then, looking at her, seeing how she was looking at him, how she was closing the gap between them, he wondered why he would want to.

"And I do feel empty. Except when I'm with you." The smile on her face turned watery, almost fragile, and somehow she was even closer. So much so their lips almost brushed when she spoke. "So maybe it's not an excuse I need. It's a reason. And maybe I already have it."

Spike breathed out, the sound ragged. "You think so?"

“Let’s just say I’m willing to be wrong.”

Then, at last, her mouth was on him, hot and fiery and *Buffy*. Pure Buffy. Buffy as he’d known her before and now again, and he did feel the Heaven. Maybe it was his imagination, maybe it was just his desperate need to be right for her, but Spike would have sworn she tasted like someone who had touched the stars only to come back again. Celestial, perfect, and for the moment, at least, completely his. Her lips and then her tongue, and then all of her, all of Buffy, surrounding him. Her hands on his face and down his neck, pushing the button-up over his shoulders until it fell soundlessly to the stone floor. And he was walking back, and she was following, and he didn’t know where he was going until he did. Somehow his legs had found his chair, and he was falling into it. Falling and taking her, and Buffy landed on his lap, her legs splayed and her pussy pressed flush where he was hard and straining against his zipper. And she was still kissing him, the strokes of her mouth becoming hungrier, more desperate, rumbling little sounds, little Buffy noises, and he was full of her taste. So full yet somehow emptier than he’d ever been, more in need than he’d ever been, and he couldn’t touch her fast enough. Every caress left him starving for what came next. Half-terrified it wouldn’t, that this stroke would be his last. That she would tear herself away and be out the door before he could catch the breath he didn’t need but wanted anyway. The same way he wanted her.

But when she pulled back, it wasn’t to run. Buffy kept her eyes on him, seeming to take him in the way he took her in, and holding that look as she tugged up the skirt she was wearing until it was around her waist. Took one of his hands and placed it at the swell of her breast. And Spike knew he was panting but he couldn’t stop, just watch as his thumb glided over her nipple, which hardened under his touch and strained against the fabric of the shirt she still wore. Why was she still wearing it? It was a thought they must have shared and he wasn’t sure which one of them ended up pulling it off, but then her tits were in his hands—she’d skipped the bra today, bless her—and she was so warm and soft and she looked so good under his fingers. Better than he could have imagined.

And maybe he was out of his mind—probably he was—but he couldn’t help himself now. The not knowing would be the end of him. “Why?” he asked, hoping she heard everything he packed into it.

“Because I want it.” A pause. “I want *you* . And it’s not wrong, is it? If I’m from Heaven, and I want this, then the want can’t be wrong.”

Spike shook his head so fast the damn thing nearly popped off. “Not wrong. Never wrong. Buffy...”

“How did I know you’d say that?” She was grinning, though, and her hand was between them, gliding over where he was straining and hard. He thought she meant to tease, and she did, but that wasn’t all she meant. The sound of his zipper lowering nearly sliced the air in half. And again, it was intentional. She was still looking at him, studying him, and then her mouth was on his and her hand was around his cock, pulling, stroking, exploring him in ways that were both confident and clumsy, the great dichotomy that she was.

Then she shifted so she was above him, the head of his cock stroking her through her soaked knickers, Buffy gasping into his mouth as though she hadn’t known to expect it, and again they moved together, Spike beating her to it this time. Needing to feel her, that heat against his skin where she was wet for him. He pulled at the crotch of her underwear and groaned low at the wetness that met his fingers, and thought about what would happen after, if she’d let him eat himself right out of her pussy, and god he hoped, because he needed her in his mouth almost as much as he needed her around his cock.

It was not at all the way he’d thought it’d go between them. Here in his crypt, Buffy on his lap, Buffy taking his prick and sliding it between her silken folds until he was pressing into her, holding on, feeling her sink onto him. Losing himself in all that exquisite tightness, that bloody strangling perfection. He rocked and she bucked and then they were moving together, hard and soft and fast and slow, her breaths crashing against his face and her eyes wide and her tongue in his mouth and her cunt squeezing him to tears with every plunge. It was beautiful; it was poetry. Most of all, it was Buffy. Buffy here, Buffy with him, Buffy kissing him with her full bloody soul as she bounced and gasped and made his body *her* body. Made everything that was him hers.

“Spike,” she whispered against his lips, her voice tight with need that seemed to surprise her. She threw her head back, teasing him with the perfect column of her throat, and his mouth was there before he could stop himself. Licking and nibbling and teasing her with his teeth, just a

hint, then more when she let a moan join the wet sound of their bodies slapping together in the otherwise still crypt. Then she mewled his name again, and he knew what she needed even if she didn't. Knew what he needed, too, for suddenly nothing in his life had ever been more important than experiencing the wonder of the Slayer spasming around his cock. Spike scaled a hand between them and rubbed a knuckle against her clit on every downstroke. She gasped again and her pussy tightened gloriously, almost so much it hurt, the best fucking hurt, and she dug her nails into his shoulders before giving one last telltale tremble and letting go with a whimper she did nothing to muffle.

"Fuck," he hissed, throwing his head back. "Fuck, Buffy."

He wanted to hold on, make it last, but there was no fighting it. Not with her clenching around his cock like that. He gripped her by the hips, determined to hold on, and thrust up once, twice, three times more before tumbling into the bloody abyss. Pumping and pulsing and filling her with him, feeling her react, trembling anew, and tumbling into this new world they had discovered together.

The world where this had happened.

Spike dug his fingers into her hips, desperate to hold her as he came down. Dragging in deep lungfuls of her scent—the sweet mingling aromas of sweat and sex, of Buffy and him together, her skin so warm, her heart thundering against his chest, her cunt still clasped tightly around his cock, which was already beginning to rouse again. It was perfect and terrifying, like everything else about her. Everything he'd ever wanted and never thought to have. Just bloody everything.

And he had no idea what would come next.

"Spike?"

Her voice was somewhat hoarse, and he couldn't help swelling with just a little pride. "Yeah, love?"

"You're not... We can do that again, can't we?" She lifted her head, met his eyes in the dark. "Like a lot again?"

Spike just stared at her for a moment. "Sweetheart, we can do that as much as you want."

"Good. Because I think I want to. A lot. Again."

"Just think?"

A small smile brightened her face. The sort that could make a dead

man's heart start beating again, or at least want to give it a try. "Just think for now," she said, and traced her fingers over his eyes and nose, her palm skimming his lips, and then her mouth was there. Sweet and soft, but full of life. Full of soul. Full of everything that made her Buffy. "But maybe more later. I need time. Is that okay?"

Spike nodded hard, blinking back tears, his throat tight and his chest full. It was more than okay. It was bloody everything.

It was his crumb.

