

# SOUTHERN COMFORT



HOLLY DENISE





THE VOICE COULDN'T BE real. A side effect of having one's head repeatedly smashed into a stone mausoleum, perhaps, but not real. Not in this universe. While absence made the heart grow fonder, Buffy was fairly certain her heart was rather stationary on the matter of Spike. And yet, there was no reason her mind would select his voice out of a thousand to penetrate the thick air. He *was* there—he was there when her eyes fought open. A familiar face in the midst of a drastically unfamiliar setting. It made her blood rush, made her homesick, filled her with gratitude and trepidation all at once.

However, in the end, there was little time to mull it over. Whatever retort she had met an abrupt death as her legs broke for the mossy earth, carrying her body five feet from the demon attached to the fists that had been so enthusiastically pounding the crap out of her.

“Same scene, different graveyard, eh, Slayer?”

Buffy rolled her eyes, hurling herself to her feet. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Reckon I oughta ask you the same thing,” Spike replied from where he sat rather comfortably on a nearby mausoleum, puffing lazily on a cigarette and watching the three demons she'd been battling follow her down the roll of land of the Natchez cemetery. “Course

that might be a tad redundant, yeah? You're very obviously getting your arse kicked."

"You're in Mississippi?" she groaned, ducking the fist of Demon One and aiming a kick at Demon Two. "This has to be a nightmare."

"Ah, now now. No need for that." Spike grinned and indulged in another puff. "Anythin' new?"

Buffy shrugged the best she could, grasping the arm of Demon Three and using its weight to leverage another well-aimed kick at Demon Two. "Oh, you know," she replied, punches punctuating her words. "Same old. Same old."

He chuckled appreciatively. "Just can't help makin' friends wherever you go. Who are these clowns?"

"Just some guys I met in a bar." Her head flipped up under the swinging arm, securing a glare in the blond's direction. "Look, are you just gonna small-talk me to death or did you just want a good seat?"

Evidently distracted by the ongoing verbal exchange, Demon One finally stopped and held up his cloven hands. "Hey, are we keeping you from something? 'Cause we could totally reschedule the...you know, killing you."

"Whoa! Do you two, like, know each other?" Demon Two asked, his voice accented in a California dialect she knew well.

Spike snickered and ignored them. "You sure do attract the thick ones," he told her.

"You're one to talk," Buffy spat.

"Look, vamp," Demon One said in defeat. "You gonna help or not? We *are* kinda busy here."

"Right," he replied. "Three on one and not a single one've you has managed to slow her down a lick." Spike rolled his eyes and took another drag before returning his attention to Buffy. "Wannabes."

It was very obviously the wrong time to crack a grin, but for whatever reason, she couldn't help herself. In a million years she never would have thought herself capable of sharing a moment of private amusement with Spike—of all non-people—in the middle of a demon brawl. Perhaps he'd simply caught her on a weird night. Or perhaps any familiar face, even one she despised, was welcome in a town of strangers.

“Vamps are so fucking useless,” Demon One snarled.

Demon Three, the only one in the group not versed in English, gurgled something sounding like an agreement.

It happened fast—so fast Buffy nearly lost her footing. In all the time she'd known Spike, in all the battles they'd waged against each other, he'd never once transformed into a blur of motion. One second he was atop his tombstone, the bane of her existence, smoking his cigarette and watching her fight three uglies at once, and the next he was everywhere. Behind her. Beside her. Seizing her arm to act as her anchor as he helped her aim a particularly vicious kick. In easy seconds, the air split with the deafening crack of breaking bone, spiced with inhuman wails that shook the ground. Even after she witnessed Demon One and Demon Two collapse, their necks awkwardly bent, it didn't fully register what had occurred until the unintelligible third demon swiped a claw at her left side. Instinct had Buffy airborne in a blink, and before she could take another breath he joined his fallen brethren.

It wasn't until she was on the ground again that her brain finally caught up with her. It came in short bursts. Realization. Awareness.

*What had just happened?*

The answer wasn't so ambiguous. There was no question as to what had happened. Not really.

*Spike saved my life.*

Well, perhaps that was an overstatement. The situation hadn't really been out of control. Point of fact, she felt she had handled herself quite well considering she was far from home and facing demons she'd never before encountered. So Spike hadn't saved her life. He'd just...helped.

He'd helped her...not get her head bashed in.

The words rushed out before she could help herself. Feelings of gratitude and the image of Spike weren't things that went hand-in-hand. She'd barely been able to get over his longstanding campaign to kill her the last time they'd teamed up to defeat something evil; now, since she knew there was nothing in it for him, it was nearly impossible to stem her gut reaction. “What the hell was that?”

Apparently, Spike didn't realize hers was a natural curiosity rather

than a hostile one. Perhaps it was the way she'd shouted the question. "Well," he retorted dryly. "That gracious thank you makes my achin' side entirely worthwhile."

"Seriously, Spike, what the hell?"

"Can't a bloke save the life of a bird he loathes without gettin' the sodding fifth degree?"

Buffy paused with a thoughtful frown. "What are degrees one-through-four?"

A blink. Spike shook his head. "No one knows. Point is, I just helped your ungrateful arse, puttin' myself..." He paused and slapped a hand across his nonbeating heart, his eyes wide with false sincerity. "... at great personal risk."

Buffy couldn't help it; she snickered.

"Is it too much to hope for a bloody thank you?"

"I didn't ask you to do anything!"

"Well, fair game, Slayer. I suppose next time I'll just let them have your precious hide."

This argument had the makings of one that could render her blue in the face, and Buffy had neither the patience nor the inclination to talk herself in circles, especially when anger was only a mask for curiosity. Thus, before her tongue could roll out another slew of words she didn't mean, she grounded herself with a long sigh, her eyes falling shut. "Okay," she conceded. "Okay. What are you doing here?"

There was no response. When she forced her eyes open again, Spike was staring at her blankly. "Huss'at?"

"I don't want to fight. I don't... You did help, but...Spike..." She waved at the cemetery. "What are you doing here?"

"It's my concern," he replied indignantly. "What are *you* doin' here?"

"Demon. Some big nasty. Giles got a call from the Council a few days ago. It's here so I'm here." Buffy's jaw tightened. "No one seems to give a crap that I quit the Council, but that's a different thing. This guy's big on the apocalyptic scale so here I be."

"Don't tell me the whole sodding gang—"

"A world of no. I came alone."

It was slow but inevitable—a pleased grin stretched across his face.

"Well, well, well," Spike drawled. "Aren't you the little girl in the big bad world?"

"It was my choice. I wanted to handle this myself."

"Not feelin' warm tinglies for your mates, then?"

"I just needed..." Buffy sighed and crossed her arms. "Not that it's any of your business, but Angel and I—"

Spike held up a hand. "Heard about it. Big snake, right?"

"How—"

"Can't keep news about the Ascension a secret, now can you? Whole bloody world heard about that one, love." His brows perked. "The Enormous Forehead walked, did he? Could've seen that one comin' a mile away."

Her mood darkened instantly. "And to that, goodbye."

She didn't get far; she didn't expect or even want to get far. Despite her better senses, the larger part of her was oddly glad to see a familiar face. Leaving Sunnydale had seemed easy enough on paper; put some much-needed distance between herself and the tattered remains of her broken heart. Get her mind off Angel's dramatic fade into the mist and onto something tangible—something requiring violent action to resolve. An apocalypse was just what the doctor ordered...even if the apocalypse in question was in some Podunk town in the middle of nowhere.

It was easy, then, to grasp onto what was known. And Spike, like it or not, was very known.

In the sense that she hated his non-living guts but was willing to overlook it for the moment. Of something related to her real life but detached enough to keep her from thinking too much of the things that hurt the most.

As it was, Spike wasn't about to let her go without at least attempting to talk her to death. There was no surprise when his voice again tickled the air, his footsteps not a hair behind hers. "Might not seem it, but you're better off now," he was saying. "Always knew you could do better than that ponce."

"What?" she retorted, tossing him an irked glance. "Like a Chaos Demon?"

His expression faded into a scowl. "Sod off."

"Trying. Stop following me."

"I go where I please."

"Fine." Buffy smiled sweetly and pivoted on her heel. "Then let me ask...how is Dru?"

Spike didn't say anything. Words were not required. His glare spoke volumes.

This naturally lent her the confidence to continue rubbing salt in the wound. It was a much more entertaining task when on this side of the mockery. "I guess that 'tie her up and torture her' plan didn't work as well as you'd hoped," she continued. "Or...she met a Panic Demon. Or an Anarchy Demon. Maybe a—"

"Fungus Demon."

Buffy stopped shortly. "What?"

Spike glanced down, shamed and wounded. There was no deceit to be found. Nothing to suggest he was pulling her leg. And had she not been agape that he was releasing this information at all, she might have felt a stab of sympathy.

"It was a Fungus Demon," he confirmed.

"Wow." She remained quiet as long as she could, which honestly wasn't long at all. There was only so much one could take with a straight face; before she could help herself, her insides were clamoring with laughter. "Oh...*wow*."

"Slayer..."

The warning in his voice only furthered her amusement. "My god," she sputtered between giggles. "How pathetic do you have to be to get a loony bin to choose *fungus* over you?"

"Yeah. Laugh it up."

She had no trouble fulfilling that request.

"Least I knew to expect it," he continued. "Had it figured the second I found her. Wouldn't last. Couldn't last. Dru and me were finished the second we blasted outta Sunnyhell, thanks to you."

Sobriety chased laughter away. "Well, excuse me for accepting *your* offer," Buffy snapped. "Next time—"

"I didn't bloody well say I resented it, now did I?"

"The kidnapping of my best friend to get her to perform some dumbass love spell really doesn't scream *I'm moving on*."



"I'm a new man now."

"Yeah. Funny how this new man manages to find me—again—"

"Not on bloody purpose, if that's what you think," Spike growled. "I was wastin' away quite happily in a bottle of bourbon, some titty thing named Jenna wavin' her parts in my face. I don't really know how I ended up here."

Buffy's eyes narrowed. "Yeah," she agreed dryly. "New man, all right."

"Last time I got pissed and got in my head that givin' *your* head to Dru would fix things," he said. "This time, I just decided to get pissed. Runnin' into you was one bloody big mistake."

A quiet second fell between them during which Buffy put on a good show pretending to think. In the end, she offered little more than a sardonic grin and shook her head. "Sorry," she said. "I don't buy it. I live in the real world, Spike. The one where coincidences don't exist and *you* exist solely to hand out migraines. Of all the towns, you end up in this one?"

"I don't know why I'm here, either," he barked. "I was supposed to be in the Big Easy, gettin' so sloshed I couldn't remember my own name, much less Dru's. I don't know what the bugger dragged me here, but somethin' sure as fuck did. And soon as your scent hit the air, I reckoned you had somethin' to do with it."

"You thought *I* brought you here?"

"Well, nothin' else makes a lick of sense!"

"And *that* does?"

He shrugged. "You said it yourself, didn't you? No such thing as coincidences."

Buffy stared at him. There had always been something slightly off about Spike, but this took *off* to new, unforeseen levels. He thought she had, what, *wished* him here out of some mad desire to keep company with his oh-so damnably annoying self?

"You're twisted," she decided. "And I don't have time for this."

"More mopin', I'd wager."

"Spike—"

"No, Slayer, I understand." His hands came up. "Been there, done

that. Then again, Dru leavin' me for keeps was just a matter of time. Weren't you an' the great git supposed to be forever?"

A dark, dangerous chill rushed through her body. "Get. Bent."

"Oh, if looks could stake."

"I don't need looks. You want dust, Spike? Keep talking."

It wouldn't happen, of course. There seemed to be some moratorium on her ability to kill any vampire she'd known for a length of time. Especially Spike. Really, only Spike. She'd had her chance a few short months ago after fending off the mayor's dispatch team. She'd had her chance numerous times during the months Angelus had terrorized Sunnydale. And she'd had her chance now.

For some reason, she kept walking away. Killing Spike seemed such a waste. He was...well, supremely annoying, but he kept life interesting.

Even if he annoyed the crap out of her to the point where previous convictions were forgotten in a blink. No matter that she was far from home with no one she knew to comfort her, there was no way in this world or the next that she was going to endure Angel-taunts from the bane of her existence. Thus with a well-earned huff, Buffy pivoted on her heel and began a furious storm-off.

Not that it did any good.

"He left you, right?" Spike prodded, still at her heels. Damn vampire. Wouldn't even let her stomp away dramatically. "Course he did. Little Buff's too bloody loyal to muck up a mediocre—"

"Spike..."

He ignored the warning in her voice. "—piss-poor romance, even if something better comes along."

Buffy froze and whirled around. "Get lost before you're someone's hay fever."

"Oooh, touchy."

"Spike, I swear—"

"Swear all you like, I'm not goin' anywhere." He rocked on his heels with an unrepentant grin. "What's this demon? The big nasty your watcher sent you to dispatch?"

"Why?"

He shrugged. "Why not? You're here. I'm here. I'm bored. And things tend to work out when we pair up."

"I was desperate the last time we *paired up*," Buffy barked. "You said it yourself—all I had, remember?"

Spike perked his eyebrows. "Don't see how much has changed," he replied. "You're all by your lonesome, aren't you?"

"By choice."

"Yeah. The reason you haven't staked me yet doesn't at all have to do with the fact that you're far from your home sweet home and I'm the only bloke you know."

If anything, the truth in his diagnosis only furthered her irritation. "We can rectify that," she suggested, reaching to collect the stake she kept wedged between the small of her back and the waistline of her sweats.

"Just trying to help."

"Stop trying."

Spike gave her one of his knowing looks. She hated that she knew his looks, almost as much as she hated the feeling of her anger dissipating as though it had never existed. Or more truthfully, the wishful anger she'd purposefully summoned to feel some semblance of normality. It seemed these days it didn't take long at all to get her to concede a disagreement.

Perhaps she was just lonely.

"It's called the Reaper," she heard herself say. "Some sort of...I dunno...collection demon. According to the Council and the research the gang did before I left, it's hitting a bunch of hotspots."

"Hotspots?"

"Like...demonic playgrounds or...places where there's been energy that's more para than normal." Buffy sighed and crossed her arms. "It's collecting energy."

"For what?"

"World-endage—or something to that effect. Giles thinks it might be trying to overturn the natural order of things...make the world a demonic playground where humans are the fabled ones." Buffy inclined her head toward him. "Your kind of party."

Spike balked as though he'd tasted something foul. "Are you outta your bloody mind?"

"Well—"

“Do you have any idea how sodding loathed vamps are by other demons? Halfbreeds is what we are—saved only by our fangs and penchant for destruction.” He laughed harshly. “We’re only slightly above you, ducks. The soul is what does you in. If demons took over, we’d be bloody obsolete. At least now the game’s in our favor. This bloke means to turn over the world?”

Buffy blinked dumbly, though she felt slightly ridiculous in her surprise. It was nothing she hadn’t before heard—nothing Spike hadn’t before told her. This was a world he liked for its guilty pleasures. And its people. He wasn’t the sort of vampire to talk about the end of times with a wistful smile and a happy heart. He’d risked everything to preserve the world as he knew it—risked and *lost* everything, and now here they were. Far from home but in much the same boat. The world was in peril, and Spike was the only vampire she knew who didn’t get a happy at the prospect.

Perhaps this wasn’t a coincidence.

“Yeah,” she agreed after a long second. “Yeah. Ummm...he’s collecting everything from demons to ghosts in...well, Giles called it a Pandora’s Box for lack of a better term. And once the Reaper has enough to cause world-engage, he’ll do just that.”

“And wackiness ensues.”

“Something like that.”

Spike offered a thoughtful nod, again reaching for his cigarettes. “You got yourself a handful, Slayer,” he observed. “And you really wanted to handle this one on your own?”

She flexed her shoulders. “I figured it’d be cathartic.”

“Anythin’ else an inquiring mind oughta know about this git?”

A quiet beat. “The energies and whatnot, whatever it is the Reaper wants for his...thing...they don’t know it.”

“Know it?”

“Giles has reason to believe the Reaper’s collection has thinned out a bit at least once. He thinks once a demon or whatever gets close to the Reaper, it automatically wants to get closer. So it might find itself wandering aimlessly trying to get closer to it without knowing what it is.” Buffy frowned. “That...actually might be why you’re here.”

Spike quirked his head. “Come again?”

"It was in New Orleans last we knew, but we think it got tipped off that I was coming to take care of business and broke northward in a big, big hurry." Buffy paused, staring at Spike as though she'd never before seen him. "If you were in New Orleans, you might've gotten close enough to...get a whiff."

"You're sayin' the beastie dragged me here?"

"I'm saying if you were compelled to come here without knowing why, it might be because you..." She broke off with a sigh, bit her lip, her brow furrowing. "Giles said there was no reason to think any of the demons or...whatever collected by the Reaper wanted to be collected, that they just couldn't help it because they got caught in this...I dunno. That's why the collection thins out—they find a way to escape." A solemn beat passed. She met his eyes. "Just...watch out for yourself."

"I could lend a hand, you know."

"No. The second you got close to it, you'd—"

Spike jutted out his chin with barely concealed indignation. "I can control myself, Slayer. It's not like—"

"I'm not saying you'd want to become a part of...whatever. I'm saying this thing gets a hold of demons and they can't resist."

"I'm not like other demons. Point of fact, I could help you sniff it out."

Buffy shook her head decisively. Enemy or not, she wasn't going to be responsible for getting someone in trouble. "No."

"Why the hell not? If I'm a sodding homing-beacon for this git—"

"I'm going back to my room, Spike."

"It's not like you give a fuck, anyway! Come on, Slayer. Whaddya got to lose?" He sealed the argument by running his tongue over his teeth in a manner that should not have been sexy, yet couldn't help but rattle her to the bone.

*Wait.*

Buffy blinked.

*Since when was Spike sexy?*

She had a feeling she didn't want the answer.

"Worse comes to worst, I'm outta your hair forever," he reasoned. "And if not..."

“No.” Another shake of her head, though this one didn’t feel any more final than the last. “No.”

She would not use Spike.

Especially with the wigsome revelation that some twisted part of her found him sexy.

*It’s post-Angel blues.*

Only it really wasn’t, and that thought was terrifying.

*Exhilarating.*

“No, Spike,” Buffy said again. “Just...no.”

Her feet were aimed at the small stone ledge separating the cemetery from the silent road, and before the vampire could utter another word, she was running. Past the tombstones. Past the bodies of the three fallen demons. Past monuments and memorials. Past everything.

She would feel normal when she got back to the room.

And maybe, just maybe, Spike would take the hint and get the hell out of Dodge.

A girl could hope, at least.

MAPLEWOOD INN WAS another in a long line of examples of how good Giles was to her. There were a number of hotels in Natchez, even more bed-and-breakfasts she'd heard about in the few hours since arriving, but none seemed as grandiose as the one she'd landed. And though she wasn't in the house itself, she felt pampered, even welcome.

The bed-and-breakfast was small in size. It offered only three rooms in the main house, and on special occasions, rented a room from its neighbor, the Birch House, to accommodate travelers. The Birch House room was the one Buffy had acquired, and though she was super jealous of the bathroom she'd seen in the main house, she was not left wanting in her own lodging. Her room provided isolation and she didn't feel as though she was causing a ruckus when she traipsed onto the grounds half past two in the morning.

Also, Buffy was a girl who liked to eat, and the inn's proprietor, Jerome King, was one hell of a cook. The inn's guests entered the premises through the backdoor, which led to one of the newer rooms on the aged property. It was modern and convenient, decorated modestly with a kitchen table, a china cabinet, a mini-fridge, and two doors that offset each other perpendicularly but both led to the private

quarters where Jerome lived with his partner, Jeremy. And yes, they had heard all the jokes.

Atop the table was an exquisite centerpiece and a tray of home-made chocolate-chip cookies designed for Jerome's guests or wandering neighbors. Though Buffy had only been with Jerome and Maplewood for a day, it was easy to pinpoint this was an ongoing trend. Jerome was warm and outgoing, and eager to go out of his way with tourist advice and information about local homes that were never on tour.

Not she was here to be a tourist. Nope, this was one all-work-no-play trip with one objective in mind: the Reaper.

Aside from the cemetery visit, she hadn't had the chance to scope out the town.

Aside from the demons that had attacked her.

Aside from Spike.

*Spike.*

Sleep hadn't cleared her muddled thoughts. Wrapping her mind around Spike and his unexpected presence seemed impossible. Seemed something more like a distant, bizarre dream than anything that could have truly transpired. How it was that she found herself so far from home yet unable to escape faces from her reality was beyond her...and yet it had happened.

There was no way he'd left town. She could warn him until the world ended, but he wouldn't leave. And why should she care, exactly? She owed Spike nothing.

And yet, there was something about the blond idiot. Spike was hers. Hers to kill or not kill, though not kill seemed more likely from the magnificent way she'd allowed him to talk her to death last night without uttering more than an empty threat or two. The thought of ending his unlife was one she'd long ago given up on. Vampire or not, evil or not, the prospect of killing someone she knew was just...ooky.

She couldn't kill Spike. She didn't want to even think about it or do anything beyond put the notion into their venomous trades. There was no one she loved fighting more. Encounters with Spike were invigorating. Enthralling. They served as foreplay for the mind.

*Not only for the mind.*



Buffy frowned and shook the thought off with little success. Ever since the rogue notion that Spike was in some way sexy had crept into her addled brain last night, she hadn't been able to shake the strange sense of unexpected...something...that seized her whenever his face surfaced in her thoughts.

It wasn't right. It wasn't natural. Once, she could understand. One time to find herself attracted to a vampire. One with a soul. One with special circumstances. One with whom it would never work because he'd never been there for her the way she needed. Not really.

Perhaps there was hope for her yet. Though there had been isolated incidents involving her and a desperate desire to bash in Angel's head with a large mallet, she hadn't truly allowed herself to get angry with the way he'd left things.

The way he'd left her.

Perhaps she thought Spike was sexy only because she knew it would drive Angel insane.

*Or perhaps he's really sexy.*

The notion that her attraction to Spike could be real and not merely another symptom of her breakup was too terrifying to consider. For her sake, she hoped he'd listened to her and busted a quick move out of town. Then she wouldn't spend time wondering about the texture of his lips or the wiry strength of his arms or contemplating how his height wouldn't make her neck hurt or how she wouldn't feel dwarfed were he to hold her.

Spike and sexy couldn't be synonymous. Her life was confusing enough.

Better yet to focus on the hunt for the Reaper. Giles hadn't specified a method he thought would be best to locate her prey and had actually forewarned that finding the demon would be the difficult part of her journey. There was no way to know whether or not the same innate pull felt by other demons or paranormal entities would be shared by the Slayer—the Slayer who, while human, fell into the classification of *something else*.

It was anyone's guess.

Right now, her best option lay in investigating the town. Hitting the places known to be haunted, and attempting to scope

out those locals that were lesser known. Not that Buffy expected to strike it rich with tourist traps. While the Reaper might be collecting oogly booglies, she doubted he'd have much luck with reputed hauntings. Hauntings tended to disappoint; aside from the one isolated incident involving the doomed James and Grace, Buffy hadn't encountered an honest-to-god ghost. Yet if there was energy to be had, the Reaper would have it. Demons received a cosmic whiff of his supreme wickedness and followed blindly until they were sharing space with loads of other unfortunate creepy crawlies.

As twisted as that logic was, it would certainly explain why a cemetery that Giles had assured her to be docile had housed more demons last night than any of the post-Ascension patrols she'd taken back home. Before the three-on-one action Spike had caught her in, she'd been dusting and slaying left and right. The Natchez cemetery was supposed to be peaceful—a place where townspeople gathered during peak tourism times to stand over the graves of their ancestors and tell stories of the way things had been in the nineteenth century and before. It wasn't a place known for demon romps.

Until last night. Until the Reaper came to town, bringing with him a parade of uglies.

And Spike. Spike, who had been in New Orleans when the Reaper was in New Orleans. Spike, who was now in Natchez but didn't know why.

While the sun was out, her best option was scouting the town and seeing if her spider senses tingled.

"You know you've been living in a small town when..." Buffy mused, plucking a tourism pamphlet off the back wall of the modern attachment to the Inn. Wonderful breakfasty smells floated in the air, signaling her poorly neglected tummy. It was her first time to sample Jerome's cooking in the form of something other than cookies, and if the aroma tickling her taste-buds was indicator enough, her host would have to drag her from the dining room table.

While Natchez wasn't a budding metropolis by any means, she still felt she had a lot of ground to cover. Nothing like Sunnydale. Sunnydale could be successfully covered in a twenty-minute walk, whereas

twenty minutes in Natchez would only accomplish getting from the good part of town to the bad.

"I'd recommend Edgeview."

As the Slayer, it wasn't in her nature to be easily stunned, therefore Buffy's teeth clamped down on her tongue as she whirled around to prevent her instinctive gasp from meeting freedom. "Edgeview?" she repeated, brows winging upward.

Jerome was an attractive enough man. He was somewhere in his late forties, just a couple inches taller than she was, with chestnut hair—accented with blond highlights—and a slightly stocky build. His face was oval and somewhat pointed, but he had friendly eyes and oodles of useless information at his disposal. Not to mention a thick New Jersey accent and an inability to correctly pronounce words like *library*, which, thanks to Giles, bothered Buffy more than it should.

He was an anomaly in a Southern town. Gay and from the northeast, yet he'd won the locals over. It wasn't hard to see why.

"Right," he agreed. "Edgeview. It's the one house always open. Probably the most popular in town, and that's no accident. Just off Lower Woodville."

Buffy licked her lips and nodded thoughtfully, thumbing through the brochure. "What...I'm sort of...ummm...a ghost hunter."

"Ah."

It was a condescending sound, but she forced herself not to lose her smile. "Any...haunted places?"

Jerome cracked a small grin. "This is the South, you know," he replied. "Every house has its ghost."

She'd feared as much. "Yeah, but..."

"Really, anywhere around here. But Royal Pub is probably the most famous in town."

"Royal Pub?"

"Yeah, it just changed owners, so the food's actually edible. Jeremy and I go there every couple of weeks or so. You need a map?" He didn't wait for a reply, rather reached past her to select the appropriate pamphlet off the wall. "Here. Here's Maplewood..." He pointed to a dot that had very obviously been hand-drawn. Buffy wondered if Jerome made a habit of doodling the location of his bed-and-breakfast

on every map he stumbled across. "And here's Royal Pub. You're with the tour bus, right?"

"I caught a ride with the tour bus. I'm pretty much pedestrianizing it."

He didn't pause. "Okay. Well, if you're walking, just head up Rankin until you get to Jefferson and make a left. They don't open till five; do you want me to make a reservation for you?"

There was such a thing as being too helpful. As it was, Buffy wasn't sure she wanted to make concrete plans so much as she wanted to wander around town until her tinglies signaled the Slayer Alarm. With a grateful smile, she shook her head. "Ummm, not tonight," she replied. "Maybe tomorrow. I just...kinda want to wander right now. But I am interested...in the, you know, haunted places."

"Well, Royal Pub's supposed to be haunted." Jerome, however, didn't look convinced. "There's a ghost tour that's run out of the visitor's center. It's not as good as it used to be, but it leaves every night at seven and goes all over town."

That might be a better option.

"You know where the visitor's center is?" he asked.

"Yeah." Buffy nodded. "That's where the bus dropped me off."

"Right. Well, if you wanna do that, I suggest you head over after breakfast. Those tickets tend to go fast." Jerome shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "In the meantime, I'd go here..." He circled a house on the pamphlet with a pen that seemingly materialized from nowhere. "...and here...and here today."

Buffy smiled awkwardly. "Thanks."

"Okay. Breakfast's in a few minutes." And without another word, Jerome disappeared through one of the doors leading to the private quarters, leaving her alone.

But only for a few seconds. The scent of yummy food could wake the dead...or in this case, the two older women inhabiting one of the upstairs rooms. Buffy had done her best to avoid the other patrons of the bed-and-breakfast, exchanging little more than a few awkward smiles and monosyllabic words since arriving. The concept of eating with strangers was entirely beyond her.

It must be a southern thing.

"Oh, look, Olivia," the younger of the two elderly women was saying. At least she looked younger. She could be a rhyhad demon, for all Buffy knew. "Our young friend is awake!"

Olivia glanced up and scowled at Buffy as though she'd butchered a cat before turning her eyes downward again.

"Morning! Anne, right?"

The name threw her off momentarily. She and Giles had decided it was a better idea to minimize the use of her given name as much possible; she was already well-known in the demon world, and even if the Reaper was aware that he was her quarry, every little bit helped insofar as stealth attacks. So she was Anne.

Not that it particularly mattered with Spike in town. Knowing him, he'd blabbed to every ear that'd have him.

Glancing back to the friendly woman, Buffy forced a smile and nodded. "Yes, it's Anne. Good morning...and I'm sorry..."

"Edith," the woman kindly supplied. "Doesn't Jerome's breakfast smell wonderful?"

"Yeah."

"My son and soon-to-be daughter-in-law are going to have such a fine time." Edith winked scandalously. "I talked them into coming. Are you enjoying yourself thus far, dear?"

She laughed awkwardly. Perhaps breakfast wasn't a good idea, no matter how wonderful it smelled. Conversing with strangers was a talent she'd long ago lost in the quest to protect the world from its various evils. There was nothing about herself she could share, and all of the people in her life were already in on the secret, thus practicing stealth wasn't something she did...ever. Not since her mother had discovered the truth.

Not since the last time she and Spike had forged a truce to prevent the apocalypse.

"Umm," Buffy continued inelegantly, fingers tightening around her brochures. "Tell Jerome it smells...fantastic." Mouth-wateringly so. "But, I—uhhh...I gotta run. Just...lots and lots of the town to see."

It was sad to think she'd once been so good at socializing. Perhaps if she weren't here alone, things would be different.

As it was, it was best to keep to herself. The fewer people she associated with, the fewer people in danger.

She just wished she didn't feel so alone.



SOMETHING IN THE AIR MADE HER SKIN HUM. IT WAS NEITHER GOOD nor bad, pleasant nor unpleasant; it simply was. And it surprised her more than she could say. Not that she anticipated a never-ending series of dead ends, but she hadn't truly believed she would encounter anything at Edgeview worth investigating. It was too perfect, and her world was never perfect.

Granted, there was nothing truly suspicious about the grounds save for her lightheadedness, which could very well have a totally rational explanation. Sleep had abandoned her the night before in favor of Spike-shaped speculation. The house stood as it had in the brochure, molded of red brick and white pillars, shaped octagonally on a small bit of wilderness off Sergeant Prentiss road. The facade was gloomy and gutted, beautiful in a truly ethereal sense.

The walk up the drive had been an interesting one. There was a drive-up gazebo in which one purchased tour tickets pending on how many people were in the party; Buffy suspected she was the first patron not to come in a vehicle. After quipping off a few quick facts and name-dropping Jerome and Maplewood Inn, the ticket-taker had abandoned his wariness and let her pass without further interrogation. Great mounds of earth rose above the paved way, therefore whenever a passing car began up the drive, there was little room for her to dodge.

Well, she could leap, but that would bring even more unwanted attention, thus she opted merely to press herself as close to the wall of dirt as possible until the way was once again clear. Good thing she'd left her favorite outfits in Sunnydale. This trip could well prove to be hell on her wardrobe.

Perhaps if she'd been driving, the change would have been subtler. As it was, Buffy was very much aware of her increasing uneasiness. How the air seemed to grow thicker with every step. How her head became light, almost weightless, and the dull heat rushing her veins

turned into a low but very palpable burn. By the time the estate was in view, the sensation had passed, but the *feeling* remained with her throughout her walk around the grounds.

There was likely nothing here of consequence, but Buffy nonetheless felt uneasy enough to want to return later just to be sure. When it was dark.

When the evil things really came out to play.



There hadn't been much sun at all throughout the day's duration, and though the sun was due to set sometime around seven-thirty, Buffy was not at all surprised to find it mostly dark by the time she again departed Maplewood just after six. If she wanted to make the ghost tour, she'd have to hustle her way through the now-closed Edgeview grounds. The jog would be a heavy one but there was no one here she needed to impress. If she arrived at the visitor's center drenched in sweat, it was her business and hers alone.

Not that Buffy was generally in favor of Buffy-stink, but without a car and with a demon to hunt, some things had to be sacrificed. As it was, she was likely wasting time. Chasing down an inkling because of a feeling that had followed her up the drive of some katrillion-year-old manor wasn't exactly a productive way to spend her time, but Giles would insist upon leaving no stone unturned. If she felt a tingle on the Slayer line, it merited checking out.

No matter how small the tingle.

No matter that investigating required walking alone through a thicket of towering southern trees as the sky grew dark.

No matter that every step added another heebie to her jeebies.

By rule of thumb, it took a lot to creep Buffy out. She'd seen too much, done too much, killed too many squishy things and saved the world from total destruction a record of four times now. Walking up a wooded pathway seemed, on paper, a piece of cake. Something she could do with her eyes closed were she so inclined.

So why did *this* wooded path give her the wiggins?

"Okay," Buffy whispered loudly, "I'm not creeped out. I am *so* not creeped out. I am of the non-creeped out nation. I've seen woods darker and...well, darker pretty much sums it up. I am so totally not creeped out. And yes, all the healthy people I know talk to themselves, so I'm obviously of sound mind."

Gravel crunched beneath her feet. Bugs chirped and the wind made love to newly budding leaves. Above her, clouds rolled and the sky grew even more ominously dark. The fresh spring air had chilled, and as she wrapped her arms around herself to conserve as much heat as possible, the total idiocy of her quest came crashing down at full force.

There was nothing here.

"I am absolutely out of my mind."

It happened simultaneously. Her inner vamp-radar started blaring just as the words tickled the air.

"Are you?"

Buffy whirled around. He was there. Of course, he was there.

"It's funny, that is," Spike continued with a grin, taking slow, intentional steps forward. "Cause just a second ago, you were of sound mind."

"What are you doing here?"

It was a redundant question. They both knew perfectly well what he was doing here, thus it came to no surprise when he ignored her question.

"Now, I'm a man who knows my crazies," he drawled instead.

"I'll say."

"And while I'll give you points for effort, love, I gotta say you lack the essentials." Spike's grin broadened as he shrugged, hands diving into his duster pockets. "Slayer, must admit, never pegged you one for breaking and entering."

"Spike..."

"Well, not dumps like this, at least." He rocked slightly on his heels. "What are we doin'?"

"I am...investigating," Buffy retorted, crossing her arms and cocking her head. "I was here earlier and...what does it matter? What are *you* doing here?"



Spike shrugged. "What's it look like?"

"Wasting my time?"

"I'm helping."

*"Helping?"*

He nodded as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. "I reckon I got nothin' better to do, so I'm here to beat the baddies. Don't wanna be sitting on my hands when this wanker decides he wants my hide for his collection, yeah? I'm not the sort've bloke to go down without a fight."

Buffy just stared at him for a second. "No."

"No what?"

*"No to this. No to you helping. No to everything."*

He pouted. The walking-nuisance had the audacity to *pout*. "Why not?" he whined. "You got no one else, do you?"

*"By choice!"*

"I'm here for a reason, you know. The Powers aren't so fucked up they wouldn't toss me your direction if it weren't with a purpose, right?" Spike tilted his head as he studied her. "You need me."

Buffy reeled. "Nuh uh."

"There's the makings of a good argument."

"Spike—"

"What've you got to lose?" he demanded.

"Besides my dignity?"

Spike glowered. "Fine then. Have it your way. Just figured you wouldn't mind a bit of company, seein' as you're chatting *yourself* up to keep from goin' bonkers. I'll be on my merry way, then. Hope the git rips your stuffing out." He waved and began to backtrack down the path. "Cheers."

It was the most pathetic and obvious bluff she'd ever heard. And yet, as Spike's familiar form began to fade into shadow, part of her succumbed to panic. She really didn't want to be alone; another thing that seemed good on paper yet failed miserably in reality. Thus before she could reconsider, she heard herself call after him.

"Spike, wait."

His answering grin was the one of a canary-stuffed cat. "Miss me already?"

Buffy sighed and wagged a finger at him. "Don't make me regret this."

Spike just shrugged, not bothering to hide his satisfaction as he took his place at her side. "Not much chance of that, is there?"

No, there really wasn't.

Yet as they started up the path, side-by-side, Buffy couldn't bring herself to mind.

DRU'S PROPHECIES had never perplexed him. She'd commune with the stars, speak of kings, queens, circuses, and all matter of things. She'd twirl naked under the night sky, singing at the top of her undead lungs, and Spike had never questioned her. Not once. Not when she told him what the night had shared, not when she whispered Miss Edith's nastiest predictions. Others would look at her in astonishment, but he saw naught but brilliance.

A century of brilliance. A century of being her faithful lapdog. A century of thinking her just another misunderstood genius. A century in believing, for all her deceit and treachery, she could do no wrong. Not in his eyes. No matter whom she shagged or how often she stomped on his constantly broken heart, Spike never once lost faith in her sight. If Drusilla predicted it—if she suggested it—then it, whatever *it* was, would occur.

Though perhaps not always in the way one thought.

It was for this reason that her last vision had thrown him. She'd seen him walking down a darkened path; the right side consisted of shadows, while the left was bathed in sunlight. Upon meeting a fork in the road, Spike hadn't hesitated, hadn't waited a blink before veering determinably for the light.

He'd stepped into sunlight, and he hadn't burned. He hadn't gone up in a spectacular cloud of dust. He'd merely walked.

Spike had had no idea what to make of the vision. For the first time in a hundred and twenty years, he'd looked at his sire and drawn a blank.

Drusilla had known, of course. She had known.

The Slayer.

Once she mentioned Buffy, Spike's confusion had melted into irritation. Every other vision Dru had entertained since Acathla had involved Buffy. *Buffy, Buffy, Buffy*. It was all he bloody heard anymore. How he'd betrayed his immortal beloved by allying himself with the Slayer. How purity and light had blinded him, and how he was lost to her because of it.

Because of *Buffy*. Because of the Slayer, of all things ridiculous. Spike had done his best to ignore her—Drusilla's whims were unpredictable at best, but he'd remained diligent in his devotion. In his hope that she would remember how faithfully he'd stood beside her through all her indiscretions and sordid affairs.

It wasn't to be. Much like before, he'd found Dru necking a puss-oozing demon...and that had been the end. No amount of groveling would salvage what he'd thought was the love of his unlife. What he thought would be the beginning and the end for him. Never had he given consideration to anyone else.

Not of which he'd been aware, anyway. But these past few weeks living in the bottom of a glass had changed him.

Every time he closed his eyes, Buffy was all he saw. Not Drusilla. Never Drusilla.

Buffy.

At first, her intrusion had infuriated him—filled him with such potent outrage he'd find himself fangs-deep in some tarty blonde just to fulfill the fantasy of ripping out the Slayer's throat. But it wasn't all rage, and soon he found himself fantasizing about something else entirely. Something not foreign to him where Buffy was concerned, but likewise something he'd never before admitted to himself.

Images of her plagued him. Her perfect, bronzed body. Her soft, supple curves. Her strong thighs. Her firm, delicious breasts. And her

pussy—god, how he longed to explore her. Spread her with his fingers and delve into her body, lap at her tender flesh and sample her juices until her legs closed around his head and squeezed him so good he'd suffocate were he anything but a vampire. He saw them together, limbs entwined, bodies moving, her mouth suckling greedily on his cock before he took her again and again and again...

And then she was here. He'd found himself on the move and suddenly she was where he was. Fighting demons. Battling baddies far from home. All alone to stop the world from ending.

Again.

It was too sweet to be reality, but he was truly at her side, walking with her up the wooded path toward some Southern castle. She'd called after him. She wanted him with her...though likely not in the same way he wanted her.

Under him. Around him. Squeezing him until the stars fell from Heaven. Holding him close to her soft, sweet body as he trembled.

He wanted to taste her.

Though something told him that were he to say anything, Buffy wouldn't react all that well. So he walked solemnly at her side as Edgeview came into sight, a silhouette against a darkening canvas.

Edgeview. A skeleton of a house—a monument to America's war-torn countryside. It stirred memories of boyhood: listening to his parents discuss the short-lived United States. Listening to neighbors chuckle and boast how the fledgling country had barely lasted a century before falling to its knees. Yet it wasn't flashes of William's pathetic childhood that caught him off guard, nor was it the tantalizing smell of Buffy's soft, alluring flesh.

No, it was something different. It started quietly, an inward itch he couldn't address, rather accept until it faded. Only it didn't fade—it expanded. His veins hardened and his unbeating heart became, if possible, even more inert. The farther they traveled the more certain he became. Something was wrong...something that made his cold insides colder. As a creature of the night, it took quite a bit to make him shiver...but this was different.

This was something else. Something he'd felt before—felt in New Orleans—but not like this. Never this potent. Never this...

"Uh, Slayer..."

Buffy glanced up sharply. "You feel something?"

"You too?"

"Not...just kinda the tingly I got when I was here before." She licked her lips, which had his eyes drawn to her tongue before it disappeared back inside her perfectly kissable mouth. Oblivious. The silly chit had no bloody idea how much a temptation she was. "I guess I'll be missing the ghost tour tonight."

He perked an eyebrow. "Ghost tour?"

She shrugged. "I'm chasing a baddie who thrives on that kinda energy."

"So you thought..."

"Give a girl a break. It couldn't hurt." Buffy exhaled deeply, shivering. "Giles sent me here with nothing to go on but that this creep has a major jones for all manner of things that go bump in the night...and yeah, while ghosts are on the side of *oh please*, I live in Sunnydale...where you never say never." She paused thoughtfully. "Hey, you're pretty old."

Just what every bloke wanted to hear. "Thanks ever so."

"Well, if it's any consolation, you do wear it well."

He grinned. *That's a bit more like it.*

"What's your take on ghosts?" she asked.

"Huss'at?"

"I figure you've been around long enough to have an answer." Buffy tossed him a pointed glance. "Also, you hang around with a rough crowd."

"Baby, I'm the leader of the *rough crowd*."

She snorted incredulously. It was a sound he very much should not have thought adorable, but there was no accounting for the way his chest swelled with warmth.

"Thought you'd know the answer to this, pet. Wasn't it you Angelus got all snuggly with while your school was going all William Peter Blatty couple of years back?"

Buffy stopped short, her eyes going wide. "Oh. Oh, you're right."

"Forgot about that?"

"No, I'd thought about them before, but I guess it..." She turned a

fetching shade of red, looking away. "I guess I just never... That seemed like a special thing. Like...a one-time incident. Possession and all."

"Right. Well, yeah, I've stumbled across a spook or two." Every step they took extended the tight discomfort stretching his chest, but he'd be buggered before he admitted as much. "Nothin' like the rot you see at the cinema, but yeah. Hauntings, regular hauntings, aren't total bollocks, pet. But like you, I doubt this git would waste too much time dallying with ghosties."

Buffy frowned. "Well, if he's really what Giles says he is, then it'd make sense for him to hit up the haunted hot spots. I mean...if ghosts aren't just designed for tourist traps, then the Reaper'd want as many uglies for his collection as possible. And maybe that's why it took so long for him to get picked up by the Council radar. It's only been recently that the bigger demons started to go missing."

"You think the bloke's been snaggin' spirits quietly and only now decided to think bigger?"

"Hey, I didn't think there were ghosts at all. This is just me trying to make sense of that which is without." She paused and favored him with a long, speculative glance. "You really look uncomfortable."

It must be bloody bad for the Slayer to sound worried. Or perhaps he just hoped it was worry. There was no telling these days. There was likewise no denying the sick sensation gripping his stomach, flooding his veins with cold but similarly making his otherwise cool skin to break into a sweat. His feet hardened further into lead with every step forward. He truly did not wish to explore the grounds.

Yet likewise, even when he tried to forcibly bring himself to a halt he found himself incapable. Something was dragging him forward. Something wanted him here.

Something wanted *him*.

"It's here, isn't it?" Buffy's breath was short and excited. Glad someone was having fun. "It's here. You feel it, don't you?"

"I'm feeling something, all right."

"It's here."

"I think I've rethought this whole 'homing beacon' thing. I never was a *beacon* sorta vamp."

They were right before Edgeview now. The small pathway leading

to the back entrance veered for the right, but his feet would carry him no farther. There was something here—something he'd felt before...in New Orleans, but never like this. Never this potent. This sick, cold, terrible, but somehow wonderful feeling spreading through him. He felt diseased but satisfied that the cure was just a few feet away...if only he could find the thing and touch it.

If only...

This wasn't right. Something here was very wrong.

"Spike?"

Somehow, he found the willpower to nod. "There."

"There?"

"Your boy's here. I can't..." His legs aimed in a new direction now, one veering from the pathway altogether and heading for the front door. "Buffy..."

"This was a crap idea," she insisted, wrapping her hand around his arm. God, his little Slayer had a firm bloody grip. Enough to stop him from moving, of course, but not enough to keep the urge in his body from propelling him forward. "Spike, you're a walking target."

"Yeah, love, getting that." Digging his heels into the ground seemed cartoonish, but he wasn't above it. "Next time you tell me to bugger off, believe me—"

"You'll ignore me and get yourself into another mess."

Spike flashed her a grin, awkward as it was. "You know me so well."

It was maddening how cute she looked when irritated—it was maddening that he had to notice it at all. Especially at such a time when he had seemingly lost possession of his body. One would think there would be more pressing matters to occupy his mind, but the damn girl had him blinded.

That was until the doors of the manor swung open and a shadowy figure swept down the front steps like every melodramatic two-bit villain to ever grace the silver screen. A creature calling itself the Reaper would be adorned in a wavy black cloak. Like swirling black cloaks were the universal shorthand for *big bad* evil. Spike would have laughed, but the dueling sensations of helplessness and Slayer-inspired arousal overpowered him. The Reaper didn't walk so much as glided



across the ground, and though its head was shrouded, Spike felt its eyes narrow on him.

"Collecting spooks," the vampire said loudly. "Bloody hell..."

It was coming for him.

"Spike—"

The shadowy figure outstretched a single arm, then motioned to the object it carried in the other. The object that had escaped notice until now. The object the Slayer and her watcher had called Pandora's Box. It wanted Spike in there—in that crowded cell with fuck knew how many other demons and spirits and nightly creatures. The other doomed beasties that had been exactly where he was now. Had looked at the shadow and wanted...wanted...

It just happened. There was no rhyme or reason to it happening, but it did. The war pounding his temples washed away as though it had never been, and at last he saw the thing the Slayer had warned him about. The glow of Pandora's Box, the gentle hum, the soothing, irresistible lull of its well-kept secrets. These wore away at his resistance before melting it entirely. The lure of the box was too much. He needed it. He needed it like he needed blood. Needed the box. Needed to crawl inside. Needed to see what secrets it harbored. Needed...

"Lemme go," Spike ordered suddenly, surprising himself at first with his words, but speaking only confirmed the abrupt burn in his chest. "Slayer—"

The grip on his arm tightened. "No, we need to get you out of here."

"Don't tell me what I bloody need!" Fangs tore through his gums and he began pulling against her. Away from her. The box was so close. So close... "I'll rip your throat out and—"

In a blink, she was in front of him, her body between his and the Reaper. Pandora's Box disappeared behind her eyes. "Shut up," she snapped.

Then she captured his cheeks between her hands and brought his mouth crashing down upon her own. And all thought of Pandora's Box or the wanker in the black dress vanished. Spike moaned, his demon receding, all fight abandoning him as his body seized what it wanted above all else. Buffy was against him. Buffy's lips molded to

his. *Buffy*. Everything around him ceased to exist. The ground vanished, the house faded, and the Reaper merged into nothing. Reality blinked away, and there was nothing but the pure, unadulterated truth of Buffy. The way her lips spoke against him, brushing his with softness Spike had never before touched. Not with anyone. Not this—this tenderness, this gentleness. Her mouth moved with girlish curiosity, consuming him with her richness. Her taste. Her *good*.

The kiss hadn't been planned—she was far too tense to have made the conscious decision to snog him. For what cause, he knew not, but he was there to catch her when her body relaxed. When her lips parted with a pleased sigh, he dove his eager tongue into her wet, wonderful mouth. Exploring, searching, drawing in as much of her taste as possible. Committing her to memory, since there was little chance he'd get to savor her again. But she was here—against him, kissing him with enthusiasm. Holding his chin to anchor him into her mouth with small, hungry murmurs scratching her throat. There was no way to tell if she was aware of herself for the way she leaned into him, her hips swaying against his, rubbing herself against the iron hardness at his crotch, but he was too far-gone to care. All that mattered was that she did.

“Fuck,” he breathed. “Buffy...”

A pause. He worried his voice had broken the spell around him, but only for an instant. She was kissing him again before he could miss her warmth, blinking away coherent thought. All he knew was her heat. Her liquid fire. The scent of her arousal attacked him without warning, teasing his tastebuds, flooding his nostrils and confirming what he already knew. What he'd known long before Dru started sprouting riddles about dark and light paths. He was lost. Spike was completely lost in Buffy. In the Slayer. For whatever reason, he was hers.

“Buffy...” Her name rolled between them on a groan as he sucked at her lower lip. “Want...fuck...want you so much...”

Then she was gone, and the loss was crushing. Spike's eyes flew open.

“You with me?” she demanded, breathless and flustered. That much was satisfying. Good to know her feathers weren't beyond ruffling.

Not that he paid much attention to anything but her moist pink

lips, swollen by his ardor. That couldn't be it. She couldn't deny him her kisses. She couldn't give him so much without giving him anything at all—no, he'd taste her again. He *needed* to taste her again.

However, he wasn't able to put as much into words. All that came out was an ineloquent, "Huh?"

Buffy nodded shakily. "Okay, you're with me." And before he could dip his head to seize her again, she'd shoved him to the ground. The ground which returned without warning. Then she was gone, flipping in a furious bout of acrobatics toward the all-but-forgotten form of the Reaper.

And suddenly the mist around his head cleared, and he understood. "Buffy!"

If she heard, she gave no indication. Her beautiful body threw itself into battle. She was poetry in full form—poetry in motion. Poetry in every conceivable embodiment.

But then, he'd always thought so.

Spike's eyes fell upon Pandora's Box, the burn in his stomach rekindling. It wasn't nearly as potent as before, but there nonetheless, and the wail of the demon couldn't be denied. In a flash he found himself transformed again into the pun of a bad voodoo gig, unseen hands dragging him uselessly toward the Reaper's collection.

"Oh, not good," he decided, voice tinged with panic, fingers scratching at the earth. "Not bloody good."

"Oh, no you don't!" the Slayer snapped as she dug her heel into the Reaper's chest. She whirled and pinned Spike under a fierce glare. "Dammit, Spike!"

What, did she think he *wanted* to become a demon trophy? She was off her rocker. "Help me, you silly bint!"

Perhaps it wasn't wise to insult a woman while simultaneously requesting assistance, but it seemed to work. Buffy materialized just as his toes threatened to skim the box's surface, smashing her leg into Pandora's side and sending the thing flying across the night sky. It twisted and spiraled before crashing at the foot of Edgeview's front steps, rocking to its side and knocking the lid off its hinge.

Then there was nothing.

Nothing until the Reaper shrieked.

“Bloody hell!” Spike barked, scrambling to cover his ears. “What the—”

But there was no point in speaking—the Reaper’s piercing wails consumed every grain of earth. The creature shot across the ground, throwing Buffy off her feet in a fury before bolting toward the fallen collection. Though Pandora’s open lid hadn’t unveiled anything remarkable, the strident panic in the Reaper’s movements was impossible to misread. He commanded the box shut with a wave of his arm, and with a parting faceless glare in Buffy’s direction, vanished in plain sight. A whirl, a breeze, and he was gone, leaving behind only the echoes of his inhuman cries.

The ground felt violated when silence commanded it once more. It took Spike a few long seconds to realize freedom had been restored to his body, a few more seconds to identify Buffy on the ground where the Reaper had tossed her. He climbed hastily to his feet.

“You all right, pidge?”

The frown on her face served as all the answer he needed. It was contemplative, not pained—a look of which he’d made considerable study back in the days when plotting her death had been the preferred method by which to fall asleep, as it always guaranteed good dreams.

Dreams of fighting until they fucked.

Amazing he hadn’t seen what Dru had seen. Amazing it had taken his ex to point out the bloody obvious.

“Someone lit a fire under his cape,” Buffy griped, accepting his hand when he offered it. “What happened?”

“He lost his goods.”

Her nose scrunched up adorably. “Huh?”

“Least that’s how I figure it,” Spike explained, nodding to the place where Pandora’s Box had landed. “You knocked the cap off, love. Wager a few spooks went missing.”

The frown deepened, unconvinced. “But...nothing happened.”

“Cept the git nearly busted my eardrum.”

“I mean...I saw the lid come off, but it wasn’t anything worth...”

The worry lines on her face deepened. Strange that a girl so young could have worry lines. For the first time in all his years, Spike felt a

pang of pity for slayers. A pang he couldn't describe and didn't fully wish to acknowledge, yet couldn't ignore all the same.

"Wouldn't you think," she continued, "if he's collecting demons and nasties, they'd have more pomp and circumstance if they ever got free?"

"Could be the ghosties are all that made it out," Spike said reasonably. "The last ones in, the first to leave...that sorta rot. It wasn't open that long." He paused. "Also, the wanker screamed loud enough to stop anyone from movin'. Maybe that's why he made such a bloody ruckus."

"He prevented them from leaving by throwing a hissy?"

"Well, love, could you move at all?"

Buffy deflated at that, poking out her lower lip as her eyes turned in contemplation. Not that Spike was particularly interested in her eyes at the moment—not with her mouth begging silently for his own, and certainly not with the deliciously steady rise and fall of her breasts tempting his empty hands.

Was she going to pretend the kiss hadn't happened?

No, Spike avowed. No, she would not bloody well forget.

He wouldn't let her. She could fight him if she wished, but he wouldn't let her pretend it hadn't happened. Regardless of her intentions, he knew she'd felt something. No girl moaned like she'd moaned without feeling...

Well, he didn't know what, but he was sure as hell going to find out. Without waiting another beat, he cupped her cheeks and drew her mouth into his, slipping his tongue between her lips without waiting for an invitation.

*Buffy.*

She tasted so sweet. Tense like before, but only at first. Only until passion overwhelmed her better senses; only until she conceded. Then she was battling him all over again. Whimpering, clawing, nipping, sucking, drawing him into her mouth to stake her claim on his tongue, his lips—fuck if she wasn't careful, he'd toss her to the ground and spread her legs apart. The molten heat of her pussy was going to melt his jeans, anyway, for the way she gyrated her hips against him. She would split him apart if he wasn't careful, and he couldn't give a fuck.

Her kisses were starved. She would consume him if he let her.

And he would let her.

A gasp drove their lips apart, Buffy's head rolling back, and his lips eagerly accepted the invitation. He pressed hot, wet kisses down her throat, slipping his hands—which had at some point traveled from her cheeks to her waist—further southward until he had ripe Slayer-ass cradled in each palm. “Christ,” Spike breathed against her throat, rubbing his erection against her center with shameless abandon. He wanted her to feel him—feel exactly to what she'd driven him. Feel how desperate he was to be inside. “My...*Buffy*...”

“Guh...”

“So hot. Taste so good.”

“Spike...”

“Wanna feel you, kitten. And I know you want to feel me, too.”

There was no account for what happened. One second he was swimming in the Slayer's arousal, and the next he was on his back, woefully unaccompanied by the Slayer in question. It took a few beats to register what had occurred, and another to realize the only person around to have shoved him to the ground was the girl standing before him. The girl whose cheeks were flushed, whose lips were swollen, and whose eyes were dark with lust she couldn't hope to hide.

“What?” he demanded, sitting up on his arms. “Buffy?”

Buffy was looking everywhere but at his face. Twice, her eyes landed on the bulge pressing his jeans and twice they darted away, scandalized. She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself. “I...ummm...”

“You what?”

“That was...weird.”

“I like weird,” he retorted, climbing to his feet. “Weird is good.”

“I didn't mean to kiss you earlier.”

Spike scowled. “What? Your mouth just accidentally fell on mine?”

“I was trying to get your attention.”

“Yeah, and you managed fine.”

“It was either that or Spike the Sardine in the Reaper's Box of Wonder.” Buffy crossed her arms, finally gaining back some of that righteous indignation that made her so bloody cute. “What would you have had me do?”

His hands came up. "Make no mistake, I loved kissing you. I just don't understand why we can't do it again."

"Because...we're...we don't..." Confusion flooded her eyes. "You hate me!"

Oh, how much simpler his life would be were that true. "What's a little snogging between enemies?"

"Do I even want to know what that word means?" She held up a hand and shook her head before he could retort. "No. I really don't. Spike..." A long pause, filled only with the sound of her heavy breaths. "You should leave."

"Too tempting for you?"

"No, I mean town." Buffy waved emphatically toward the house. "You saw what happened. If the Reaper finds you when I'm not around—"

"Not seein' a problem. Just gotta stick close to you, is all."

"—but even then, there's no guarantee I'll be able to stop you from crawling in the box yourself."

Spike shrugged. "Just make like you did tonight. We should be fine."

There was nothing for a beat. She just stared at him. "Do you have some massive death wish I should know about?"

"Kinda redundant asking that of a bloke who's already dead," he observed. "I told you I wanted to help."

"And then you changed your mind."

"When?"

"Just before the Reaper started working his mojo on you!"

"Yeah, well, I changed my mind again right around the time you snogged me."

"You're reading waaaay too much into one little kiss, Spike."

Seemed she'd worked out what he meant by *snog*. "There was nothing little about that kiss," Spike retorted, hooking his thumbs through his belt loops. "And you're off count."

Buffy sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "I'm not going to stand here and argue with you," she said, hesitating, then breaking for the path they'd walked together. "If you know what's good for you, Fang Face, you'll get out of Dodge now."

“Yeah, well, not one for doin’ what I’m told.”

“You’re also not known for your smarts. Strange how these things tend to go hand-in-hand.” She turned away before her eyes could punctuate her words, seemingly aware that her voice lacked conviction. She betrayed so much in one little gesture. Without being any the wiser, her desperate confusion was on full display.

Christ, he’d really rattled her.

“I’m going back to Maplewood,” Buffy announced, visibly trying to convince herself. Another beat. She hesitated as though struggling to find words, but gave up in a matter of seconds for the more tempting escape of the wooded path.

Leaving Spike to do nothing but watch the rhythmic sway of her hips until she melted into shadows.



“I’M A MORON,” BUFFY MUTTERED IRRITABLY, RIPPING THE comforter down the bed. “Kiss the dangerously sexy vampire to distract him from certain doom. Why, yes, that does seem to be the only option.”

God, he’d tasted so good. Nothing like the few fantasies she’d allowed herself. Nothing like any of the kisses she’d shared. His mouth wasn’t overly remarkable, by any means, but the way he’d touched her—the way his lips had molded against hers—the way he’d flaunted his reaction to her. It had been so long since she’d given thought to sex. After the disastrous popping of her cherry, Buffy had all but decided she belonged in a nunnery. All her life, adults had told her sex was bad and boy, had she ever gotten the memo.

Angel had left her so she could lead a normal life. Have normal boyfriends. Go on normal dates. Bear normal children.

It had been in abstract until tonight. The thought of someone else. The thought of anyone else. The thought of her with someone who wasn’t Angel. Angel, whose face she couldn’t quite summon due to the way her lips tingled still with the echoes of Spike’s kisses. Spike, who *wouldn’t* leave, even when she demanded it.

Another vampire. She was out of her mind.



Angel's kisses had never made her burn. Not once, yet she couldn't stop sizzling from the simple thought of what she had shared with Spike tonight. Perhaps it was the thrill of the forbidden. Perhaps it was knowing exactly how wrong it was. How wrong *Spike* was.

"Folly, thy name is Buffy."

The night had at least been somewhat productive, aside from the idiocy that had been throwing herself at the enemy. She'd seen the Reaper. She'd fought him, witnessed him in action, and now she had a fairly good grasp on how he operated his trade. Likewise, she knew the tingle she'd experienced at Edgeview hadn't been a false alarm. Perhaps there was enough *otherness* in her to hunt this thing without too much difficulty. And really, the sooner the Reaper was a footnote, the better. Then she could place much-needed space between herself and Spike and get the tantalizingly delicious image of them writhing together out of her mind.

God, she really needed to stop, else she'd start cursing at the top of her lungs. Though her room offered privacy, she doubted the walls were sound-proof. And judging by the rental parked in the drive by the main house, the elderly woman's son and soon-to-be daughter-in-law had arrived, meaning a Spike-inspired screamfest would disturb at least two more patrons.

Thus, instead of screaming, Buffy changed into her favorite oversized T-shirt and slipped her legs under the blankets. Better to sleep it off and hope for Spike-less dreams.

One could hope.



A METALLIC CRASH RENDERED HER INSTANTLY AWAKE. BUFFY BOLTED upward with a gasp, wide eyes darting around the dark room as memories fought through the sleep-addled haze to remind her where she was and for what purpose.

It took a few seconds, but everything came surging back with a clarity she was too tired to consider. Bits, pieces, then the whole puzzle. She wasn't home; she was in Natchez, Mississippi, and she was here hunting a demon.

Then she remembered where she'd been tonight. What had happened tonight.

The Reaper.

Spike.

Kissing Spike. Kissing Spike *a lot*.

*No, no, no.*

Thankfully, another noisy clamor chased away Spike-driven thoughts. Buffy tossed the covers aside and made her way toward the door. She had no idea what to expect at this hour; Sunnydale was so much easier to predict. Creepy sounds were always at the blame of some pointy-headed demon. It was the way it worked—the way with which she was comfortable, as it left no room for doubt. However, Natchez was a demonically sleepy town with little-to-no activity marring its past. Nothing that could be attributed to causes from her line of work, anyway. Nothing like she saw on the Hellmouth.

Not until the Reaper came to town.

Perhaps that was it. Perhaps it was the Reaper. Faceless or not—though the jury was still out on that—he'd gotten a good look at her tonight. There was no telling whether or not he'd followed her to Maplewood. Her body had already been buzzed with the aftermath of Spike's kisses, so if the Reaper had followed her, she wouldn't have been in the position to notice.

Better to collect a weapon. Just in case.

Buffy inhaled deeply, grabbed a stake off her nightstand, and threw the door open.

To nothing. There was nothing on the other side.

A large weight rolled off her shoulders in the form of a sigh. *Pathetic.*

"Either never leave the Hellmouth or rethink this semester's enrollment at UC Sunnydale," Buffy muttered, poking her head out the door for good measure. The soft glow of the security light above Maplewood's parking garage peered back at her. Likely set off by one of Jerome's bajillion cats.

"Okay, enough excitement." She turned around, tossing the stake onto the bed. "Back to sleep for a certain slayer."

A shiver of familiarity rang her spider senses. Buffy tensed and

whirled around again, her eyes this time clashing with another's. A familiar crystal gaze with a smirk to match its sparkle. Though she wasn't surprised, she balled her fist and swung on instinct, only to be captured in Spike's all-too-firm grip.

"Touchy, are we?"

"Force of habit," Buffy explained hurriedly, jerking away. "And what the hell are you doing here?"

Spike shrugged, rocking slightly on his heels. "Hiding."

"Hiding?"

"Figure the Reaper's on my tail now and there's no safer place than the Slayer's side."

"I told you to get out of town."

"Yeah, well, I decided to come here instead."

Buffy blinked dumbly. "Are you *out* of your mind? You can't stay here!"

"Why not?"

"Because...this is my room, Spike!"

He flicked his eyebrows and licked his teeth in a way that should be one hundred percent obnoxious and zero percent sexy, yet was somehow the other way around. "One of its more attractive qualities."

"You can't be serious." She shook her head hard. "This is... You *can't* be serious."

"As a sodding heart attack," Spike replied. "Been givin' it a lot of thought, I have. The both of us know I'm goin' nowhere so long as you're in town. And I stand by what I said earlier...I can help you."

"If by help, you mean becoming a vamp-magnet the second the Reaper is actually in view. Yeah. Great idea."

"We'll work around it."

Buffy laughed harshly. "Spike—"

"Sweetheart," he drawled, leaning against the doorframe. "You know you don't want me to go. You *want* to want me to go, but you like havin' me around. I'm here so you're not alone, yeah? And I know you liked snogging me earlier." He licked his lips before his gaze dropped to hers. "I liked it, too. Can't bloody stop thinking about it. How you taste..."

She took a large, exaggerated step back. "There will be no more...that."

Spike shrugged. "Fine."

"None at all."

"Whatever you say, love."

"And you sleep on the floor."

A childlike grin spread across his delicious lips. His lips which she *so* did not favor with a longing, perhaps drool-included stare. "So I get to stay?"

*This is the worst of all bad ideas.*

"On the floor," she said, barely hearing herself. "Do I need to invite you in?"

Spike's grin broadened as he stepped across the threshold. "It's a rented room," he said, shrugging off his duster. "I can come and go as I please."

"If you try anything—"

"I know...you'll stake me good and proper."

"Something like that."

"Mmm." His eyes fell to her lips before landing on her breasts. "But what a way to go."

Oh yeah. If her thundering heart and racing pulse wasn't indicator enough, the sudden need to press her thighs together definitely drove the *this is insane* nail to bed.

So she was insane.

Buffy met Spike's eyes, warming under his smile.

She could deal with insane.

ONCE ASLEEP, there was very little in the world that could stir Spike to consciousness. A side-effect of having too much energy throughout the day—or night, as the case may be—perhaps, but a fairly predictable trait to anyone who knew him well. Periods between sleep were filled with violence, destruction, and shagging—it only followed through that once he crashed he crashed entirely.

Therefore, he found it rather surprising when a telling twinge of the Slayer's bedsprings had him instantly alert. The girl was awake. Though he kept his eyes shut, he knew from the way her heart began pounding as her mind likely took her through yesterday's greatest hits, including her new roommate. Then he felt her move nearer, looking over the bed to ensure he was still resting on the floor where she'd left him.

Spike smothered a grin, knowing she'd anticipated awaking with either two puncture wounds in her throat or a vampire cuddled up behind her. Both ideas were intoxicating, but the greater pleasure was in the wait. The suspense. The hunt.

Buffy would be his. This was now a certainty, upgraded from the realm of fantasy to a place where dreams became tangible. Buffy would be his...if only for a little while. If only until the spell around their

extremely special circumstances shattered and shoved them back into the reality they were both desperate to escape. Before they parted ways, he would know how her pussy tasted. He would know just how snugly she fit his cock. He would know the delicious little sounds she made—whether or not she was a screamer. He would know her.

Yesterday, that would have satisfied him. Today he feared it wouldn't be enough.

Spike had never been one for flings. Sure, after Dru dumped his arse he'd taken his revenge by fucking the brains out of several extremely willing women, but it hadn't made him feel any better. Rather the opposite—every time he walked away from a passionless encounter, whatever life usually thrived in his dead veins had completely drained. He wasn't the sort of vampire—the sort of man—who thrived on sex for the sake of sex alone. Yeah, he'd keep a steady thing around if it fell in his lap, but taking pleasure in pleasure was only half the fun. It was always better if there was a connection.

Dru had never cherished him. She'd been grateful and affectionate, playful and wicked, but never lost for him. And though he'd longed for something else, it had, in his mind, been enough.

It wasn't now. He wanted more.

He *needed* more. Which was why a fling with the Slayer would only somewhat satisfy him. The need for connection was stronger than he'd anticipated; Dru had seen it, of course, and he knew what she'd call it. But it seemed too ridiculous, too impossible, too impulsive, to give his feelings for Buffy any such declaration.

But then, Buffy had been with him for nearly two years now. She'd been with him ever since he saw her dancing in the club; saw the gritty look of determination on her beautiful, haunted face. Ever since he'd witnessed her sacrifice everything for a world that could not love her back.

Yes. God, he did love her. He loved her in a way he'd never loved any woman. Not Cecily. Not Drusilla. No one. Not as an ideal. Not as something he wished to see but could never fully translate. He loved her with his entire self, even the small part of him that had always been reserved, untouched, unwanted by Drusilla—and the small part

combined with his whole cast a supernova of understanding over his shaken reality.

He loved her as an equal.

Dru had been right. Christ, she always was, but this was something different. The vision she'd had of the forked path and Spike's chosen walkway—it had been more than foreseeing the future—she had likewise betrayed the past.

Perhaps this was where he'd been destined to come all along. Dragged across time by a woman who wouldn't fully love him. Kicked in the head and shot in the heart over and over so he'd know salvation when he saw it. So he'd become enraptured the second he saw her dancing. So he would know, even without recognizing the power of such knowledge, how she would change his entire existence.

*Buffy.*

It was wrong. Vampires and slayers walked a thin, fine line, and fuck knew he'd always been obsessed with them. But perhaps there was an explanation for that, as well. If this was for what he was truly meant.

There was a broken beauty in the wrongness of their relationship. One he hadn't realized until now.

Strange revelations to have while sleeping on the Slayer's rented floor, but that didn't make them any less true. And he knew he'd have her. He'd have the pleasure of her body. He'd know the taste of her blood.

Yesterday it would have been enough, but yesterday he hadn't known he loved her.

Today he did.

And while shagging Buffy would unmake his world, it wouldn't satisfy him.

He wanted forever.

Another telling whine of the bedsprings silenced his thoughts completely. The soft pads of her feet brushed the rustic stone floor as she leaned over him, her delicate scent overwhelming his senses. How a woman so strong could smell so sweet, he didn't know, but he wanted to fill his lungs with it.

"Spike?"

He didn't move. He wanted to see how she'd act if she thought him asleep.

Her hand brushed his shoulder. "Spike?" she whispered again, squeezing him softly. When he failed to stir again, she sighed and drew back. "Oh boy. I *so* am not looking forward to explaining you to Jerome."

*Jerome?*

Who the bugger was Jerome?

"All right. I'm—ummm...going to shower." Buffy took another step back. "I don't know why I'm talking to Mr. Living Dead Guy, but I am." A pause. "And, on the off chance that you can hear me, if you do anything evil while I'm showering, it's the dust-buster for you."

Spike killed a grin. She was too damn cute for her own good. Not that the idea of peeping at her naked glory wasn't tempting—fuck, it was too tempting for words. The visual alone had his cock twitching. And though it went against his nature, he would respect her privacy. For now.

Tomorrow might be a whole new ballgame.

His conviction to remain a gentleman didn't make the shower any more endurable. The entire time the water ran, images of naked Buffy assaulted his sex-starved mind. Buffy dripping. Buffy soaping. Buffy's beautiful breasts flecked with drops of water. Buffy's bare quim aching to be touched. Her soft skin. Her firm body. Her legs wrapped around his waist as he fingered her clit and readied her, pressed her against the wall and pried her vaginal lips apart with his cock.

Fuck, his imagination really hated him.

A roll of steam announced her return to the main room, soft, cautious steps crossing the floor. When he stole a peek, he saw she was again wearing the over-sized T-shirt in which she'd greeted him the night before, only this time lacking a panty-line whenever the smooth cotton pressed against her bare thigh.

He swallowed. Hard.

*Bloody hard, that's right.*

Her hair was wrapped in a towel by means he was certain only women knew how to perform. She hesitated, turned her head in his



direction, but ultimately decided to leave him alone and took a seat instead upon the mattress, her back to him.

God, he was so aware of her. Every hot little breath she took echoed in his lungs.

"Okay," he heard her say. "Okay. Better get this out of the way now."

*What?*

A second lapsed before he had an answer. Buffy picked up the telephone and began to dial.

"Giles?" A pause. Some groggy mumbling and a few could-be words reached his ears, but nothing more. "Yes, I'm aware that you're two hours behind me. Well, sorry for interrupting Watcher Beauty Rest, but I'm not sure when I'll be near a phone again today, and I wanted to play catch-up. You know—on the *demon* I'm hunting for you?"

The line fell silent. "Yeah," Buffy continued smugly. "That's what I thought. I do have some stuff to tell you. I've seen the Reaper... He does nothing for me, I promise, but I've also seen him in action and we've scored correctly on the pop-quiz thus far. The demons and whatnot he's taking are definitely not of the willing. No, Giles, I saw it happen. Massively creepy, like full loss of bodily control. We're talking definite tractor-beam here."

Spike couldn't remain silent any longer. And all things considered, he felt he'd shown remarkable patience thus far. He popped his head over the mattress. "Thankfully," he said loudly, "the Slayer has a trick or two up her sleeve to keep poor defenseless beasties from being dragged off against their will."

Buffy whipped around so fast her towel-turban collapsed. "Shut up!" she hissed.

"What? Embarrassed to be *heard* with me?"

Unsurprisingly, the watcher went from groggy to alert in a flash. "Is that *Spike*?" he squawked loud enough for the whole bloody inn to hear. "What the devil is *Spike* doing in your room?"

"The girl's slipping," Spike said, unable to help himself. "Letting a vamp crash in her quarters? I think you've been too soft on her, Rupert."

Buffy glared daggers. "He's helping me," she said into the phone,

her voice shaking with anger. "I ran into him a couple of nights ago and we're...working together."

"Buffy, need I remind you that this is *Spike* we're talking about?"

"Don't think so," Spike replied. "Seeing as I'm right here and her eyes *are* connected to her head."

"Good Lord. I'm flying down there immediately."

Buffy flew to her feet, stricken. "No!" she screamed. Then, wincing as the effect of her exclamation bounced off the walls, continued softer, "No. No, I have it under control. Spike's not doing... Well, he's helping me. Yes, Giles, *helping* me. We trailed the Reaper last night and everything went...no, I have *not* lost my mind! Look, if Spike so much as glances at my neck, he's toast. Or, more appropriately, dust. But for now, he's helping." A pause. The watcher's voice had dwindled in volume once again, though Spike could still hear his erratic flapping even if the words weren't decipherable.

"Giles, I'm hanging up the phone. No, he slept on the *floor*, not in my bed. God, perv much?" Buffy sighed, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. "Yes, of course I'll be careful. Stake under my pillow, looks at me crossways and he's gone, yadda yadda yadda. Bye, Giles. Bye. *Bye.*"

It was amazing the phone didn't shatter under the force of her slam.

"What the *hell* were you thinking?" Buffy snapped.

God, she looked amazing. Wet hair. Brilliantly angry eyes. Cheeks red with fury. Chest heaving.

*Goddess.*

Spike waved a hand. "Evil, pet, remember? Like to stir up trouble wherever trouble can be stirred."

"He's going to pull a massive wig and rush down here and then..." She glanced away quickly, like she was embarrassed, and in doing so confirmed what he'd known since last night.

Buffy might be alone, but she wasn't lonely. Not anymore.

And she didn't want anyone to interrupt them. She knew, even if she didn't confess it to herself, where their relationship was going. She knew the floor wouldn't be his bed too much longer, because she wanted him under the covers. It was why she stood before him in

nothing but a T-shirt and no knickers. Why she didn't bother throwing an arm across her chest, where her nipples saluted him through the thin cotton.

She knew he'd see it all soon—taste it all soon. She knew this as sure as he did.

The only question remaining was simple: what did it mean to her? What, if anything, did she want? Certainly not another relationship, seeing as she and Angel the Wonder Wanker had just parted ways, and there was little chance she'd ever give thought to another vampire—especially Spike—in the long-term sense.

But maybe she would. Just maybe. They were so alike. So desperate for affection. So wanting of love. Of the sort of love that didn't disappoint. That didn't run off in a blink. The sort of love that lasted.

Buffy had thought she'd had it. He had, too. But they hadn't.

Not with Dru. Not with Angel. Those two were meant for something else—they'd served their purpose.

Buffy was meant for Spike. Even if she didn't know it, even if she never acknowledged it, it was something he knew with absolute certainty. Creatures such as they were meant for passion, meant to be molded with love, and meant to love with every aching fiber.

There was no telling if Buffy would ever realize it.



THOUGH BUFFY DIDN'T FEEL ANY MORE COMFORTABLE ABOUT speaking with strangers than she had yesterday, she felt she owed it to herself as well as Jerome to give it a shot. Furthermore, she could use the time away from Spike; it was more than obvious the blond pest wasn't going to let her out of his damnably sexy sight anytime soon.

She'd never had so much trouble falling asleep in her life. It wasn't like she hadn't before let a vampire sleep on the floor beside her bed, but the past incidents with her first love couldn't hold a candle to last night. Not when she possessed the mind of a woman rather than an idealistic teenager. There was nothing fairytale about Spike and therein lay the appeal. He was real in ways Angel had never been. Her love-struck eyes had believed Angel devoid of fault,

and because of her naïveté, she'd been slammed with heartache beyond measure.

Spike was all flaw and beauty. She saw him in ways she'd never before imagined.

Whatever resistance she had left in her was quickly melting into nothing. The way his mouth had worshipped hers left little to the imagination as to how well he'd worship the rest of her. And the way he looked at her last night...there was something beyond lust. Something beyond the way he undressed her with his eyes. Something she never thought she'd see in another man.

Something she never thought she'd crave.

Her mind was too jumbled, her thoughts too tantalizing to be left alone. If silence cushioned her imagination, the images plaguing her would only become more graphic. Better to attempt socializing.

Besides, she was famished. And with Spike in town—in her room—there was little need to remain under the radar. Plus the Reaper had definitely received the memo regarding her presence, so it no longer mattered whether or not all of Natchez knew the Slayer was in town.

The breakfasty smells that greeted her upon sneaking through the back entrance rivaled the previous day's in terms of mouth-watering deliciousness. It was a few minutes past eight-thirty, thus the meal had already commenced. And though she felt more than a little awkward traipsing in, especially after her quick escape the day before, her growling stomach accepted no excuse.

The crowd around the formal, exquisite dining room table had expanded overnight. Edith and her elderly friend, Olivia, were still present, this time accompanied by a relatively attractive middle-aged man and a friendly-looking blonde. Jerome sat at the head of the table a couple of seats down. There were two unclaimed plates along the wall.

Jerome glanced up in surprise. "Anne! Good morning."

"Hello there!" Edith added brightly. "We didn't know whether or not to expect you today."

Buffy offered a small, shy smile and nodded. "Yeah, ummm...well, yesterday was a...little weird for me. I've never traveled...you know, far from home before without a parent or legal guardian nearby. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry!" Jerome leaped to his feet to pull out the chair beside him, which she took gratefully. "Our other guests, George and Bertha, haven't joined us yet either. Please, have a seat. We have French-toast soufflé, eggs, sausage, and fresh fruit." He indicated the buffet along the wall. "Grab a plate and make yourself at home."

"We were just discussing which houses to tour," Edith said helpfully. "This is my son, Joshua's, first vacation in...well, goodness..."

The blonde next to the middle-aged man offered an answer, though the mouthful of French-toast soufflé translated her response to, "Tphsch yearsh."

Joshua pouted. "That is a gross exaggeration."

"The California trip doesn't count," the blonde countered, swirling another bite of French-toast in a pool of syrup. Then she met Buffy's eyes. "Not to be blatantly forward, but you might want to get some of this before I clean it out."

"Noted," Buffy replied, rising to her feet and seizing her plate. The march to the buffet was brief but awkward; she felt thoroughly on display. It didn't help that her stomach was growling loud enough to be mistaken for a small lion. However, conversation resumed within easy seconds and quickly took off without her—which was fine from where she sat. Nice people these might be, she was here for the food.

Every few seconds her mind drifted back to the vampire she'd left in her room. The vampire who had leaped into the shower the second she'd announced she was going to investigate the breakfast table. The vampire who was probably naked at this very moment. Naked with water streaking his sculpted, lean, muscular body. Naked with his long, perfect fingers running along the length of his cock. Would he imagine her as he touched himself? Would her name be the one—

"Anne?"

Buffy whirled around quickly. Everyone was staring at her.

"I—umm..." She blushed and gestured to the sausage. "Just debating if my figure can handle the...ummm...calories. Sorry." Hurriedly scooping eggs and soufflé onto her plate, she made a beeline for her seat and quietly resolved to keep her mouth shut until she was on the safe side of her bedroom door.

Of course, once she sent that thought into the cosmos, the cosmos

had to strike back, for the next instant, the floor began to tremble with rolls of thunder. Thunder in the form of heavy-booted stomps and the crash of the front door, trailed by the hiss of sizzling vamp-skin and a colorful tapestry of British curses.

Buffy's eyes fell shut as her stomach sank. *Great.*

Just great.

"What the hell?" Jerome demanded, leaping up only to be forcibly shoved back into his seat. No way was she going to let her host encounter a vampire inches away from bursting into flames.

"That's...umm...did I mention I..." Buffy trailed off awkwardly, deciding the better route was to intercept the party-crasher before he could waltz inside. This conclusion, however, was reached a beat too late; slayer-speed had nothing on an egocentric vampire. Before her feet could cross the dining room threshold, a blanket-covered Spike shadowed the doorway, sporting a cocky grin.

"Mornin', love," he purred, then directed his attention to the roomful of gawking observers. "Mornin' all."

"Spike!" Buffy hissed through her teeth. "What the hell are you doing?"

He shrugged and tossed the blanket to the floor. "Tummy was makin' all sorts of rumblies, and you said the bloke could cook."

The bloke in question was suddenly at her back. "And who is this?" Jerome asked with strained politeness.

Damn ground. It never opened up to swallow someone on cue. Buffy fought off a groan, forced a smile to stretch her lips, and turned. "This is...umm...William."

"William," Jerome repeated, unimpressed.

"William?" Spike echoed in disgust.

"William." Buffy nodded. "I...uhhh...ran into him. We're old... friends. I had no idea he was in Natchez, but...he is and we... uhhh...reconnected."

At that flimsy excuse, Edith's son snickered. Loudly.

Jerome looked as though he'd barely heard her. His eyes were instead locked on the rumpled blanket. "Is that Jenny's comforter?"

Spike perked a brow. "Jenny?"

"She owns the Birch House," Buffy explained hotly.

"Thought we were at some dive called Maplewood."

"We—I are. Or am. Jenny lets Jerome rent out a room at her house for his B&B."

"Though perhaps not anymore," Jerome said, glowering at Spike. "Anne, I understand you...meeting old friends, but—"

"He has a skin condition," Buffy interjected quickly, threading her fingers through the vampire's. As though touching the skin in question would lend her story credence. "He can't...be in the sun. Or let it touch him. Or even look at it."

"Well," Spike began, but he was cut off by an angry glare before he could contradict her. "Right."

A throat cleared from the table. "So he runs around outside under blankets?" Joshua asked.

Olivia, Edith's bad-tempered traveling companion, muttered something which, while not decipherable, didn't sound particularly flattering.

"Well," Jerome continued, his eyes clearly telling her he'd like nothing more than to throw them both to the curb. "Just...in the future, if you run into...old friends...please let me know before you decide to invite them over." The courtesy and helpfulness he'd exhibited the previous day had vanished. Not that she could blame him.

"I don't plan on running into—"

"It's her room, innit?" Spike demanded, very much uncaring whether or not anyone ever talked to her again. He tossed an arm across her shoulder and steered her possessively into his side. "She's the one fronting the cash, mate."

Jerome's nostrils flared. "I don't appreciate—"

"Sp—*William*." Buffy patted Spike's chest with a loud, artificial laugh. "It's still Jerome's house, and we're his guests. Or *I'm* his guest." She met her host's eyes and pulled her best wounded puppy look out of storage. It was something she hadn't had to utilize in a while, as Giles hadn't given her grounds. She just hoped it worked as well on fussy gay men as it did on bumbling watcher-librarians. "I'm sorry, Jerome. Really. William just...it was late last night when we...and I didn't think."

A long beat passed. Buffy couldn't remember the last time she'd

ever been waterlogged in shame—probably during the whole *Angel's-back-from-Hell-and-I'm-hiding-him* fiasco—but that was different. That was family. And while logically it always hurt more upsetting loved ones rather than acquaintances, she also took solace that said loved ones would continue loving her. Would eventually forgive her. Jerome could well spend the rest of his life hating her without giving the matter any further consideration.

The idea bothered her more than it probably should.

“Okay,” Jerome conceded. He was noticeably unhappy but seemingly willing to accommodate. “I’ll go get another plate.”

“No need,” Spike replied, bored, moving toward the unclaimed seat on Buffy’s other side. “Looks like this one’s free.”

“That’s for George and Bertha,” Jerome said heatedly.

“Say that like I care, mate.”

Another inward groan. Clearly, her vampire didn’t intend to make things easy. Though perhaps, after the phone conversation with Giles, she should have expected as much. It surprised her when Jerome didn’t say anything—rather aimed another glare at Spike’s uncaring face. The whole table sat silent as he picked up a plate and wandered to the breakfast line-up.

“Smells good enough,” Spike granted as he built a mountain of eggs, surrounded by sausage and topped with three pieces of the French-toast soufflé. The ground still refused to swallow her—not even when the vampire plopped beside her and proceeded to dump half the contents of his plate onto hers.

“What?”

“Not enough meat on your bones, love,” he explained before reaching for the syrup. “Eat up.”

“I’ve already—”

“Yeah, and I can still hear your stomach growlin’.”

Everyone was staring at her. At them. Buffy decided not to argue, but she did send Spike a furious enough glance that he would know, in no uncertain terms, how much trouble he’d be in once they were alone. And damn all if the irritating twerp didn’t have the audacity to grin and wink at her. He knew exactly what he was doing. He knew it, and he was having the time of his unlife.



This was *so* not the time to feel a tingle of arousal, but she did.

Oh *god*, she did.

Spike's grin broadened as though sensing it. Without warning, she felt thoroughly naked.

Another throat cleared, this time Edith's. Buffy guiltily tore her eyes away and glanced up, but the woman was studying the vampire with the look of one determined to salvage what had been, until Spike's destructive appearance, a pleasant morning. "So," Edith said with false interest, "where do you know Anne from?"

Spike stuffed a handful of sausage into his mouth. "Who?"

"That would be me," Buffy muttered.

"You're Anne?" He blinked at her. "When'd that happen?"

"You're rooming with a guy who doesn't know your name?" Joshua demanded. He might be the only person in possession of a pulse who was enjoying his morning. "Well...that's...special."

Spike's grin turned predatory. "I spent the night calling her some-thin' else, if you catch my meaning, mate."

And that was it. The proverbial *it*. The final straw. Buffy didn't even realize she'd been operating on such a short fuse until she kicked herself away from the table. "Would you come with me, please?" she demanded, seizing Spike by the ear before he could object. She didn't release him until they were precariously near the back door.

"What the *hell* is wrong with you?" she demanded, her voice set in a furious stage whisper. "Are you *trying* to get me kicked out?"

"Don't see what the problem is, kitten," Spike replied innocently. "Can't a man enjoy a meal in peace?"

"I don't know. Does that man want to be around to enjoy his next?"

"Why, Slayer, didn't know you were offering."

"Does it matter to you that I *like* these people?" Buffy snapped. "That up until twenty minutes ago, they liked me, too? You dragged Jerome's comforter—"

"*Jenny's* comforter," he corrected.

"Whatever."

"Sorry," Spike replied dryly. "Next time I'll go up in flames. Just for you, sweetheart."

"I don't understand why you had to come up here *at all*."

He shrugged. "I was hungry. Didn't drink a drop yesterday and solids help the cravings. I reckoned you wouldn't want me biting your new chums."

The admission had her anger deflating much quicker than she would have liked. An unanswered question was suddenly satisfied—a question she hadn't had the courage to ask for fear of the answer. Spike lacked a soul to hold him back from hurting those around him, and inviting him into her life invited the people around her to his fangs. She'd wondered how many people he'd drained since coming to town, and how many more would be put in danger because of her. Only now he was telling her his presence in the dining room was a means to keep his craving for blood from overcoming him...and though it might be a line to pacify her—though it probably *was*—it did its job.

"Okay," Buffy said, calmer now. "Okay. But that still doesn't explain why you were such an ass."

Spike shrugged again, unrepentant. "Just being myself," he replied. "Don't pretend like you don't like it. I know better. You can't hide from me, love."

A grin tickled her lips. Anger was dangerously close to depleting entirely. Damn him.

*Damn him.*

After all, if she couldn't hide from Spike, how was she supposed to hide from herself?

Something told her she didn't want to know the answer.



THE TOWN WAS QUIET. ABSOLUTELY QUIET. NO BUZZING. NO INNER fire. Nothing. After a thorough sweep of Natchez's every corner and crevice, Buffy finally conceded and began the long walk back to the Birch House.

Where Spike was waiting.

The advantage of having a severely sun-allergic traveling companion—though when Spike had become a traveling companion, she didn't know—was the ample time provided through the day for serious introspection. How within the time-span of forty-eight hours,

he'd gone from a pain-in-the-ass to the vampire crowding the floor of her rented room. The vampire who suddenly embodied *forbidden-fruit* in every delicious sense. The vampire whose kisses sparked a fire deep within her belly—stronger than any she'd ever before felt, and more terrifying for that very reason. The vampire with whom she desperately wanted more time, if only to discover where their relationship was going.

The vampire she couldn't touch the way she wanted. Not without conceding something she'd needed to believe, no matter the futility.

*It's wrong. Therein lies a world of hurt.*

And hurt was something she very much wanted to avoid. One heartache had nearly destroyed her; another would finish the job.

So she couldn't travel that road with Spike. End of story. Next question.

*Could try to at least sound convinced,* Buffy thought grumpily. *This is **my** mind, after all.*

She wasn't surprised to find Spike pacing when she returned to the room. He'd been cooped inside for hours as she scoped the town, and she knew she wasn't imagining the relief on his face when his head whipped up. He'd been worried about her.

Worried.

"You were supposed to be back thirty minutes ago."

She shrugged. "I'm back now."

"Yeah? Tinglies go off, or did you just—"

Buffy smiled and held up a small plastic sack. "Went shopping."

Spike's frown remained in place until a sniff confirmed what she'd brought home. Then his eyes changed, fierceness fading to a soft shimmer. He glanced from the bag to her face and back again before stepping forward, a small, almost shy smile tickling his perfect lips. "You brought me blood?" he asked gently, reaching for her offering.

"Well..." She shuffled awkwardly. "You mentioned you hadn't had any and since we're practically in a barnyard, it wasn't hard to find a butcher shop."

Spike inspected the contents. "It's pig's?"

"Yes."

"Bloody disgusting."

Buffy arched a brow. "You didn't expect me to lift it from a hospital, did you?"

"Would've been quite a gesture, kitten," he retorted, tossing her a rakish grin.

"I think bringing you blood in the first place is gesture enough." She exhaled deeply, relieved at his teasing. Teasing she could handle. Teasing felt normal. The tender look on his face demanded serious reflection, and she was all used up on her daily quantity of deep thoughts. "That piece of crap blocking Jerome's drive is your car, isn't it?"

Spike scowled. "Oi!"

"Call it like I see it."

"She's my best girl, that car. Don't bloody knock it." His eyes sparkled as his fangs descended and tore into the first of five plastic blood-filled bags. And to her horror, the look on his face did nothing to disgust her. Rather every nerve in her body was suddenly ablaze and electric sparks shot directly to her clit. God, she was *so* screwed. If Spike's demon turned her on there was little hope in salvaging her heart from this escapade.

*Guh.*

"I...uhhh...well." Buffy quickly glanced away. "I need to change. We have reservations at Royal Pub."

"At what now?"

"Royal Pub. It's a place...haunted...I dunno. I didn't feel any Reaper vibes on my tour around town, and since Royal Pub is supposed to be haunted, I figured we'd head there and see if anything...uhhh..." She met his eyes again. "Occurred to either one of us."

Spike arched a cool eyebrow. How he managed to look so delicious with a blood-ring around his mouth was beyond her. "This a date, Slayer?"

"A what?"

"You're taking me to a fancy joint. Tryin' to seduce me?"

Buffy rolled her eyes. "You wish."

At first she thought she'd said something wrong. He looked at her strangely and without humor, tilting his head, the soft burn in his eyes sparking new flames that struck cords deep she didn't know her body

possessed. Then he was moving forward, wiping his mouth and forcing the demon back, his human face falling over him; a dream come to life. The bag in his hands disappeared. Before she could think to question him, her cheeks were cupped in his palms and he was kissing her.

*God*, he was kissing her. His lips flirted with her, loved her, sang wordless songs until she couldn't help but sigh against him—couldn't help but allow his tongue to wander into her mouth. He tasted wonderful—dangerous. Hints of cigarettes and the metallic twang of blood tickled her tastebuds. Flavors that should have repulsed her but only made her want. He was so real. The monster was just as present as the man; not two entities but one. One rolled together, a faulty but somehow perfect package. He kissed her with a desperation she'd never before tasted. As though her kisses were what granted him life.

Yes, she'd wanted this. Since last night. Since she had explored his mouth on Edgeview's lawn. She wanted to know him without motive.

She'd kissed him before to save his life. One taste had made her an addict.

"Nnnnaghhh."

"Fuck," Spike agreed. "Yes...I do."

Reason abandoned her altogether. Buffy's head fell back, every inch of her dangerously close to melting completely. "You..."

"I do," he repeated as his mouth nibbled a wet path down her throat, hands following suit. His left hand found her breast without warning, palming her reverently and exciting her nipple with a few masterful strokes of his thumb. "I do wish it, Buffy. Want you now. Want you open and begging for me."

"Spike..."

"I wanna spread you apart," he murmured, his wandering mouth traveling farther south. "Wanna play with your pussy. Wanna see where you're soft."

His right hand delved between them and pressed at the apex of her thighs, which fell apart without struggle.

Yes.

Spike sighed. "You're so hard everywhere, aren't you?"

"You're one to talk," Buffy retorted. Her own hand itched to explore the hard confines of his erection, but she remained immobile

—frozen by nerves or arousal or some bizarre combination of the two. At the moment, she barely remembered her own name.

A chuckle. “Naughty girl.”

“Spike, we—”

“But you are. So hard everywhere. So bloody firm. But here...” His palm grated against her pussy. “Here you’re all woman. Soft. Pink. Wet. Wanting me so bad. Don’t you, Buffy? Tell your Spike how bad you want him.”

Words scratched at her throat. *Yes*, she wanted him now. Wanted him fiercely. Wanted him beyond the knowledge of what it meant to want. What it meant to possess or be possessed. She wanted Spike everywhere. His hands in her hair, his mouth between her legs, his tongue around her nipples, his fingers strumming her clit, his cock sliding against her lips, his body against hers. She wanted it all. She wanted everything. A whirlwind of sensation had her falling until she was certain she’d crash against the floor, but when she opened her eyes she was still standing.

Still on both feet.

And the world waited outside. The world with its Reaper. The world with its consequences. The world with its damned *reality*.

With its truth of what she was. What he was. And what they were to each other.

From where the strength came, she did not know. One second she teetered on crashing onto the mattress and the next she had returned to herself. She braced her hands against his shoulders and shoved. The second air hit her lungs she was flying. Moving across the room in a blaze, collecting weapons, changing clothes, burning the ground until there was nothing but the echoes of her heavy strides.

“We gotta go,” Buffy said, cheeks burning. “We gotta...”

“Got the keys right here.”

His voice was devoid of emotion. As though their encounter meant nothing.

But she knew better. She didn’t know how, but she knew.

Which was why she couldn’t meet his eyes. Resistance would melt and she wasn’t ready. She wasn’t ready to be hurt again. She wasn’t ready to chance it. Not now. Her heart couldn’t take the risk—and risk

was written all over this. All over Spike. A huge all-sales-are-final risk, and if she gave in she'd be handing herself over to a world of hurt.

It was safer to keep her distance no matter what she wanted. Thus Buffy moved robotically at his side as he led her to the car. Though she wished to speak, she bit her tongue. Though she wished to touch him, she kept her hands at her sides. There was nothing to do but go through with dinner and hope the night would improve.

Or better yet, change her mind.

THE SILENCE between them would strangle a lesser man. Thankfully, he wasn't the sort of bloke who depended on air.

So why was his throat so damnably tight? Why did his lungs ache with the need to breathe? His skin burned from where he'd held her. From the molten heat at her center to the ample softness of her breasts, the silky perfection of her mouth...it was too much for one vamp to handle. Too much for one with no moral ties to keep him grounded—none but the want of Buffy.

She was doing her best not to look him in the eye. Doing her best not to look at him at all.

Spike's jaw clenched. *Perfect.*

*Bloody perfect.*

Still, there was no way he was about to stand for silence. Not with everything that had already transpired between them, and especially not through dinner. From the way she was dressed Spike guessed their chosen locale to be somewhat formal—either that or she just wanted to impress him. Not that she was dressed to the nines, though he supposed he would have thought so no matter what she wore. Her hair was pulled back elegantly into a braid she'd hastily slapped together in



the aftermath of their snogging session, and though stray strands of blonde could be seen here or there, there was nothing sloppy about the way she'd fashioned herself. Likewise, the red blouse she'd pulled over her luscious body accented her soft, pink lips in a way that made his insides twist. Her black slacks cut off at the heel of her practical shoes—strappy things made to seduce. Made to slay. Perhaps it was why she'd chosen them. Her life had to double on all fronts. Gone were the mini-skirts of her youth; the outfits so revealing he'd often execute certain attacks so she'd do one of those high-kicks that always flashed her knickers.

She looked glorious. So glorious.

So distant.

"This place far from here?" Spike asked, then immediately kicked himself. Fuck. He'd sworn he wouldn't be the one to break the silence.

Buffy nodded. "Yeah," she replied, her voice strained. "Ummm...we could walk if you'd rather..."

Walk? And drag out the torturous silence? No thanks.

"Car's easier."

She hummed in agreement and bolted for the passenger side of his beloved Desoto.

Right. This was going to be a fun night. Spike heaved a sigh and ducked behind the wheel. The burn to touch her wasn't getting any better. If anything, the closed confines of his vehicle only worsened the brewing sickness in his stomach. But he'd survive. He would. If she wanted him, she'd have to be the one to say something. He'd made it bloody clear how he felt—well, not the part where he was hers for eternity if she'd let him, but under the circumstances that was a matter of preserving what little pride he'd managed to not toss in the gutter. She knew enough—she knew he was hers if she wanted him.

He just wished he could tell the burn the same. It was bloody unbearable.

"Go out the front drive," Buffy said softly. Did the stupid chit not realize how fucking sultry she sounded? Was she doing it on purpose?

It'd be like her to torment him just for kicks. She'd relish the sting.

No. The rational man inside warned against him. He was just irri-

tated and suffering from the biggest case of blue balls he'd known in his life. He was also mad in love with his enemy, which could throw a wrench into anyone's day. And the need to touch her blazed through him with all the fire of the devil's whimsy.

"Up Rankin," she instructed, staring dead ahead as he maneuvered the car away from Maplewood. "I walked it earlier today..Jefferson's a one-way street, so we'll have to park and walk up a block or so."

The Desoto rolled to a stop at Union. And then, for no reason he could pinpoint, the wheels aimed themselves right and took off before he could register he'd made a wrong turn.

*What the bugger?*

Spike's eyes went wide and his hands clenched hard around the wheel. "Fuck me."

Buffy sat up sharply. "What are you doing?"

"I don't know."

"What the crap, Spike?"

There was a Chevron station and a left turn ahead—one he very much intended to take. One his hands firmly ignored and his lead-heavy foot promptly scoffed at, zooming ahead with steadily-increasing momentum. The burn itching his insides exploded to full strength, and realization collided with sensation.

The burn hadn't been a response to Buffy.

It had been the call of the Reaper.

He was such a dolt. How he'd meshed Buffy-lust for his demon's insane desire to be a part of some wretched monster collection was beyond him, but with his eyes open everything became unmistakably clear. He remembered this feeling well—the confused tug propelling him from New Orleans to this hole-in-the-wall of a town. The blind need that had brought him here.

"Might wanna buckle up, sweetheart."

No need to make the suggestion. Buffy had edged as far back into her seat as was physically possible. "Where are we going?"

"No idea."

Her voice hit a shrill. Understandable, under the circumstances. "What do you mean?"

"Remember how I got here?" Spike tossed her a glance, nodding

when her eyes went wide. "Yeah. Reaper's on the move, and I'm behind the wheel. Not stopping till he stops, I'd wager."

A beat. "I left all my stuff at Maplewood."

Spike slammed the breaks before he crashed into a semi. Bugger. He hoped the demon didn't get so antsy it ignored traffic rules. Not that he was particularly partial to them himself, but the Slayer was soft and breakable...though perhaps not as breakable as other creatures possessing heartbeats, but he wanted her very much the way she was. "Your stuff'll be there when we get back," he told her.

"The last time you hopped in the car and drove after the Reaper, you ended up in a different state."

Oh. Right.

"If we wind up in Missouri, I'll buy you a new wardrobe." He paused. "Well, knick you a new wardrobe."

"Spike!"

The Desoto veered left without warning, speeding toward the highway. "Seems we're heading out on the road." He flashed her a quick grin. "Hope you weren't too hungry, kitten. Looks like we're gonna miss that reservation."

Buffy shrank further into her seat and crossed her arms, and things grew quiet again. In easy seconds they were cruising down 61 South, making a smooth beeline for Louisiana. And though he was mildly irritated at the Reaper's intrusion, a very real part of Spike couldn't help but be grateful at the distraction. The tension between them remained palpable but, in some small way, conquered. Thus as his black beauty cranked up to seventy-five, whined and fell back to sixty, Spike didn't let the silence bother him. He wouldn't. If Buffy wanted to address him, she would. She could say whatever her pretty little heart desired.

Didn't necessarily mean he had to listen.

Didn't necessarily mean anything. He was his own free vamp in the world and he didn't owe her any favors.

"I'm sorry."

It took him a few seconds to realize the voice wasn't imagined. Spike blinked and tossed her a surprised glance. "Huss'at?"

She sat with her head bowed, gaze on the floorboard, her hands folded pristinely in her lap: a child awaiting punishment. How she

could remain so oblivious to the power she held in the slightest gesture was beyond him. Buffy was the pounding in his head and the ache in his heart; he wanted to strangle and hold her all in one stroke. So infuriating. So confusing. So fucking beautiful.

"What happened back in the room," she continued softly. A beat, then she inhaled and glanced up. "I'm sorry about that. My feelings are...well, kinda all over the place right now. It's... This thing we're doing is totally insane. You know that, right?"

"Snogging me, you mean?"

"Presuming my translation is correct, yes." She wrinkled her nose. "Snogging *is* English for making out, right?"

Spike stifled a chuckle at her wording. "That's right, pet."

"If we...if I *snog* you—okay, that just sounds weird coming from me." Buffy shook her head. "If we make out...if I kiss you... This thing is freaking me out."

"What thing?"

"You and me. I kissed you yesterday to save your undead ass and suddenly we're all with the...kissing all the time and you staying in my room and..." She broke off, again tearing her eyes away. "I don't get it. I don't get how I went from just...distracting you yesterday with a quick kiss to—"

"There was nothing quick about that kiss, Slayer."

"Well, it was supposed to be quick before your hands made with the grabby."

Spike smirked. "Had a gorgeous, warm woman wiggling against me. Might not have a heartbeat, but I'm still a man, sweetness. My hands went where they wanted. Can't be held accountable."

There was a pause. "Gorgeous?" she repeated shyly, her cheeks pink.

"Come on. You know you're gorgeous."

Buffy smiled and met his eyes again. "Not really. I don't know it...I have good days and bad."

"Well, take it from me. I've been around a long time and I think I can identify beauty." His grin grew wicked. "So you're all in a mess about us, then."

"I don't get how you're not. You were the one all up in Angel's case for being in a relationship with me."

His smirk faded immediately. Damned wanker was the parent of all killjoys. "Ever consider that had more to do with it being sodding *Angel* than you?" he retorted. "Stupid git had to be the best at everything, didn't he? No matter which face he wore. I snuff slayers, he has to bloody..." He trailed off before the thought could reach fruition, and judging by the look on Buffy's face, it wasn't a beat too soon. "Yeah," he allowed a second later. "Maybe a part of it was you. But it's different now."

"Different?"

He shrugged. "It's me. That makes it different."

Buffy's eyes narrowed. "Spike—"

"You wanna know why Dru broke it off?" he demanded, unaware of the words until they tickled the air. As soon as they were free there was no taking them back. "Because of you. At first because of the deal we made, right? The one that saved the world from your honey? It was that...but then after I found her again, it was...because I kept seeing you. Everywhere. On the streets. In my dreams. Over and over. She kicked me out because I was already gone where it counted. Just didn't realize till I saw you the other night. Till I stumbled across you in the cemetery and knew the truth of what she'd told me."

The silence that settled between them was deafening. There was nothing for a full three minutes—nothing but her thundering heart and rocky breaths, and something that suspiciously smelled like tears.

At last, he couldn't stand the quiet. "Buffy—"

"He left me."

Something dark twisted in his stomach. "Angel."

"So my...so I could have a normal life."

His jaw fell slack. "You gotta be kidding me."

Buffy said nothing. He took her silence as indicative that she thought the reasoning as ridiculous as he did.

"What did he think?" Spike erupted, hands tightening around the steering wheel. He swerved hard to the right and back again to avoid the idiot in the Toyota who was barely crawling the speed limit. "His highness bows out of the limelight and suddenly you're not the Slayer

anymore? No more apocalypses, no more demons, no more uglies to go bump in Buffy's night?" He laughed harshly. "That's right, the arrogant git. Thinks the whole fucking world revolves around his enormous forehead."

"He thought he was holding me back from a real relationship."

"Yeah. That year and a half you had with him had all the markings of a dry-run."

A small sound erupted from her lips. When he glanced over she was grinning.

Spike smiled tightly to himself. *Good.*

"I tried dating a normal guy once," Buffy confessed. Then frowned. "Well, twice. Both pre-Angel. Pike in LA—"

He arched a brow. "Pike?"

"I know, freaky huh?" Buffy leaned back speculatively. "Actually, like this...when you're not fangy and lunging at my throat, you kinda remind me of him."

"Only I'm better, right? Tell me I'm better."

Her grin widened. "Oh, no contest. Pike was fun to hang around, but we weren't... I didn't ever feel...*this*."

This was progress. Definite progress.

"Actually," she continued, "after Acatlha, I thought about looking him up. Not because I wanted to...or anything. Just...he was the only person in LA I thought I could trust. But I'd become someone else entirely and I decided against it. And...well, you only remind me a little of him. He also knew about my slaying, which made it easy and uncomplicated. And then my first year in Sunnydale, there was this guy. Owen. He was nice and normal and I couldn't...because he was nice and normal. The Slayer and normal can't coexist."

Spike blew out a deep breath. "So you know it."

"Yeah." Buffy worried a lip between her teeth. "So I can't do normal and I can't be abnormal. I can't have either."

"Slayer..." Before he realized what he was doing, he'd reached over to seize her hand. He tensed for a second; so did she, but there was no point in letting her go. The warmth of her skin against his was enough to sustain him no matter how treacherous the upcoming storm. "These hands...your calling... You're not made

of the same stuff as the people you risk your life protectin'. Their normal isn't yours. But this..." He squeezed her softly. "You can't deny this."

A pause. "But I'm still human."

"How much?" Spike countered. "You're like us in so many ways... you just fight for the other side, is all. Same mold with different faces. Who's to say you won't live forever like we do? No slayer's ever gotten far enough to know the truth. Humans age and die, but you're more than that." He paused when he caught the look on her face. "Didn't say that to scare you, pet."

Buffy shook her head numbly. "No, I understand."

"Yeah?"

"Just never thought of it like that." Her voice trembled. "I don't know how...this is all screwing with my head and I don't know whether to be worried or confused or elated."

"I like elated. Why don't you stick with elated?"

"I just don't understand how I got here from yesterday. From *my god, Spike's annoying* to trying to not jump your sexy bones." Buffy drew in a shaky breath. "This entire thing has me so...muddled. It scares me."

"What?"

"No. *You*. You scare me." Buffy met his eyes and held until he had to look at the road again. "In ways I don't think you want to. Not in a vampire way, more in...I'm not the kinda girl to rebound. At all. And if I let myself...with you..."

The ache in his chest was so potent he could have sworn his heart had started pounding. "Buffy..."

"I don't rebound." She settled back in her seat, crossing her arms. "And I don't know what's happening here."

It took willpower beyond his reckoning to bite his tongue. There was nothing in the world he would have enjoyed more than wearing down the wall guarding her heart. But something stopped him—grabbed his reins and pulled. Pushing Buffy toward a decision wouldn't help him, not in the long run. In the long run, it might end up destroying them both. So in the meantime, he remained silent.

At least he knew what she wanted.

The only remaining question was whether or not she'd trust him enough—trust herself enough—to go after it.



ST. FRANCISVILLE WAS A SMALL TOWN SPIKE HAD PREVIOUSLY ONLY associated with Travel Channel programs—the sort he was prone to watch when everything else on his telly had gone gray and fuzzy. He'd raced through it on the heated drive from New Orleans without giving it much thought, but as the unseen hand guiding the steering wheel cemented into a cold grip, realization likewise broke over the mental horizon.

"I know where we're headed," he announced suddenly, jarring Buffy awake. The Desoto veered right without warning, landing them in the drive of Myrtles Plantation—a joint known for hopping tourism and an active spiritual landscape. "Yeah...here we go."

The Slayer blinked sleepily. "How long was I out?"

"Bout twenty minutes."

"Mmmm." She stretched her arms over her head, a move which outlined her breasts against her blouse. Spike forced himself to keep from licking his lips. "Feels longer," she concluded with a yawn.

"We're not far from Natchez. Give or take an hour. My guess? Reaper's collecting the spooks that escaped last night."

"And he brought us..." Buffy winced and peered out the windshield as the car rolled to a halt in the gravel parking lot to the left of the entrance. The plantation wasn't grandiose—wasn't the sort of place to come to mind at the mention of the Old South, but there was a sort of haunting beauty about it. "Where are we?"

"Just over the Louisiana state-line."

"We're in Louisiana?"

"No, but I'd see why you'd think so."

She smirked. "No need to get cheeky. I'm guessing this place isn't known for its food?"

"There's a restaurant 'round back, actually." Spike grinned at the look she tossed him. "From what I've heard, this is one of the more celebrated haunted joints in America."



She furrowed her brow skeptically. "Really?"

He nodded.

"Doesn't look haunted."

"They never do," Spike mused wisely.

"And you think the Reaper's here to pick up all the pieces that fell out last night?"

"It's the only thing that makes sense," he reasoned with a shrug. "Either that or he missed it the first time...but I figure I was a good ways behind him on the drive, so yeah. If this dive really lives up to its reputation, then he'd've made a stop on the way."

Buffy didn't look convinced. "And these ghosts are important enough to make a special trip back?"

"Don't see why else we'd be here." Spike shrugged again and tossed open the driver's side door. "Either way, need to stretch my legs. Gonna take a look around." A pause. "Might need a pretty distraction if I run into a certain cape-wearin' ponce. You comin', Slayer?"

She made a face to indicate disinterest but it didn't take. Her eyes sparkled too much. "Yeah, yeah."

The grounds were much larger than a first glance would betray. Two dependencies offset the main-house from the back: the restaurant Spike had mentioned—to which he was likewise only privy thanks to the telly—and the gift shop. A courtyard stretched along the back patio between the two smaller structures, and was, unsurprisingly, flooded with eager patrons likely waiting for the next tour. Further back along the lawn was a white wooden bridge which stretched over a small pond toward a gazebo. Large oak trees provided the illusion of isolation, and likely granted tourists with a more ethereal atmosphere than would have been granted were the highway visible.

Buffy sidled up to him as though seeking body heat. "What time is it?"

"Twenty till eight."

No sign of the Reaper. Odd. And yet, the burn in his stomach had definitely led him here. There was no mistaking what he felt.

"Looks like something's about to start," she observed, nodding at the eager crowd gathering around the back patio.

"A tour, most likely." Spike glanced from the main house to the

gazebo. Something wasn't right. It should be stronger. He should feel... *something*. "Right...come on, kitten."

"Where are we going?"

He nodded to the gift shop. "On the tour."

"Why?"

*Bugger if I know.*

But he didn't say that. Not that the Slayer was the sort to spook easily, but he didn't want to set off her warning alarm. Not just yet.

But something definitely wasn't right. He should be able to feel more—or less, or something other than what he felt. The burn that had thrived in his chest over the past ninety minutes had dwindled to a mere itch, and there was none of the persistent need that had dragged him across the Edgeview lawn. There was something here, though... something unlike anything he'd felt before.

"We're here to find the ghostnapper, right?" Spike said at last. "Where better to look?"

Buffy frowned, surveying the tourists. "Hey, check it out."

Spike followed her eyes but didn't see anything. No cloak. No tall, hooded figure. Nothing. "What?"

"Edith's son and his fiancée are here."

"Edith?"

The Slayer narrowed her eyes at him. "The nice woman you were a jackass in front of this morning?" she explained. "Not the mumbly one."

"Oh, right." Now he saw them. Not particularly amorous for two people about to get hitched, but perhaps Spike was the only bloke around who wouldn't go anywhere without letting the world know the tasty dish at his side was very much claimed. "The drive's not a long one. Probably popped down for the tour."

"Weird, though," Buffy observed. "You're not getting any vibes off them, are you?"

He smirked. "Sorry, sweetheart. If they were anything but human, I would've sniffed it out at breakfast."

Damn all if she didn't look disappointed. "Okay. Well, I got the cash I was gonna use at Royal Pub if we wanna tour."

"Don't think so, precious," Spike replied, delving a hand into his duster pocket. "My idea. I'll front the cash."

She arched a brow as he brandished a couple of twenties. "Where'd you get that?"

"It's legitimate."

Buffy didn't look convinced.

"Well..." He shrugged carelessly, nodding at the man from Maplewood. "Legitimately lifted from Curly over there. Swiped it when he went back for seconds."

"Spike..."

"Eh, a second ago you thought they were demons." Spike winked, surfing a renegade cigarette from his pocket and sticking it between his lips. "Be back in a flash, love. Hold tight."

Ten minutes later, he found Buffy sitting at a small garden table with the couple from Maplewood, chatting animatedly with the blonde. Whatever reserve she'd exhibited had evidently been conquered. Perhaps on matters of the heart, she just needed female advice. He strolled up behind her and dropped her ticket into her lap. "Evening all," he said.

"We got tickets?" Buffy asked, surprise coloring her voice. "Donna said she thought they were about sold out."

"Donna?"

The blonde waved a hand. "That would be me."

"Ah. No, we got in all right." Spike nodded and placed a small figure on the table. "Here, pidge. Thought you might want a souvenir."

Buffy glanced up with a grin. "A voodoo doll?"

"What else?" He favored the others with a brief look. "So what brings you lovebirds down here?"

"Donna's obsessed with ghosts," the man said, bored.

Spike smirked appreciatively. "Yours, too, eh?"

The man's brows perked. "I take it you two haven't stopped...reconnecting?"

"And on that note," Buffy said, collecting her things and rising from her seat, "we'll leave you to it. Enjoy the tour."

The blonde offered a friendly nod. "You, too. Drive back safe!"

"See you at breakfast tomorrow," said her traveling companion with all the enthusiasm of a patient awaiting a root canal.

Buffy linked an arm through Spike's and steered him a good distance away. "A voodoo doll?" she asked, holding up the doll in question. "You bought me a voodoo doll?"

"Bought's such a strong word..."

"Spike!"

"Evil, pet. Remember?" Spike tossed an arm over her shoulder before she could bat him away. "Besides, I fronted the cash for the tickets."

"With Joshua's money!"

"That why you were being so social?"

She shrugged and didn't reply, but he could see the truth in her eyes. Buffy felt guilty on his behalf. His little slayer with a snow-white conscience...well, where it really counted. It was the sort of thing that shouldn't make his demon soften with adoration, but he couldn't help himself. She was so good. So innocent. So pure.

The tour began a few minutes later and went very much as expected. Hokey for the most part and filled with small moments and objects that had Buffy grinning brilliantly. Things like the cross-paned glass lining the windows on either side of the entryway doors. Things like the upside-down keyholes the tour guide said were designed to ward away evil spirits. Things like the cherubs and nuns on the chandeliers which allegedly guarded rooms against all things malevolent. Things like the mirror in the hall—the only place in the house where photography was encouraged. The mirror which received more attention that night due to Spike's lack of a reflection.

Décor aside, there was little to the tour but stories and fables concerning the manor's history. A few people speculated whether or not a fallen candle in the dining room could have supernatural energy behind it, but otherwise, the experience was tragically uneventful. The dull burn in his belly aside, Spike felt the entire trip had been a whop-ping mistake.

Didn't rightly explain why he'd been led here in the first place.

Unless something larger was going down somewhere else.

Spike bit the inside of his cheek to keep his suspicions from

surfacing as the tour group scurried into the final room. The crowd was large enough to drain the available space rather quickly, especially since a dining room table sat in the middle. Of all the rooms toured, this was easily the smallest—a smoke room or something with a wonky portrait of a dead child on the wall and hunter green wallpaper that made the chamber seem even smaller. He and Buffy ended up wedged into a far corner beside a mahogany buffet table.

His head pounded with the thunder of thirty heartbeats. The scent of fresh blood made his fangs and his stomach growl. It'd been too long since he'd eaten—really eaten. The pig's blood Buffy had brought him satisfied the craving but not the hunger. Not for what he really wanted.

They were passing around a large portrait to investigate the alleged ghost the home's owner had captured while snapping pictures. Well, at least it was almost over. In a few minutes, they would be on their way back to Natchez...without answers, granted, but at least with the return of his free-will.

"Bloody glad the tickets were on Curly's tab," Spike murmured, though admittedly only so he could lean in and get a lungful of Buffy's delicious scent. "What a waste, yeah?"

A small smile cracked her lips, and her head fell back with what he thought was laughter. That was until he saw her eyes roll up—until her body fell slack. And then everything went slow. Buffy fell backward, her neck craned and her mouth ajar. All thought abandoned him. Everything abandoned him. He didn't hear the excited squeals of the few kids on tour or the calls of Buffy's pseudonym by their unlikely travel companions. Nor did the cries of the tour guide break through the hardened exterior guarding his mind. There was nothing. And though he didn't remember reaching out for her, she was in his arms in a blink, her head a half inch away from cracking against the buffet.

It took a few seconds, but finally, he realized his was the voice shouting her name in a blind panic. And then he was moving. Mowing over and through a herd of people for the door that led to the patio. Cool night air touched his skin and the weight compressing his long-dead lungs lifted without warning. He carried her a good ten yards away from the house before collapsing to his knees, raking his gaze

over her as he felt around to see if there was an obvious wound, even though his nose told him there wasn't.

"Buffy! *Buffy!*"

The time lapse between her blackout and the wonderful opening of her bright, emerald eyes was likely ten seconds, fifteen at most. However, by the time she was looking at him again, it seemed hours had passed. The longest quarter minute of his life. He didn't know if he would ever stop gasping.

"Buffy," Spike whispered urgently, suddenly mindful of their audience. "You're all right, aren't you? Tell me you're all right."

She blinked in confusion, then frowned and pressed a hand to her head. "When did we go outside? What happened?"

"You passed out."

"I what?"

"In there. You passed out." The relief flooding his veins was unlike anything he'd ever experienced. Not even after Prague. Spike gasped again, holding her head to his chest. "Christ, love, you can't scare me like that."

"My god, is she okay?"

He glanced up sharply. It was the blonde and her fiancé. He hadn't felt them approach.

"Yeah," he replied. "Just a little shaken."

"What happened?"

Buffy sat up without warning, which was no small feat considering how tightly he held her. She offered Donna a small smile. "I'm okay," she assured them. "Just a...a pressure or something on my chest. I don't...I don't remember..." She turned back to Spike with a frown. "I really passed out?"

"Think you gave the ghost-hunters something to gab about," Joshua observed.

"Quite a conclusion to the tour," Donna agreed.

"Yeah, right." Spike rose to his feet, taking Buffy with him. "We're leaving. Now."

There was no way he was going to sit around and chitchat—not with what had happened. It took a lot to bring a slayer down, and he'd never met one stronger than the girl at his side.

Let the tourists think it was spooks. He knew better.

The Reaper. The Reaper was here, or had been here. And he'd gone after Buffy.

The Reaper had gone after Buffy and he'd done it in the shadows. He'd done it quietly. He'd done it so no one would be any the wiser.

There was no doubt. No one could tell him differently. Slayers didn't faint without reason.

And he wouldn't be satisfied now until he tasted the Reaper's blood.

NO WORDS WERE EXCHANGED over the drive back to town, though every few seconds Spike felt the slow sizzle of Buffy's eyes as she alternated from staring at him to staring at the road. He never glanced back; he couldn't. He was too shaken, too afraid, and he knew if he looked at her, she would recognize it.

Spike didn't know how the Reaper had attacked her, or why he'd chosen the venue he had. All he knew was he'd been used, and there was nothing he abhorred more than being used.

He needed to know how to overcome the Reaper's pull so he could rip apart the bastard himself.

It was late when the Desoto pulled into the drive at Maplewood, though not as late as it felt. Spike killed the engine and at last turned to Buffy, who wordlessly opened the car door and climbed into the night air. Perhaps that was it, then. They simply weren't going to talk about it.

"You want me to pop inside and grab you a nibble?" Spike asked. He'd never noticed how strange his voice sounded after a lengthy silence.

Buffy glanced up with a grateful smile. Her eyes were bright and awake, and after the drive they nearly brought him to his knees. She



was so strong—a tower of fortitude. He'd never known a woman who could go through something like what had happened at the Myrtles without wilting; not one who possessed any softness about her, anyway. But then, perhaps that was his own folly. He'd never known a strong woman. Not his mother. Not Cecily. Not even Drusilla. Dru had made him feel needed, but that was nothing compared to Buffy's unyielding resolve.

Buffy didn't need him. She *wanted* him.

Spike had never before appreciated the difference. Not like he did now—looking at her wonderful, bright eyes.

"I'm not hungry," she said at last. "Weird, huh?"

"You had that milkshake before we headed out," he observed. Spike had insisted on it. No one knew better than he how blood operated. She needed something in her system after fainting, and though stopping had conflicted with his intense desire to vacate St. Francisville as quickly as possible, knowledge had overwhelmed instinct.

"I guess it filled me up." Buffy tucked a few stray strands of blonde hair behind her ear. "I'm really wired, though. Like...I dunno, the last time I passed out it was because of..." A frown depressed her lips as she lifted a hand to her throat and gently stroked the mark there. And immediately, Spike's mood worsened. "It...ummm...I was really revv'd by the time I woke up. It was kinda..." She pursed her lips and looked away quickly. As though the subject matter made her feel as exposed as it did him. As though she was ashamed of what had transpired.

Not that Spike knew what had transpired, but the mark stank of Angel. Angel had sunk his pompous fangs into the Slayer's delectable throat. He didn't want the particulars. Just knowing his wanker of a relation had dared presume he had the right to take what was rightfully Spike's had his demon flaring in a dangerous way.

He didn't need to know.

Only if Angel's demon had staked a claim on the Slayer...

No. That he *would* know. He would have sniffed it on her the second he saw her fighting the demons in the graveyard. There was no doubt.

Though it must have been torture on the old git to taste the girl's blood without letting the world know to whom it belonged—at least in

Angel's warped mind. No matter he'd left her behind to pursue other, nobler things. Other quirky blondes to muck up. Or perhaps the girl had grown too old for him. Eighteen did make Buffy a woman, and god knew Angelus didn't take a fancy to girls unless they were underdeveloped.

Then again, Spike might just be bitter.

"Let's get you inside," he murmured, avoiding her inquisitive eyes. The last thing she needed tonight was to deal with his jealousy. What she needed was a good night's sleep.

What she needed was nowhere in the ballpark of what he needed.

What he craved.

Spike sighed and flipped on the light-switch, drinking her in as she moved around the room. There weren't any bruises marring her milky flesh—none that he could see, but an assault like the one she'd endured came with no guarantees. After all, if the Reaper could defeat her by attacking from the inside, what else could he do by working a bit of mojo? What could he do to her?

Buffy met his eyes and smiled softly, making him feel more vulnerable than he had in the whole of his existence. "You were really freaked, weren't you?"

"Wouldn't say freaked." She arched a brow and his defenses met the gutter. Spike sighed, his eyes hitting the floor. "All right," he conceded with a sigh. "Christ, pet, you're the strongest person I know. The strongest...not just talkin' brawn here. You've survived more than any girl—any bloke—*anyone* could. And when you fell, I fell with you."

Her lips twitched. "You were there to catch me."

"You don't need catching."

"Not normally, but I did tonight." Buffy moved toward him, tugging at her worn braid until ribbons of blonde cascaded over her shoulders. "Things have been...well, crazy. And I'm not...I don't know how to feel about a lot of things. But when I opened my eyes and saw you, I wasn't afraid. It's insane, Spike." Her hands crisscrossed as she grasped the hem of her ruby blouse. And it didn't dawn on him that she was going to draw it over her head until the offending garment between them was gone and he was left staring at her white, lacy bra.

"Buffy..."

"I'm not afraid anymore."

He dragged his gaze away from her breasts long enough to find her eyes. "You're not?"

"No."

"Afraid of what?"

"You. This." She gestured between them. "I don't understand it, but...you..."

A harsh, shuddering breath ricocheted through him, knowledge warring with desire. She'd had a scare tonight—something had crawled up inside her and every fiber of her delectable body had weakened. There was every chance she was reaching out now only for the need to connect with someone who could hold her to solid ground. He knew it—he knew she could snap back at any second.

The man inside knew this, and furthermore knew what he should say.

But Spike was more than just a man. For a few precious seconds he'd feared he'd lost her, and his body was in desperate need of hers. He needed to reassure the angry demon that she wasn't lost after all. That she was, indeed, as tangible as she seemed. Her eyes were open and trusting and she stood before him in an invitation the blind could spot. He wanted her. Wanted her warmth against his skin and her pussy cradling his cock. Wanted her lips against his and her hair curled around his fingers. Wanted to feel her gasp and spasm against him. Wanted so many things.

Most of all, he wanted to commit her to memory. If they were on borrowed time he would make the most of it. Learn her now before she slipped through his fingers forever.

Words clawed at his throat but he shoved them aside. The next thing he knew, he'd closed the space between them and jerked her into his arms, his mouth crashing over hers with an urgency he barely recognized. There was no resistance—she flung her arms around his neck without hesitation as her tongue plunged inside his mouth, echoing the eager thrust of her hips against his erection. He'd never felt so fucking sensitive in his life—so scorched by the touch of any woman. So ablaze by the feel of her squirming against him. A growl savaged his throat as reality crashed hard with fantasy. Her lips fell

slack with a half-moan, her tongue curling under his teeth as she grasped his upper arms to leverage herself against him. The wall between them had collapsed—the same that had compelled her to shove him away just a few hours ago. The things she'd told him out of some sense of self-preservation. The things she'd told him to keep him at a distance. She'd already lost herself once, and though there was no hesitation in the way her lips molded against his, he felt her reserve. Her fear. Her absolute terror of falling again.

Of falling the way she was. In the arms of the enemy.

In the arms of a vampire. A real vampire. A vampire unlike the watered-down sort Angel had been. There were no excuses from where Spike came. No want of being anything other than exactly what he was.

*Liar.*

Spike growled into her mouth, digging his fingers into her firm ass and rubbing his cock against her molten core. He wasn't ready, and at the same time, he'd never been *more* ready. Her warmth had his flesh melting off his bones, and the burn had never been so sweet. She tasted so feminine. Body spray spiced with toothpaste and hints of a chocolate cookie she'd eaten hours before, offsetting the vanilla stolen from the milkshake he'd bought her after she fainted. All things that made her Buffy. Made her the woman to whom he'd lost his heart when he wasn't paying attention. The girl. The human. The Slayer.

"So sweet," he murmured against her lips when they broke apart, his hungry mouth dipping to taste her throat before he could miss her warmth. "So fucking sweet."

"Ungh..."

"Wanted you the first second I saw you, kitten. You know that, right?" He sucked her flesh between his teeth and tugged. Warm breasts filled his palms, thumbs exciting her nipples through the tantalizing fabric of her bra. "Course, I didn't know it. Couldn't know it. Couldn't see what I see now."

Every inch of her trembled under his touch. "What do you see?" she whispered. How a nymph could sound so shy was beyond him, but there was nothing of the seductress who had, just a few minutes before, shed her blouse and proclaimed her body his for the taking.

“You.”

She shrugged self-consciously, doing her best to ignore his wandering hand before he snapped the clasps holding up her bra. The offending fabric slipped down her arms and bared her breasts to his hungry eyes as her arms twitched as though she were fighting the need to cover herself. How she resisted, he didn't know. For a girl who had only been naked with a man once before...

Not that Spike had much experience with virgins or the sexually inexperienced. Aside from his recent string of revenge-fucks, Spike had lived a life that revolved around a woman with more sexual tricks up her sleeve than the best-paid whores on God's green earth.

The darkest chapter in his personal history stood as irrevocable proof that Buffy had known a man's touch, but she could still wear white without any sense of irony. He wanted to tear into her body and stake his claim on her, at the very least with his dick if not with his fangs. He thought he'd had perfection before, but perfection hadn't had a reliable definition until now.

Her self-awareness humbled him. It betrayed a desire to be desirable, as if the notion were a stretch of the imagination.

“You're soft,” Spike whispered, dragging his fingertips around her back until he had a handful of Buffybreast cradled in each palm once more. “You smell...”

“I smell?”

He glanced up wryly and chuckled. “Delicious.”

“Oh. I thought you meant I stink.”

A scoff. “Hardly,” he replied, flicking his tongue over one of her nipples. “You're real. Earthy. Smell like...*Buffy*...just...”

“I didn't know Buffy was a branded scent.”

He laughed again. “I prefer to keep it to myself,” he replied, lowering to his knees as his mouth moved southward, dropping kisses over her taut belly. “Don't know how you bloody do it.”

A hard shudder commanded her body. “Do what?” she asked breathlessly.

“You're so hard.”

“Ummm...thanks?” Buffy replied, uncertain, before quipping, “And here I thought that was my line.”

Spike aimed another amused glance upward. "You gotta be hard," he explained, before tonguing her bellybutton and tugging at her slacks. "All muscle and fortitude...so strong. So hard, and I don't understand it. Don't understand how someone so hard can be so fucking soft."

A low moan of protest slipped through her lips. "I'm not soft."

With her trousers bunched at her ankles, Spike turned his attention her panties. The dewy circle at the crotch had him mesmerized, as did the shuddering breaths rocketing through her small, fiery body. And before he could help himself, he'd dipped under the elastic and combed his fingers through her damp curls. "Not soft?" Spike whispered, rubbing his nose against her. "I beg to bloody differ."

"Oh..."

"Has anyone tasted you here?" he asked softly, bunching her panties entirely to the side to bare her quim to his eyes. The question didn't need an answer. Angel was the only man that had ever been near her pussy and the thought of his mouth anywhere near this perfect flesh fed Spike's demon a jealous rage unlike anything he'd ever felt.

He didn't want to know.

As it was, Buffy tensed the second he breathed across her delicate skin. "You don't...Spike..."

"Mmm?"

"You don't need to...do that."

He arched a brow. "Need has nothing to do with it, kitten. You really don't know how wonderful you are, do you? How you look, how fucking lovely you are. And you smell so sweet. Christ, you make my mouth water."

She blinked prettily, her expression bewildered. "You...you like doing that?"

Spike quirked his head. "Surprised?"

"I...I don't..." Buffy blinked hard and looked away. "I just... I've read stuff. Not much but stuff. And I didn't think that was something guys liked...you know, doing."

"Vamps rely on the senses, pet. Can't rightly speak for human blokes."

"He tried," she continued quickly, still not looking at him, speaking

as though he had not. "That night...he tried, but I was too nervous to respond. My leg was shaking too hard—just one leg, not both. Isn't that weird?"

Spike wrapped his arms around her legs and buried his face in her belly. He didn't want to hear, but she needed to talk, so he didn't interrupt.

"I barely felt anything. I was too..." She rested her hands on his shoulders and squeezed. "You don't...you don't need to try."

He scoffed and nuzzled her hot, delectable flesh. "I told you," he replied, "need has nothing to do with it. I want your taste on my tongue. Want you to ride my face so good I'd suffocate if I were alive." Spike fisted her panties and rendered them useless with a fierce tug. "On the bed with you."

He kept expecting her to snap back to herself, and she kept surprising him with her resilience. Before his incredulous eyes, she kicked off her shoes and wiggled out of the trousers that had pooled at her feet. She moved quickly but without objection, and when she turned around and sat on the mattress, her eyes were clear. Anxious. Fearful. Eager.

And his. All his.

He couldn't lose this—any of this. Spike inhaled sharply. He had to do this right by her. Had to convey with his hands and mouth how much she meant to him.

He made quick work of his clothing, intensely aware of her eyes following the trail of his T-shirt as he stripped it over his chest. And when she gasped as his cock bobbed free, his mind went a bit fuzzy and the demon's need overpowered the man's desire to do this softly. She was spread on the bed, her lips swollen from his kisses, her legs open and her pussy his for the taking. She wasn't fighting; she was offering. Buffy was offering herself to him.

Spike shuddered hard, wrapping a hand around his erection. "Spread your lips for me."

Her alabaster skin melted into bright red. "My..." She hesitated before trailing her hands downward and framing her quim. A shy smile tickled her lips. "I feel so naked."

"Mmm, yeah."

Buffy squirmed, laughing. "It just feels weird," she said. "I've never been so...ummm...nude before."

He smirked, reaching for her foot with his free hand and pumping his cock harder with the other. "I find that hard to believe."

"I mean...when I wasn't three and being given baths by my mom." She blinked hard and looked away, the pink in her skin turning a deeper red. "Not even..."

Spike drew in a short breath. She hadn't let Angel see her in the light like this? Hadn't spread herself on a bed, perky breasts standing proudly in the air, nipples drawn and pussy flushed with liquid need? She hadn't shown this to anyone else. He was the first. Spike. Spike the killer of slayers. Spike who had been her enemy only a week ago.

*Fuck.* It was no wonder he was in love with her. She kept surprising him.

She'd never stop.

Spike took another step toward her, the movement ricocheting through his insides like a shotgun blast. "Never?" he murmured.

"Nerves. If I'd...let's just say, it would've killed the mood."

He nodded, forcing the jealous knot down his throat. "You nervous now?" he asked. He skimmed his right hand up the silky contours of her left leg until her sex was under his fingertips.

"Are you kidding me?" Buffy replied, shrill. "Spike...I..."

"You can stop this whenever you want."

"But I don't want."

"You don't?"

"No. No, I want..." She broke away, fixing her eyes on some random spot along the wall. "I don't know. I don't know anything anymore. What I felt tonight was so...and you were there and you're here and I don't know. But something's happening. It wasn't just... When we've kissed, there's been something."

"I'll bloody well say."

"And I knew...God, is there any way we can talk when I'm slightly less naked?"

Spike smirked and knelted before her. "Get my way, and naked's all you'll ever be," he replied.

"Your way is science fiction."



"Baby, you're the guardian of the world and I'm one of those creatures that goes bump in the night. We're the stuff of science fiction."

Buffy fidgeted and blushed; she was the most adorable thing he'd ever seen. And before she could fidget her way into changing her mind, he slid his arms under her hips and lifted her pussy to his ravenous mouth. "But we're real, aren't we?" he continued, nuzzling her soaked flesh. "My little Slayer."

"Not...*yours*."

His heart twinged but he ignored it, deciding instead to focus on the gift open and ready for him. Perhaps he could change her mind if he gave her what no man had given her. If he showed her what her body could do. "Can't you be my slayer?" he asked, parting her lips and gently running his thumb over her clit.

The response was immediate: Buffy gasped and twisted, her pelvis thrusting hard against him and her head falling back against the mattress. "Gahhh."

"You were saying?"

"You're a vampire."

Spike frowned and caressed her again. "No, I don't believe you were saying that."

"Slayers...no vampires."

"You did it before."

"Learned my lesson," she replied, hips arching off the bed. "Not his."

"That mark on your throat says different."

Buffy's brow furrowed in confusion. "Well...you misunderstood."

"So you don't do vamps anymore?"

She shook her head, though she didn't look convinced. "Supposed to stake you, you know."

"Mhmm. Could you, Buffy?"

"What?"

"Stake me." He moved his thumb over her clit again, soaking up the sight she presented. Her breathing had become labored in a second, beads of sweat gathered at her brow and her eyes sparkled with warmth he'd never before seen. "Could you really do it?"

"No," she replied, arching hard against him. "Not unless...you plan on staring at me all night."

Spike slipped his fingers over her labia. "Wouldn't mind. You're very pretty, love."

"Spike—"

"Gorgeous, even."

"Stop."

"Make me." He grinned and wagged his tongue at her, then dropped his gaze again to her pussy. "Can't stop. You're so warm and wet and I'm a parched man."

Another jerk of her hips, this time accompanied by a whimper of protest. "If your goal is to make me less nervous, it's really amazing how fantastically you're failing."

"I like you nervous," he returned. "Nervous makes you wiggle."

An anxious little laugh rushed between her lips. "You have no idea." Buffy squeezed her eyes squeezed shut, her hips moving along with his fingers. "Mmm. Spike..."

"I love you like this. Panting for me. And you have such a sweet little clit..." He flicked her softly, eliciting another sharp jolt. "And you smell..."

She wiggled again. "If you keep saying that, I'm going to hide in the shower."

A smirk stretching his lips, he slid his fingers over her entirely. "Never knew the Slayer could be so self-conscious," he mused, pressing her harder as his mouth neared its target. Her heady, womanly smell just about did him in. It was difficult enough keeping his mind on track; if he moaned aloud, he might forfeit the advantage. After all, this was almost more for him than for her. Memorizing her taste. Committing her to memory. Knowing every sinful, juicy crevice of her pussy so he had something to carry with him for eternity.

Her whimpers echoing in his ears... God yes, this was for him. All for him.

Spike licked his lips. "Just occurred to me...I never got to eat tonight."

"Ahhh..."

"Think I want a taste." He rubbed his cheek against her inner thigh. "Don't worry, kitten."

"Who's worried?" she replied with a bravado she clearly didn't feel.

"You're trembling."

"You're nose-to-nose with my girly parts. And you're, you know..." She wiggled again. "Spike..."

"I'm Spike," he agreed, spreading her again and baring her soaked hole to his eyes. His prick swelled. She was so wet. God, she was so fucking wet and tight as a newly-tuned drum. And she was his.

If only for right now—for this moment—she was all his.

"That's not what I meant. I—"

"Just want you to remember which name to scream." And without further prompting, he dove into her warmth and lost himself entirely.



SHE'D NEVER FELT ANYTHING LIKE THIS.

The night Angel had stolen her virginity, she'd nearly torn the bed apart with her body's violent, nerve-induced tremors. While she didn't remember hating the experience, any pleasure she had taken away from the night had been long buried under the hell that had followed. Of the act itself, there wasn't much in her memory beyond a flash of pain and the sense of being invaded. It had been quick and, in her young mind, hopelessly romantic. Covered in rainwater on the eve of her birthday, enjoying womanly pleasures for the first time, still buzzed from the chase. Happy to be alive. Happy to have each other.

The fairytale was gone, and with it its fluffy, protective cushion. This bed was real. The quilt beneath her body. The cracks in the ceiling. The air against her skin. The vampire kneeling before her, exploring her soaking pussy with his mouth. Electric shocks followed every tentative lap of her flesh, but after a few seconds, the ache in her clit swelled to heights heretofore unexplored and she realized he was teasing her. He was touching her but not touching her. Tasting her, but not tasting her. The ball of his tongue traced the walls of her inner labia, his thumb navigating the sensitive area around her clit without

giving her what she wanted. Teasing. Spike, whose legendary lack of patience would make him any gambler's best bet, was *teasing* her.

"What...what are you..."

He flicked his eyes upward and met hers, and the shock of watching him as he feasted on her pussy with his mouth rocketed through her with unexpected urgency. Buffy gasped and jerked, tugging her head back to the mattress. She kept watching him. Watching as he grinned and waggled his face against her. Watching as his tongue parted her lips and slipped over her clit, sliding back and forth with such tenderness she would have cried had it not felt so good. And more. More. Every touch left her wanting more.

"Oh my...god."

Spike chuckled and licked her opening once, twice, then finally sank his tongue inside her to lap at her inner walls. "Mmm."

"Oh..."

"Mhmm," he agreed, delving deeper, the rich sound of his murmur reminding her of a large cat. Licking up milk and purring its contentedness into the saucer. He pulled away once to smack his lips, brows flickering devilishly. "Not so shy tonight, are you, kitten?"

"That...oooh, I like that."

He had the audacity to chuckle again. "Good thing, that," he replied. "Cause baby, you're delicious."

Spike was in her again before she could reply, tongue plunging in and out of her pussy as his fingers brushed over her mound to tickle her clit again. And rational thought abandoned her completely. She felt herself detach in favor of the white-hot shards tearing through her veins. It was so good—so good, but not enough. He was tasting her but teasing her all the same. Her clit remained woefully unattended aside from the odd nudge or cursory tap every few seconds, which only fueled the fire pushing at her insides. She needed something she couldn't identify. She needed something she'd never before felt. She needed...

"Spike!" Buffy sobbed, arching her hips in offering. He kept his mouth on her without breaking stride. "Ah...I need. *I need.*"

He pulled away again, licked his lips, and slid a finger inside her. "What's that you need, Slayer?"

"I...I don't know."

He quirked his head and nudged her clit with his knuckles. Again, an electric shock jolted through her body. Again, it was woefully short-lived. "You don't know?" he asked, rubbing his cheek against her inner thigh. "You have no idea what your body is capable of, do you?"

"Ahhh..."

"Beyond those fancy-dancy moves you do...the way you move, contort. The way you mold yourself into a weapon..." He nuzzled her pussy again. "But you don't know what you can do down here. How you can switch from pain to pleasure in a bloody blink. How these legs guard somethin' so precious...so wholly...*Buffy*."

"Wholly Buffy?"

Spike nodded, licking up her slit again. "Your core here. You're not the Slayer now. You're just a girl. Just my girl, if only for tonight. For this moment. Right here."

Buffy whimpered and jerked, rolling her hips in nameless desperation. His voice clashed with understanding; it wasn't until he'd lowered his head again that words separated from sound and made sense. Just for tonight. Just for the moment. Did he really think this was all it was to her? A night—a single night. The thought made her stomach twist. Whatever had occurred at the Myrtles, whatever had been brewing between them over the last couple days, wasn't the sort of fire one could douse with a quick roll in the sack. As it was, Buffy wasn't built for it. She couldn't share this passion with someone and look at them the next day as though nothing had changed. As though she hadn't made herself vulnerable in the most intimate way possible to his hands and mouth. To his eyes. To *him*.

This moment wouldn't be good enough. If she let him into her body...

But there was a fine line between stolen moments and a relationship. No matter what she thought in the heat of passion, she couldn't ever afford to forget Spike was the same vampire who had hunted her vigorously the past two years. The same vampire responsible for Lord-knows how many deaths in Sunnydale alone. The same vampire who had made a career of matting Slayer-skin to his walls. The same Spike who had nothing but evil lurking within his chest. The last time she'd

lost herself in a vampire's arms, the world had nearly ended. And she'd trusted him so much. With everything she was. Spike she couldn't trust for anything.

Except that wasn't the way it was anymore. Something had changed. God, yes, something had changed. Spike looked at her as though she were crafted by the gods themselves. He touched her in such a manner she might believe he could feel the soft tenderness of his own caresses against his skin. When he spoke with her, it was as an equal. Not an older, wiser being with years of experience under his belt. A man who saw her as someone who matched him in every way possible. In the way he looked at her—the way he'd held her when she opened her eyes after fainting—never before had she felt more cherished.

All from Spike. It didn't seem real.

And she didn't want it to go away.

"This is what you need, innit?" he whispered before flattening his tongue over her clit. She must have spasmed, for the next thing she knew he was chuckling against her wet flesh hard enough to rack her body with violent tremors. "This is your magic button, kitten. Rub here, lick here..." He closed his mouth around her swollen pearl and gave a good tug, earning a hard gasp and another eager thrust of her hips. The tip of his tongue balled again, rubbing her, teasing her, loving her so gently she nearly came apart just for his tenderness. "Mmm," he mused, pulling away again. "You like that, don't you?"

Buffy lifted her hips again. "Spike, please."

"Please what?"

"More."

"More of what?"

She scowled at him. "Jerk-off."

A grin tugged at his lips. "Now, now. No need for name-calling."

"I'm burning up!"

He shifted and covered her pussy with his hand and rubbing her with the heel of his palm. "I'll bloody say."

"Guh."

"Makes me so hard," he purred, eyes eating her up. "Watchin' you moan. Feeling you writhe. You look at me and I..." Spike broke off and

turned his attention back to her pussy. "You're perfect. You're so perfect. This cunt. Every delicious move your body makes. Your skin. I just wanna lose myself in you. Over and over and over again."

He slid his lips slid her clit again before she could muster a reply, reaching up the length of her abdomen to palm a breast as his other hand ventured to her opening and danced across her labia. "So wet," he murmured. "Feel this, baby? Feel your honey rolling over me? I tell you, a man could die happy here. Give me some and all I want is more. More of this. More of your taste. More of you." He pressed two fingers into her opening, inhaling sharply when she mewled. "The sweet little sounds you make. For me, right? This is all for me. You're letting me have every luscious inch."

"Spike..."

"You want me inside you?" He pressed his fingers inside her again, then out and in. In easy seconds he'd developed a steady rhythm, stretching her, testing her, filling her. Stirring within her a hunger she barely understood. Every thrust deepened her craving, gnawing away until there was nothing but the harsh desire to have it satisfied. And when his tongue began flicking her clit again, thought dissolved into a blanket of ecstasy. White hot bolts of pleasure liquidated her veins, centering in her stomach and massing to a boil so sweet she could barely stand it.

"That's it, sweetheart," Spike encouraged between licks, drawing her clit into his mouth and wagging his head. "Mmm. *Mmm*."

"Unh..."

Buffy forced her eyes open and looked down again, and the sight of Spike eagerly sucking on her pussy set her off. The beads of pleasure ignited into something fierce, something ruthless, something which forced her from her body entirely. Jolt after jolt of pure euphoria rattled through her skin, constricting her veins, rushing through her with potency unlike anything she'd ever touched. The cries ripping off her lips barely sounded human, much less like they belonged to her—throaty, harsh, and desperate. Her body tensed and released and he didn't let her up. Wave after glorious wave had her conquered and Spike kept sucking. Kept licking. Kept lavng her clit and exploring her pussy as though her body had secrets it had yet not betrayed.

“Spi—” She tried to sit up but he overpowered her, his free hand flying to her thigh to hold her to the mattress as his mouth devoured. “Ahhh...oh gohh...stop. I...what...what are you...ooooohh...”

He chuckled, leaving her clit with a parting lick before his mouth wandered to her opening again to lap up her body’s juices. Every flicker delivered a sharp, electric shock, and the burn was so good she couldn’t decide whether she wanted to pull him closer or push him away. In the end, her body chose for her, spasming impossibly once again toward a dark abyss of pleasure. She didn’t know how long it lasted—time lost its meaning once she regained use of her eyes. Her skin prickled. Her chest heaved. Hot rolls of sweat trickled into her eyes.

Spike lay curled between her legs, eyes shining, his mouth twisted in a very pleased grin. “Ever feel anything like that, Slayer?”

His voice triggered something primal. Something hot and needy. Before thoughts could connect with action, she’d sprung up and seized her vampire by the cheeks, hauling his mouth to hers. And she devoured. She inhaled him, sucking on his tongue, drinking him in. Every crevice of his mouth was hers to explore. Hers. All hers.

“Oh baby.” Spike enveloped her in his arms and pressed her back to the bed, his thick cock resting against her soaked flesh. “Bloke can get used to this.”

“Amazing,” she gasped before sucking his lower lip between her teeth and edging backward. “My...Spike...”

“Mmm, that’s right.” He thrust his hips hard against hers and chuckled when she moaned. “Your Spike. All yours.”

“Never...never...”

“You’d never come before?” If anything, the satisfied grin on his lips spread wider. “Always knew old gramps was a prat.”

Buffy blinked dumbly. “That’s what that was?”

“Want me to do it again? If you weren’t sure...”

She shook her head hard. “Oh god, no. No. I think you’ll kill me.”

“It’s funny...I hear you say no, but your body...” Another jerk of his hips rendered her a whimpering mess. “Oh yeah, your body wants more.”

“Spike...”

“It’s not the main event. Just a sampler. A little sampler. I want



more.” Spike began pressing sweet, anxious kisses into her throat. “Felt you come apart on my tongue. Now I gotta feel you around my cock. Squeezin’ me. Strangling me. Hurting me so good I’ll beg you for more. And you’ll wanna give it. You’ll give it over and over again.”

Something large pressed against her opening, parting her flesh as though it were a missing piece of her coming home. Buffy willed her eyes shut. She couldn’t survive another orgasm but she needed it all the same. Needed to feel what he’d promised. Needed him inside her—his body rocking against hers, plunging again and again. She needed it.

“Wrap your legs around me, precious.”

Buffy snorted inelegantly. “Legs? What are legs?”

“In your case? Lethal weapons.”

“That I currently can’t feel.”

“Better for me. Means I can do whatever I want.” He curled a hand around her knee and stretched her until her calf was wrapped around his waist. “Atta girl. Now your arms. Around my neck.”

Somehow, she found the strength to obey, allowing him to edge them effortlessly up the mattress. Then she was stretched entirely across the bed with a pillow propped under her head and her legs spread to accommodate him. “It’s only been once,” she reminded him. His cock slid between her pussy lips, driving her insane with an impossible renewal of lust. Where her body had the strength to want more she didn’t know—all she knew was she did. She wanted more. She needed more. She needed in ways she didn’t know she could need, and she needed it now.

“I know,” Spike whispered, burying his face in her throat. “I know.”

How had she not known this side of him existed? How had she missed it? In the two years they’d known each other, she never would have thought him capable of this. Yet now, as he pressed her apart and began the slow slide inside her, it seemed so obvious she doubted she could ever trust her own insight again. Her memories of him were warped forever, twisted into something different yet the same. She’d known he’d been good to Drusilla—he’d coddled her, loved her, romanced her...every day during the hellish first year they’d known each other, he’d made it very clear that a hundred years hadn’t wilted a

single petal on the rose. It was a passion women craved—passion Buffy hadn't truly believed to be real.

He wasn't ramming into her, though for the way he sucked in his cheeks, she could tell he wanted to. He wasn't smirking at her; rather his eyes were devouring her in wonder. Her name rolled off his lips as he buried his face in the crook of her neck. Further and further, her pussy expanded and welcomed him, dragging him inside her inch by agonizing inch. Her heart leaped into her throat and tears stung her eyes. It was too much—it wasn't enough. She needed less and more at the same time, and her body sat war-torn, splitting with pleasure and stinging with pain. It was nothing like she remembered.

God, it was so much better.

"Ahhh," Buffy hissed, arching beneath him to propel his cock deeper within her. "Spike..."

He murmured against her throat. Then sniffed. And before she could blink, a growl ripped through his lips and he surged his hips forward, burying himself to the hilt. She gasped and clutched at his forearms, her chest thundering so hard she thought it might break. Then there was nothing but Spike. Spike inside her. Spike's body pressed to her body, his heavy gasps rocking his chest against hers. He lifted himself onto his elbows and searched for her eyes. "I'm sorry," he panted. "Didn't mean to...just...the mark. Had...you're mine. Mine, Buffy."

She blinked up at him before recalling Angel's bite, and understanding dawned. He'd smelled another man on her and his reaction had been immediate. Primal. It should have scared her but it didn't. If anything, it made her want him more.

"It's okay," she whispered, lifting her head to kiss him. She needed closeness. She hadn't had closeness in such a long time. She needed to feel his kiss as he moved against her. As he withdrew from her body, her flesh pulling against his, and sank inside her again.

"Buffy..." His brow came to rest against hers, his fingers curled against her cheeks. "God, so warm. Burning me up. Burning...you always this hot, baby?"

Buffy rolled her head, raising her hips as he slipped away

again, and god, the drag of his flesh against hers was exquisite. "I... ahhh, umm."

He chuckled shortly. "I'll take that as a yes."

"Can't talk. Can't...don't make me."

He brushed his lips over one of her eyes, and she suddenly realized she had squeezed them closed.

Perhaps he lived in her mind, for the next thing he said was, "Look at me." And she did, as though she had been awaiting his command.

"So pretty," he whispered, then stole another kiss from her lips. "So tight. Squeezing those muscles around my prick. Love this. God, how I love this. More, kitten?" He thrust harder without awaiting a response. "Do you love this, too? Love the feel of me inside your cunt?"

Buffy whimpered, digging her nails into his forearms and rolling her hips. "More. I need more."

"More of what?"

"You. Deeper."

Spike smiled, nibbling on her lower lip, driving his cock harder inside her. "Like this?" he asked. "Oh...that's it, Slayer. Squeeze me hard."

For whatever reason, hearing him address her by her title sent white-hot sparks through her insides. "More," she gasped again, wrapping her arms around his throat and kissing him before he could reply. It didn't matter—his reply was in his body. In the slippery drive of his cock into her pussy, in the sound of flesh slapping together, in the squeaks of the mattresses and the slams of the headboard against the wall. In the throaty moans ripping off Spike's lips and falling into her mouth. More, more, more. More of this. More of him. More of everything.

"Oh god."

"Fuck yeah," he agreed, pumping harder into her. Harder. Harder. It couldn't be hard enough. She needed to meet that edge again. Meet it and fall over head first. "Fight me, precious. Fight me."

"Need..."

"I know what you need." He bit at her lips again before moving southward, mouth peppering kisses along her skin until he had one of her nipples sucked between his teeth. "Need to come apart. I need it,

too. Need it. Want it. Wanna feel it. Want you coming around my cock.”

“Ahhh...” She tunneled her fingers through his hair as his hips smashed against hers. The burn she’d felt earlier flamed again, churning deliciously in the pit of her stomach. He kept pulling away, and while the feel of his cock dragging against her flesh had sparks flying before her eyes, she needed more. She needed it—an *it* she couldn’t identify but similarly couldn’t stop fighting to keep.

She needed...

“So beautiful. So beautiful.” He squeezed one of her breasts, his mouth playing with the other. “And all mine. All mine, Buffy. You hear?”

She wouldn’t dream of denying him now. Not now. Not when she needed. “Yes. More. Spike...*more*. Please!”

“So hot. So tight.”

“More!”

“All mine.” He shifted and something sharp skimmed her throat. Somewhere in the dark recesses of her mind, she knew what it was, but she didn’t care. The only thing that mattered was the burn. The sparks shooting through her body. The need to touch—need to feel—the *need*...

The need to keep him inside her. Time to fight back. The next time his cock thrust into her pussy, she contacted her muscles around him hard. Capture. Hold. *Need*.

“Bloody fuck!” Spike roared, his head reeling back, yellow eyes blazing. “Oh god. *Oh yes*. Again!” He thrust harder, feral. “Again. Do that... oh Buffy. *Buffy*. *Buffy Buffy Buffy*. My slayer. My Buffy. Squeeze me. Fucking *yes*.”

She bucked wildly. “Spike!”

“Buffy!” The hand at her breast was suddenly gone, suddenly between them. Then his fingers were over her clit. Rubbing her. Teasing her. Playing with her. The burn deepened, need expanded. She was so close. So *close*.

The second his fangs sliced into her throat, her body exploded. Wave after wave crashed over her, seizing her and carrying her somewhere she’d never before traveled. The bed vanished. The walls

vanished. Everything vanished—everything but Spike. Spike thrusting hard, growling into her bloodied throat as he trembled and emptied himself inside her. Tiny pinpricks danced across her sweat-laced flesh. Pleasure roped her veins and held. And when it was over, when the last wave receded, he was still with her. Still a part of her. Still inside. Still hers.

And it hit her. What she'd known before but hadn't realized. Hadn't understood. What she could only truly know at a moment like this.

He was hers. He was completely hers.

Spike was hers.

And he always had been.

THERE WAS NO GOING BACK.

Not from last night. Not while her warmth surrounded him. Not while the heat from her skin still had him sizzling. Not while he was still drunk on her kisses. Not while his cock was still nestled against her ass, hardened with the memory of how her pussy had felt around him. She'd gasped and clawed at him, squeezed him until he popped, and she'd looked him in the eye the entire time. She'd whispered his name. She'd held onto *him*. And she'd asked for more.

Now she was in his arms and he had no idea how long she'd let him hold her. When the day broke against the sky, would she remember what she'd asked? Would she remember how she'd wanted him? Would anything remain with her? Had any of it been real at all?

Spike inhaled sharply, running a hand down her arm. He'd been around long enough to identify next-to-perfect moments, often mistaking them for the true thing until something else reshaped his vision. Until he had a new appreciation for what perfection truly was. It wasn't with Dru; it had never been with Dru. It wasn't in the taste of human blood or even a really good brawl. It wasn't even in the thrill of snapping slayer necks. It was here. Right here. With Buffy. Buffy beside him. Buffy curled in his arms, believing in him without

betraying a thing. He could do whatever he liked to her now and she couldn't stop him. She'd allowed him into her world and trusted him not to hurt her—and she didn't even realize it.

She had to know. Before they parted ways—hell, before they went any further with each other—she had to know.

A soft little moan spilled across her petal-pink lips. Spike buried his face in her hair, drew in her scent as he tightened the arm he had wrapped around her middle. He wasn't letting go without a fight.

She awoke slowly, but the transformation had him spellbound. She was peaceful and still one second, then light touched her cheeks and her body began to stir. Buffy blinked sleepily and yawned, stretching her luscious curves against him. She paused when she encountered his erection, hesitated, then offered a grin and wiggled her delectable ass. "Good morning."

He murmured in response and dropped his mouth to her throat, irrevocably drawn to the mark he'd given her. Where his fangs had pierced her over Angel's mark—where he'd truly tasted perfection.

"Mmm..." Buffy shivered, then twisted in his arms. She didn't balk when their eyes clashed. Rather, it was as though her face had kissed the sun for as bright as she smiled. "You realize if we have to kill things today, I'm completely out of luck. My legs lost all functionality sometime between the third and fourth time."

"That's being gracious, kitten," Spike retorted with a smirk. Then, sobering, he seized her lips in a long, delicious kiss. There could never be enough of this. "Taste so sweet..."

She scrunched her nose. "Kissing me is icky first thing in the morning."

"I'll be the judge of that."

"Morning breath."

"Mmm...Buffy breath."

"Morning plus Buffy plus no toothpaste equals massive ick." She frowned, then kissed him again in an almost methodical manner, as though she was conducting an experiment. "How do you taste so yummy?"

Spike grinned. "No breath. No morning breath."

"No fair. I've seen you breathe."

"Voluntarily," he replied, tucking a lock of blonde hair behind her ear.

"Well, no more kisses until I make my breath user-friendly." She scooted to the edge of the bed, dipping her hand over the side in search of clothing. A soft smile crossed her face when she located his discarded tee. "Be right back."

Christ, she did more for his clothing than he ever could. Spike licked his lips, eyes absorbing the way the black cotton contrasted with her creamy skin. He groaned when she slipped off the bed entirely. The hemline hit her at the hips, concealing her pussy and teasing him with glimpses of her ass. She was so bright this morning, so much lighter than he would ever have dreamed. There was no reason to believe it would last or that it meant anything beyond what she was giving him, but against his better judgment, he hoped. He *hoped*.

"I love you."

The words were out before he could think to stop himself. It was what he wanted—what he needed. He needed this between them before they went further. He needed her to know what was at stake.

The look she gave him would remain with him forever. She turned around slowly, astonishment blanketing her face, her wide eyes drinking him in before falling into the softest warmth he'd ever known. It touched her lips, her cheeks, colored every inch of her skin. She had him drowning without effort. No one had ever looked at him like that.

No one.

He thought she would speak; she didn't. Instead, she drew in a deep breath and stepped forward, hands crisscrossing at the hem of the tee and drawing it over her head, nothing left of her former shyness. Spike sucked in his cheeks. Fuck, she was a goddess. A warm, living, breathing goddess. A goddess the likes of which he hadn't known existed until she'd stumbled into his life. It had just taken him a long bloody time to realize what should have been obvious.

She climbed onto the bed and crawled up his body, hissing when the length of his cock dragged along her slick pussy. His hands found her breasts, a shuddering breath rocking through his chest. "Perfect," he whispered. "So fucking perfect."

"I'm not perfect," Buffy replied, seizing his cheeks and drawing his



mouth into hers. He moaned loudly against her lips, gripping her hips to anchor her into a hard thrust. She explored him eagerly, licking every crevice of his mouth, sucking on his tongue with desperate, reckless need. Her kisses were enough to inebriate the strongest of men. And when her hand slipped between them to position his cock at her opening, he would have sworn his entire existence had been a prelude to this moment. In Buffy's eyes, he was finally made whole.

"That's it, kitten. Take me inside."

She smiled shyly. "I've never done it like this," she replied. "On top."

"Good."

"Good?"

"Bloody right. The less you've done with any other bloke, the better for me." He lifted his head to suck her lower lip between his teeth. "Fewer gits I gotta off."

Buffy arched an eyebrow. "You're gonna kill all my old boyfriends?"

"They touched what's mine."

There was no response to that. No acknowledgment. No rebuttal. No rejection. Nothing. And the nothing both invigorated and offended him. She wasn't denying it, refusing it as she had the night before, but after he'd proclaimed his love for her, he wanted something tangible. Something to solidify that what he had here—what he was touching now—was something he would have forever.

Instead, she kissed him. He just hoped her kisses were her way of saying what she couldn't.

"What happened to morning breath?" he asked when they parted before nipping at her lips.

"I figure you can deal with it. Buffy want now."

"Buffy want what?"

She merely grinned and sank down, and god if the sight of her pussy swallowing his cock didn't rattle him to the core. Spike swallowed a moan and slid his hands up her legs, clutching hard as she began rolling her hips against him. It was slow and delicious, and even if he yearned for a hard rutting if only to demonstrate how very much *his* she was, he knew this was important for her. Buffy needed to know how this sort of control felt. She needed to know how she could

steer his cock with the slightest jerk, wrangle him with a squeeze of her sweet slayer muscles. She needed to know this brand of power.

And he wanted to be the one to show her.

He wanted to be the one to show her everything.

"You have such a pretty pussy."

Her creamy skin turned a cute shade of red. "Do not," she argued, her head rolling back.

"Mhmm. And I'm gonna show you everything it can do."

"It doesn't do magic tricks."

Spike smirked, slipping his fingers up her sides until his hands were hooked under her shoulders. "Oh, baby," he purred, encouraging her forward so he stretched deeper within her. "Fuck yeah. So hot. So wet. So bloody tight. You're perfect, love. And everything you do is a magic trick."

"You're high."

His grin widened and he stole a kiss from her lips. "On your sweet cunt."

She blushed harder. "Spike..."

"That's it, baby. Moan for me."

And she did. She moaned. She whimpered. She came apart.

And she knew he loved her. She knew it.

But she didn't say it back.



SPIKE LOVED HER.

Giddiness bubbled in her chest, searing her skin with newfound life and inspiring her heart to wild, erratic bursts every time she replayed his declaration. Every time her mind brought her back to his eyes and the achingly desperate way he looked at her. She had words, now. She'd felt it with every thrust, every whimper, every delicious moan. Spike loved her, and he'd given her the words.

The rest was up to her.

So much had changed in the past few days. Things she never would have thought of herself were emerging in an astonishing new light. She'd left Sunnydale with a mission and a broken heart. She hadn't

been looking for anything beyond ridding the world of an apocalypse-happy demon. A fling had been out of the question, which was fine, because whatever she felt for Spike surmounted the place where flings lived.

Looking back, she felt the years with Angel had imprisoned her in a fantasy world. There had been no happy medium for them—it was one extreme or another, and at one point it had been terribly romantic. Her girlish heart had loved him completely. But even after he returned from Hell, even before he'd shattered her world, a part of her had understood it couldn't last. Fantasies never did.

Strange. Nothing about Spike embodied fantasy. He was harsh. He was dark. He was real. And he loved her. He'd grown to love her over their tumultuous relationship. He'd seen who she was and fallen—he hadn't merely decided to love her, as Buffy was sometimes convinced Angel had. And that was the kicker. In so many ways, Angel's love had been conditional—a choice he'd made against his better judgment. He'd loved her best when she was in her element. When she was Buffy, however, he tended to scowl and get preachy on her lack of important priorities. He loved nothing better than to tell her what she should be rather than what she was.

When she was just Buffy with Spike, she made him laugh. Their conversation was lively and entertaining, their interests—boiled down to hard basics—frighteningly similar. They shared personality and humor, superficial cares, and attention spans. Her calling might have brought them together but it wasn't what had kept them together since their unlikely alliance.

Her calling wasn't why he loved her. He loved her in spite of it, not because of it.

Spike's loving her changed everything. *Everything*. Things she wanted to be changed. Things she feared changing. He kept her grounded but sent her flying in the same beat. And when the Reaper was behind them and they were ready to part ways, she didn't know what would happen.

All she knew was the thought of leaving him made her insides twist and her heart ache. Returning to her regularly scheduled life held little appeal. Not after last night—after what had happened here. Not after

spending hours in Spike's arms as his hands and mouth loved every crevice of her body. Not after hearing the words.

She wasn't made for flings and wouldn't walk away unscathed, but dragging Spike along with her wasn't fair, especially if he loved her. Her thoughts were too jumbled, too confused, too *out there* to be given a label. She couldn't offer him anything at the moment—she wasn't ready to make the leap.

*Fool me once.*

Buffy sighed. From the other room she heard the shower shut off, which meant in mindless seconds she'd be presented with pure temptation, and this time she had to be strong enough to say no. Five times already they had both tried to get clean, thrice together and twice separately. Showering was fruitless when they jumped each other's bones the second they flashed each other with naughty parts. And though there was nothing she'd love more than to spend the day entangled in Spike's arms as he made her body sing, the Reaper remained at large, and she couldn't hide in her room forever.

Better to distract herself now so Spike couldn't when he reentered the room. Buffy reached for the phone and punched in Giles's number. She hadn't updated him in over twenty-four hours, which meant he was probably crawling up the walls and checking flight schedules for the quickest route to Mississippi. Silly watcher. Trust her to protect the world, but one little cross-country trip and he was Mr. Dad.

Sure enough, he didn't disappoint. "Buffy?" he demanded upon answering.

"The one and only."

Giles sighed one of those full-body sighs that could be felt as well as heard. "Good lord, Buffy, do you have any idea what you've put me through the past few hours?"

"I have a feeling you really want to tell me, but really, can't listen at the moment." Buffy glanced up as Spike padded into the room, a towel wrapped around his scrumptious hips, flecks of shower-water splattered across his chest. His hair was wet and tousled, his eyes sparkling mischievously. Instantly, her mouth ran dry and her brain short-circuited. *Gub.* Honestly, there ought to be laws against looking that good.

Buffy inhaled sharply and pressed her thighs together, doing her best to ignore the sinful outline of his swelling cock.

Her ears must have stopped working, for when sound returned, Giles was practically screaming at her. And she hadn't noticed.

Spike dulled her senses, reprogramming her to be receptive to only him.

"Giles! No, I am still here. Giles!"

"What the devil happened?"

The words rolled off her tongue before she could stop them. "Spike stepped out of the shower."

She froze. Spike merely blinked at her before a smirk drew across his lips. Right. He *would* find this funny.

"*Spike?* He's *still* in your room?"

"Ummm...yeah?"

"Buffy, have you completely lost your mind?"

"Not completely!" she protested, scowling at Spike, as though it was his fault she couldn't come up with a decent lie. "I told you he's helping me."

"I don't see why he needs to be *in your room* to help you!"

Buffy's jaw fell slack, her mind blanking. Dammit. If she said anything resembling the truth, Giles would be pounding on her door quicker than Dorothy could click her heels. Though he'd given her every sympathy when Angel had left town, she knew he'd busted out the happy dance once all was said and done. Buffy getting involved with another vampire would put her watcher at DEFCON 1.

Though honestly, he had to suspect something. Spike had been in her room two days running. And their past was too colorful for the sleepover excuse, especially since Buffy's attitude toward Spike had always been stake-on-sight. Nothing in that regard had changed until she left Sunnydale. She could certainly comprehend why her new mindset raised eyebrows. She didn't understand what had happened, either.

"Look," Buffy continued, determinately ignoring Giles's Spike-related squawking. Let him think what he would. Her love-life was not up for debate. "Something happened last night."

"With Spike?"

Spike perked his eyebrows, his tongue making play with his teeth. Buffy scowled at him and turned away. "The Reaper's thingamajig triggered Spike's...otherworldly senses. Or whatever. We ended up at some place called The Myrtles."

Mention of the Reaper had a calming effect on Giles, and he switched comfortably into shop-mode. "The Myrtles?" he repeated. "Really? The home in Louisiana?"

"Right. That one. But when we got there, Spike felt nada."

"Perhaps he was luring you there for other means."

Buffy rolled her eyes. So did Spike. "No," she snapped. "We were supposed to hit hot-spots in town but when we got in his car, it kinda—I dunno—dragged him there. I think the Reaper was trying to take me out and needed a place with lots of energy to do it."

"What do you mean?"

"He attacked me, Giles."

"Spike did?"

At that, Spike's patience snapped. "Bloody hell, how thick can you get?" he yelled. "Would you shut your gob and listen to the girl?"

"Yes, Giles," Buffy retorted dryly. "Spike attacked me. He attacked me so bad I decided to let him sleep it off in my room last night. Would you get real?"

"Well, I'm sorry if your choice in bedfellows has me on edge, but honestly, Buffy, what are you—"

"The *Reaper*, attacked her, *mate*," Spike barked. "Haven't bloody figured out how, but he did. Attacked her from the inside."

There was a long pause at that. Then, quietly, Giles asked, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Buffy said. "But I'm thinking if he's upping the ante to personal attacks, we must be getting close to the full shebang. Do you have anything that might tell us where he's planning to unleash Pandora's Box?"

Giles cleared his throat. "Yes, actually—"

"And you were planning to tell her when?" Spike shouted at the phone. "Wanker."

Buffy batted at him. "Shush!"

A pause. Giles exhaled deeply, then continued, "Willow was able to

pull up some modern theories on the Reaper's *modus operandi*. Apparently, he has quite a following among the demon world and his progress is being tracked on assorted demon-run websites by fanatics who, as you might imagine, are very eager to see the world's natural order reverse itself. Using...well, means I'm not entirely comfortable with, Willow was able to extract a few key details. Pandora's Box must be let loose before the new moon. Which, if you're keeping up to date on your lunar cycle, is—"

"Tonight," she finished, sighing. "He's doing it tonight?"

"You knew tonight was the new moon?"

"Giles, my best friend is dating a werewolf. I do pay attention." Buffy huffed. "Some details would be helpful, please."

"It will be haunted ground," the Watcher continued. "The Reaper requires a sort of...prism. An establishment where he can concentrate the contents of Pandora's Box into one energy. It will be a haunted house or a mausoleum. Or—"

"No," Spike said sharply. "Haunted house means rot to the ground it stands on."

"A cemetery, then," Giles said.

Spike glared at the phone. "No."

"What the bloody hell do you know?"

"Cemetery's aren't haunted for shit. It's the people you put in it who give it energy. Not the ground itself. Haunted ground doesn't mean the obvious, Rupes. I'm bloody ashamed of you." Spike shook his head, turning his eyes to Buffy. "We're looking for a place that's been touched by fire."

"Fire?" Buffy repeated. Giles was silent, therefore she assumed he was brooding that he hadn't reached the same conclusion.

Spike nodded. "If it's haunted ground we're aiming to find, we need a place that's been dead, see. Fire kills the ground. Marks it. Leaves an impression. Can't bloody do much with a cemetery except collect ghosties, and if he's done doin' that, we need to look beyond cosmetics and find a place where the land itself's been dead."

That did make sense. Even Giles begrudgingly admitted so.

Buffy's brow furrowed. "If that's true, though, we have a major problem."

“What’s that, pet?”

“We’re in the American South surrounded by fire traps. If I took anything away from US History, it’s that the North pretty much torched this place in the war.” She sighed. “Also, these old houses? I heard Jerome telling Edith that three caught fire last year alone. There’s one really big one off Main that’s just a big...house skeleton. If we’re looking for a place that’s known fire, that narrows it down to every piece of land south of the Mason Dixon Line.” Buffy grumbled and pinched the bridge of her nose. “We are royally screwed.”

Spike blew out a deep breath. “Well,” he drawled. “I reckon we better start looking.”



BUFFY FELT like a criminal creeping through the back of the main house. She was likely the worst guest Jerome had ever entertained, and though it wasn't her fault, she couldn't help the guilt. Twice now she'd snubbed him for breakfast, and the one time she'd made it to the dining room, she'd unwittingly dragged along the baddest, rudest vampire in the Western hemisphere. Jerome was much too clean, much too fussy to ever forgive her indiscretion, and now she was back because she needed help.

The immediacy of the apocalypse trumped etiquette. Buffy inhaled sharply and pushed the back door open, her senses instantly overwhelmed with the lingering aroma of whatever delicacy Jerome had whipped up for breakfast. And as always, rich, chocolatey cookies waited on the silver tray. Worrying a lip between her teeth, she caved and snagged one, her rumbling stomach reminding her she hadn't eaten anything substantial since lunch the day before.

Well, excluding the plate of cellophane-wrapped cookies left on her doorstep by a mysterious benefactor. She and Spike had snacked on those throughout the day, and apparently, she hadn't eaten her fill.

"Anne?"

Buffy whirled around, licking chocolate from the corner of her mouth. "Ummm. Hi. Sorry. I—"

Jerome frowned, poised in the doorway leading to the kitchen and the owner's quarters. "Are you all right?" he asked. "I was just getting ready to bring you something. Donna said you fainted last night, and when we didn't hear from you..."

She blinked. God, had that been only last night? So much had happened since then.

So much.

*Spike.*

"Oh, right," Buffy replied, plastering on a quick, watery smile. She might feel guilty, but she wasn't about to pass up the opportunity to blame her bad manners on an illness. "Yeah, ummm... I was a little lightheaded. Spi—erm, William drove me back and..."

Jerome's eyes darkened slightly, his worry lines receding. "Your friend's still with you, then?"

"Well... Yeah."

Disapproval weighed his expression, but he was too much of a gracious host to vocalize it. "Well, I'm glad you had someone taking care of you. Have you eaten anything besides cookies? You must be starving."

She grinned and nodded to the cookie plate. "I'm fine. These are delicious."

"Let me make you some real food. The sort with proteins."

"No... I mean, that sounds great, but I actually came in here to ask you something. Or see if you have any books or anything that would help." Buffy drew in a deep breath, mind racing. "I, uh, am doing some research for a class."

"It's summer."

Damn. He'd noticed. "Right."

"And...didn't you just graduate?"

"Summer class," she explained. "For Mr. Giles, actually. The guy who, you know, set me up here? He's teaching it. The class. And we're...ummm..." God. She used to be so good at this. Like three days ago, she'd been good at this. Had sleeping with Spike completely fried her brain?

*Probably.*

Especially when she had yet to stop spinning. Spike was a vicious, remorseless killer. A killer who kissed and stroked her. A killer who made her body sing. A killer who made her feel warm where she'd been cold.

A killer who loved her. Spike loved her.

Thankfully, Jerome threw her a lifeline. Either he pitied her or wanted to move onto the next thing. "What is it you need, Anne?"

"Places down here that have burned—caught fire. We need to research them. Like...umm..."

"Caught fire?"

"Right."

Jerome barked a laugh. "Well, that narrows it down—"

"I know. Really. And that's sort of the problem. I thought maybe... you could tell us some of your top choices. Any place in particular that you'd...recommend?"

There was a long pause in which Jerome just studied her, as though trying to determine whether she was serious or stalling. As though expecting Spike to peek around the corner, arms full with the good china. But to his credit, he shook his head, slid his hands into his pockets and shrugged. "Well, historically, there are hundreds of places in the area."

*Great.*

"Oh?"

"There was a house on Clifton Avenue, right around that turn toward the cemetery? Looked just like Rosalie."

Buffy nodded. "The house by the river."

"Right. Well, local lore says a scorned Union officer torched the home when he did not receive an invitation." Jerome frowned. "A factory explosion killed a bunch of girls in the '20s. The turning angel in the cemetery—the namesake of that Greg Iles book?"

She nodded again, searching her memory. Her first day in Natchez hadn't been entirely eventful, but she remembered talking with a few ladies about the local celebrity author everyone in town loved to hate. A tell-all novelist whose fictional stories relied on local Natchez secrets, typically tattling on rich-blood families. His novel, *Turning*

*Angel*, had made famous the actual turning angel monument in the cemetery.

"There's also Avonlea."

"Avonlea?"

Jerome nodded. "The house on Main. Owned by Palmer West. He—"

"Right! That big one."

"Caught fire and he just let it burn. Of course, his entire family is batshit crazy." Jerome laughed hard at that as though he'd said something really funny, which led Buffy to believe he just loved gossip. "You know about Avonlea, right? The owners were reclusive, hardly ever seen in town and flat-out refused to let anyone into the house. They had this book collection, the locals compared it to the Library"—he pronounced this *lieberry*—"of Alexandria. Worth *millions*. It all went up in the fire. And we've had buyer after buyer come here with offers like you wouldn't *believe*, and Palmer turns them down."

Buffy balked. "Why?"

"He's crazy. Also, I think he knows it'd make a lot of people happy to see Avonlea restored. But yeah, that's very hush. A big tomb on the side of the road, overgrown with trees and things. It's really sad."

And it was her best bet. All other places in town would be too pristine, too managed, too well-lit to attract the Reaper. If Spike was right, and she had every faith he was, they needed someplace in the shadows. Someplace remote. The skeleton of a mansion was ideal.

It was where the Reaper would go.

"Thanks, Jerome," Buffy said, turning for the door. "That...that's exactly what I needed."

"Where are you going?"

"Avonlea."

Jerome's eyes went wide. "Oh no. You can't. It's private property."

"Well, I won't tell if you won't."

"If Palmer's in town, he'll be there guarding the place."

Buffy frowned and paused, glancing back. "Guarding a burned down house?"

"Crazy," Jerome explained again. "He's been known to shoot at cars if they turn up his drive."

Well, crap. She'd just have to hope Crazy Palmer wasn't in town. And if he was, Spike would have to lead. Not that she wanted him shot, but vampires could withstand a lot more than humans, slayer strength or not.

She favored Jerome with a small smile. "I'll be super careful."

"Anne—"

"And if I get shot, I'll tell them you did your best to talk me out of it."

"I really can't advise—"

"You really can't stop me." The smile turned saccharine. "Thanks for the cookie, Jerome."

Then, without awaiting a reply, she spun on her heel and marched intently out the door.



"I'LL GIVE YOU THIS, LOVE," SPIKE DRAWLED, SLINGING A particularly lethal ax over his shoulder. "The place is damn spooky."

Buffy arched an eyebrow. "You do remember you're a vampire, right? You thrive in the spooky."

"Yeah, that's the point." He sighed and glanced to the starless sky. "No light at all. Even in good ole Sunnyhell, you got the moon shinin' down on you, right? These bloody trees block even the headlights from the road."

"I like the trees."

Spike exhaled. They were at the footstool of the mansion. It was a great, two-story piece of history, rotted with burnt wood and crumbled plaster. A lamppost entwined with strings of ivy guarded what had once been a grand circle drive. Scorched columns held up a slanted veranda. It was a solid silhouette, cold, unfeeling, abandoned.

"Strange, innit?" he said softly, turning to face the road. "I forget at times."

"Forget?"

He nodded. "How quiet it gets outside the big city scene, right? Dru and me... We used to lie on our backs in fields and look at the stars. She showed me things I..." Spike stopped abruptly, noting the

distant look on her face. She shone brightly in the darkness. So bright. And she looked...upset.

Spike stared at her for a long minute, a slow grin stretching across his lips. "You're gorgeous."

Buffy blinked and crossed her arms, avoiding his eyes. "What?"

"All jealous."

"I am not!"

"I mention Dru and you shut down."

"I was...thinking." She pouted, and god, if that didn't make her even lovelier. "About...apocalypse stuff. Are you getting any vib—ooooomm!"

The ax clamored to the cement walkway. He had her pressed against one of the columns before she could utter another syllable, mouth ravaging hers with all the passion he'd forced himself to bottle since leaving the privacy of her rented room. But seeing her like that—seeing the evidence of her desire for *him* in her eyes...he lost all reason. Lost everything aside from the need to taste her. And taste her he did. Her warmth. Her fire. The hint of her toothpaste colliding with warm chocolate and diet soda. She whimpered and clung to him, teeth scraping against his lips as she fought his mouth with desperate, fiery strokes, sucking fiercely at his tongue. Spike growled, pressing his body hard against hers. He parted her legs with his knee, tugging her forward until her pussy rested against his thigh.

God, she could melt his clothes right off his body. She was so hot. So fiery. So fucking intense.

He wanted her here. Wanted her wet and writhing against him. Singing his name against the quiet night as he marked her body—as he eradicated any thought of the man who had dared touch her in the past. The man whose grubby hands had so presumptuously explored what belonged to Spike. What had *always* belonged to Spike. Buffy's hot, desperate moans had him thoroughly unmade.

Spike hissed, sucking hard on her lip before pulling away, kissing his way to her ear. "You're all I need, Slayer," he growled, rubbing his leg against her molten center. "All I've ever needed. Just took me a bloody long to find you."

"Guhhh."

"So wet," he purred, tenderly stroking her belly. "Makes my mouth water."

"Spike, we can't..." Buffy sighed and pushed against his chest, her eyes large and apologetic. "Reaper."

*Fuck the Reaper*; he wanted to say but knew he couldn't. If the creature managed to unleash Hell on Earth... Well, Spike had liked this world before. Now? He didn't figure there'd be much time for long snogs and longer shags if the Reaper had his way. The Slayer and all her goodness would be thrust into the fight, and she'd go down swinging.

He couldn't have that. Hell, he figured he was a lost bloody cause all over. The Slayer attracted all manner of nasties, and loving her meant fighting alongside her, no matter what that made him. He had to keep her alive and kicking as long as he could. Forever, if he could.

"Bloody Reaper," he drawled, stepping back and steadying her as she regained her footing. "I mean what I said, though. About Dru. About how you're all I'll ever need."

He felt heat rise to her skin. Felt her pulse race and her heart thunder. Her eyes darted to the black space between them. "Spike...I don't..."

"Feel the same. I know."

"It's not—"

"I just wanted you to know, love. Before we throw down and fight the good fight. What I said this morning is true. Fuck all if I know how it happened... I just do. Makes no bleeding sense to me, but I can't shake it. I just *know*, you know? You're what I've been meaning to find." He paused, cupping her cheek. "Buffy...I love you."

The same lost, awed look that had tickled her face that morning warmed her again. She bathed him in sunlight without a thought or a prayer. "I know," she replied softly. "Spike...I just...I don't know what's going to happen from here. After we stop the world from ending and go... I'm just—uhh, confused. And I don't know what I feel right now."

Spike blinked and stepped back, combing his fingers through his hair with sudden awkwardness. He hadn't wanted to make things strange for her, but at the same time, she had to know what was at stake. She had to know how deep this ran for him, and how seriously

he took those words. He'd only said them to four women in his life, and only one of those had meant it when she said them back.

Well, that wasn't entirely fair. He supposed Dru had meant it in her own, twisted way, but it hadn't been enough for him, and that, as much as anything, had ultimately driven them apart. His need for all-encompassing love was unique, perhaps, but no less real. Living off what he had been offered wasn't good enough anymore. Dru loved with whimsy. Spike loved with his whole being. In all his years, he'd only come across one person who loved the way he did. And she was standing at his side.

"Right," he said shortly, glancing up. "Well, sorry to tell you, pet, I'm getting no tinglies here. I—"

"Spike—"

"Props for the setting, though."

"I didn't mean for it to sound that way."

He paused and met her eyes. "That way?"

"You told me something beautiful and I didn't know how to react." Buffy waved a hand. "I don't know how to react to any of this. My life has turned completely on its head since I got here. I came here to do the job and get my mind back on track. To get—"

"To get over him."

She balked but didn't back down. Rather, swallowing hard, she offered a brave nod. "Well, yes. But not the way you think. Not even the way I thought. You showed up and changed everything. And it's happened so fast, Spike. Everything has happened so fast. And now you love me."

"I've loved you a long bloody time, Slayer. Just took seeing you to realize it."

The admission nearly had her in tears, but nonetheless, she pushed on. "I can't give you what you want. The most I can... I have feelings for you. As in *much*. And it's so different from anything I felt with..." She paused and broke away. "It's real. It feels...real. Angel never felt real. And I decided I loved him too quickly. I decided, and yeah, it grew into something else, but it began with a decision. He had the big broody, romance-novel-cover thing working for him, and it was so hopeless and romantic and I don't... It was never really real, though. It was Romeo and Juliet, and that's never real." Buffy sighed. "I don't



want to decide I love you. If it happens, I want it to be real, too. As real as whatever we have now. If I decide I love you, like I decided with him, it becomes a fairytale, and we can't be a fairytale, Spike. I haven't had anything beyond the fairytale before. Everything you and me have had has been real. Everything we've done...and it has to stay that way. The feelings I have for you are real, too. And powerful. I just don't know if I can call it love. I've known you forever, but I only *saw* you a couple of days ago." A watery smile traced her lips. "Give me time?"

Spike could do nothing but stare. In all his years, he'd never come closer to perfection. Not before this instant. Before her words knew breath and her eyes gifted him with new life. It was more than he'd ever had. More than anything. *Anything*. She was the first woman in his life to speak plain truths—to give him something beyond lacy words and empty promises. Beyond... *Christ*...

"Buffy..."

"I know that it's not what you want—"

"It's perfect." He cupped her cheeks and drew her mouth against his, tasting every delicious crevice. Treasuring every sinful stroke of her tongue. Loving this. Loving her. Needing more and more. Needing... but happy.

*Happy.*

God, what a fucking notion.

"Perfect?" Buffy asked. Her eyes positively shone. "Really?"

"God yes." Spike sighed, resting his brow against hers. "Thank you."

"Mmm...for what?"

"Giving me this." He kissed her again before drawing away with finality. "More later, yeah? Right now we have bigger gits to worry about." Spike rubbed her shoulders, his eyes hitting the sky again. "But I meant what I said before. I got nothing here, love. Either the Reaper found a way to shut off my trigger or we're fuck all outta luck."

She licked her lips. "Well, there are tons of places around town."

"Doesn't need to be in town, does it? Can be anywhere."

A groan. "You're not really helping with the encouragement."

"Sorry, pet. We can drive around if you like. See if something snags me."

"And if he did find a way to shut it off?"

Spike shrugged. "We'll get there."

"Time's kinda of the essence, here. If the ritual's going down tonight—"

"Yeah, yeah. Go fight the big fight. We'll get there. I'm a bloody man of my word." He leaned over and seized the handle of the fallen ax. "This bloke's history. Just gotta find him and make sure he knows it."

Buffy nodded distantly, rubbing her arms. They turned on the same foot and started back for the car. Whether her mind was with him or on their missing baddie, he didn't know. All he knew was he had to get the Reaper out of the way so he could get back to more pressing matters.

So he could chain her to a bed and make love to her until the feelings she'd mentioned solidified, and she knew she felt the same thing he did.

It wasn't until his hand curled under the door handle that his gut twinged.

"Oh bugger."

Buffy's head shot up. "What?"

"Get in the car."

"Spike, what's wrong?"

"Get in the sodding car."

She blinked in surprise but obeyed without another question, not speaking again until the metallic clink of her seatbelt secured. "What is it?" she demanded. "Is it the Reaper?"

"We're about to go for a ride," Spike agreed, charging up the engine. "Hold on, kitten. Looks like the git finally sent our invite."

The Desoto's wheels squealed as he pulled back onto Main, and then they were off.

Chasing shadows into the night.

“I DON’T LIKE THIS.”

By the way Spike’s jaw tightened, she sensed he didn’t either. He didn’t say anything, though, and she appreciated it. Buffy didn’t want him confirming her fears, even if fear itself kept her grounded—kept her human. Kept her in a place where she realized her mortality and molded her weaknesses to serve her needs. But she didn’t want to feel fear now, and she certainly didn’t want Spike voicing his own misgivings. With as much as he’d seen and done, it would understandably take a mountain to rattle him. He knew what went bump in the night even better than she did.

“I don’t, either,” he agreed a second later, shifting the car from first to third. And though his words lent her pause, his tone had her nerves sighing in relief. “The gravel’s bloody murder on my traction.”

“This isn’t like before. This is the middle of nowhere.”

Spike blew out a deep breath, craning his neck to catch a glimpse of the road. “Well, we figured the Reaper’d want something a little private. Can’t get more private than this, pet.”

They likely had only been traveling for a few minutes but it felt like hours had passed. The stretch of highway before them had been endless, dark and vacant. A few wandering cars had passed them, sure,

but nothing to ease the isolation. Two minutes ago, the Desoto had taken a sharp turn off an exit ramp, and they were speeding toward a thicket of trees that broke into a dense forest. Still no foreseeable destination. Nothing but the Reaper's tug at Spike's demon—and even then, they didn't have the guarantee it was legitimate.

"I have no idea what we're going to do when we get there," Buffy said, her head rolling back as she restlessly wiggled her legs. "Well, okay. I have some idea. I need to stop the Reaper, destroy Pandora's Box, and somehow keep you from falling head over feet for the guy, if this thing's legit and not some decoy." She paused. "If we're not being dragged out here for a distraction."

"Mighty good thing you got superpowers, yeah?"

"Spike..."

He shrugged. "If he starts tugging at me, we know how to break it."

She tossed him a wry glance. "Yeah. I'd like to explain that one. Sorry I let the world end. I was too busy macking on my boyfriend."

Spike inhaled sharply and the air between them sparked with new life. Buffy swallowed and waited, but nothing happened and the moment faded to a calm, comfortable acceptance. Whatever had happened before had evidently placated him enough to keep him from jumping at every reassurance of her affection. And that's what it was. Affection. The warmth. The haze. The touches. It was all affection, and they both knew it. He didn't need to pry or demand what the word meant. If it was Freudian or genuine. If she meant it. Those questions were quiet now, even if the quiet was temporary. For the moment, there was nothing but peace.

Instead, Spike shrugged and reasoned, "Sounds good to me."

"It won't to Giles," she retorted.

"Can't expect much from a bloke who's only had his right hand for company."

Buffy made a face. "Gross, Spike!"

"What?"

"If we survive this, I'm so making you pay for that visual."

Spike smirked and wagged his tongue at her. "God, I hope so."

A soft blush warmed her cheeks. "You still getting nothing?" she asked, nodding at the road.

"I'm getting a lot," he replied. "Just nothing that helps us."

"I don't like this."

"I know, kitten."

"It's creepy out here." She shivered and rubbed her arms. "There are no lights."

"We're in the country."

Buffy nodded. "I noticed that."

"There typically aren't lights in the country."

She leaned forward to gaze at the sky through the windshield. "You're telling me." She shivered again. "I don't know how people live out here in Nowhere Land. I kill demons and avert apocalypses professionally and this still gives me the wiggins."

"Which is pretty fucking cute, if you ask me."

She shot him a glance. "You're not helping."

"I'm not?"

"No."

Spike paused. "Am I supposed to?"

"I need to get my mind battle-ready. And all I can think about is the fact that it's freaking-scary dark out here." Buffy blew out a breath. "Maybe it's the not knowing, you know? Where we're going."

"Makes sense."

"I don't like feeling like this."

Spike reached over, took her hand, gave her a reassuring squeeze. "You're not scared, pet," he said softly. "Believe me, I've seen people scared bloody witless, usually at my hand. You're not scared—you're ready. It's just typically never this quiet before you go into war."

It had been happening often over the past few hours. Little moments during which she found herself lost in the realization that everything had changed. Beyond the trip or trying to escape Angel's memory, or even allowing another vampire into her bed, everything had changed. Spike changed things. Made them revolutionary. Made them whole.

If she asked him to come home with her, he would. Spike loved her. She knew he loved her. There was no doubting it. Perhaps they'd been moving toward love the second they met. After all, they'd both been in disastrous relationships and knew their own self-made fairytales had to

end eventually even if admitting it hurt. They'd fought and fought and, while their battles were always lethal, they had also been fun. Fighting Spike was fun. It was the reason she always preferred fighting him. Always. If anyone was going to take her down, she wanted it to be him. She wanted to die while having fun.

It was perverse and wrong, but no less true. Fighting Spike made her feel alive.

Sleeping with Spike made her feel something beyond alive—it made her feel immortal, and while that was dangerous, she didn't want to lose the sensation. Ever. Her body hummed from where he'd touched her, and she still felt ghosts of kisses from the path his lips had taken as he explored. As he'd searched and discovered.

Spike understood her. He understood her now, when she said she felt uneasy. When she told him she needed time. When she held up a hand for silence or instructed him with her eyes. Spike understood her.

"Maybe it'll help if we go over it again," Buffy said, closing her eyes and wiggling her shoulders. "The quiet makes my brain do funny things."

"Like think?"

She made a face. "You're hilarious."

Spike shrugged and offered a wicked grin. "Still evil, pet."

"Believe me, that message comes in loud and clear." She inhaled sharply. "Okay. So once the Reaper does his thing, the ground will do some mystic mumbo-jumbo that makes it impossible for any human hand to move Pandora's Box."

He nodded. "According to your old man, that's the bulk of it."

"Because if he opens it without consecrating the ground, or whatever—"

"Consecrating?" Spike repeated, arching a brow.

Buffy waved a hand. "Or whatever!"

"You're adorable."

"And you're getting on my nerves."

Spike shrugged again. "It's what I'm good at."

"Well, find something else to be good at for the minute." She aimed another glare at him which went tragically unacknowledged. "If the Reaper opens Pandora's Box without all the pomp and circumstance,

the ghosties go all over the place and it's all for nothing. And we're banking he won't be careless enough to do that, so we need a back-up plan."

"Right, 'cause nothing's ever easy."

"Not in my line of work," Buffy agreed with a sigh. "Have any spare back-up plans on you, by chance?"

"Doesn't seem to be much room for plans," Spike retorted. "You said it yourself. Impossible for human hands to move the box. Figure someone not human has to step up, don't you?"

Buffy blinked. "You mean you?"

"See any other volunteers, Slayer?"

Logic and reason refused to collide. The words made sense, yes, but she couldn't understand. "No," she said shortly.

"What?"

"No."

Spike laughed. "Buffy—"

"It could be dangerous."

"Apocalypses typically are, sweetness."

"I don't want to risk you."

"And I don't wanna risk you," Spike replied. "Seein' as, of the two of us, you're the one with a pulse, I figure it'd be safer to let the demon handle the demon's box, don't you?"

Buffy blinked, flustered and lost. Her mind refused to connect the dots. "No!"

"Why?"

"I don't know! I just don't like it."

"Slayer—"

"We'll get there in time. I'll kill him in time."

"Right. And if you don't, big daddy steps up to the plate."

"I don't want you anywhere near the plate!"

Spike shrugged a shoulder. "Can't always get what we want."

"Spike!"

"You have any other ideas, love, and I'll be happy to hear them."

Words weren't forthcoming, therefore she didn't try. She sat dumbfounded for a few seconds, opening and closing her mouth in the hope of accidentally stumbling across something brilliant, but pearls of

wisdom were in short supply and she fell back into a confused silence. The functional, rational side of her brain told her she was being unreasonable, but she didn't care. Her chest swelled and her head pounded, and lord help her if she knew why, but the feeling in her gut refused to abate. Something would go wrong if Spike tried to manhandle Pandora's Box. She knew it. It didn't matter what the rules said—didn't matter what they'd dug up on the Reaper, she knew something would go wrong. Slayer senses had yet to betray her when it came to these things and she wasn't about to start second-guessing them now.

Spike wouldn't understand. How could he? She wasn't exactly skilled at putting words to this sort of knowledge. All she knew was something bad would happen and she couldn't stop it if it did. And she wasn't ready. She wasn't ready to evaluate herself...or the magnitude of her feelings for him. It was too soon. She needed more time. She couldn't risk this when she wasn't ready.

She'd just have to make sure the Reaper didn't get too ritual-y before they arrived.

"We're getting close," Spike said suddenly.

Buffy sat up, eyes drawn to the black road ahead. "We are?"

"Bloody gotta be. This feeling...like I'm missin' something. Like there's someplace I oughta be." Spike heaved a sigh, reached inside his duster, and fished out a cigarette. "Might give you a run for your money, Slayer."

"I won't let the Reaper snag you."

"Yeah, well, there's no telling if I'll let you stop him." He groaned. "God, I'll be happy when this bugger's in the ground."

"And so say all of us."

"This sodding magical mystery tour he's aimin' to—"

"He won't." Buffy drew in a deep breath, doing a quick inventory of their supplies. They didn't have much, but what they had would be enough. Her bets remained steadfast that one of the reasons the Reaper was so hard to catch was he knew he wouldn't stand a living shot against a real live foe if he didn't pull a few tricks out of his bag of wonder. Things like beckoning Spike to join the catalog of other nasties he'd gathered, or luring them to a nondescript haunted location to attack Buffy blind.



Spike smiled through the dark and she was surprised at how quickly she warmed. "I love you."

She blushed. "I know."

"And I'm not one for heroics, but I bloody well mean it when I say this. Get the job done. Don't worry about me."

Buffy's eyes went wide. "What?"

"The Reaper goes after me, you get your shot, yeah?"

"The Reaper's getting nowhere near you."

"Slayer—"

"Vampire," she shot back. "Like you said, you're not one for heroics. Don't start now."

"Love's a funny thing."

"What does that have to do with—"

Spike stretched a hand along the back of her seat and tunneled his fingers through her hair. "Everything," he replied. "If you're worrying with me and end up losing the world, not only will we all be royally fucked, but you'd never forgive me."

"Never forgive you for something you can't help?"

"What can I say? You're unreasonable."

"Spike—"

"And even if you do forgive me, you'll bloody never forgive yourself. All this presuming you and me live long enough after the world's turned topsy turvy for you to get reflective."

Buffy batted his hand away and glared. "I am not losing you to the Reaper and I definitely am not losing the world. You start going after him and...I dunno, but if you ever want a repeat of last night and, well, all of today—ever—you sure as hell better plan on sticking around."

He grinned. "You're so cute when you're trying to intimidate."

"Spike—"

"Can't bloody stop me, love."

"I can knock you out and toss you in the back."

"Ooh, feisty."

"Will you take this seriously?"

"Have I said anything that makes you think I'm not?"

"I will kick every inch of your pale ass."

"And, knowing me, I'll enjoy it." Spike jerked the steering wheel

and veered the Desoto sharply to the right, putting them on an even bumpier and narrower road. "I got me something to live for, pet. Not saying I'm asking the bloke to make me a part of his stamp collection, but...oh fuck."

Buffy followed his gaze, a gasp clawing her throat. What stood in a break of trees had likely once been grand. Something fallen to time. It wasn't an obscure mark—the chains around the structure warding off trespassers told as much, but it was so far off the road no one would intervene with the Reaper anytime soon. The pillars were straggled between each other, marking where a house once stood. Large, gothic columns scarred by flame and aged with unkind winds and rain blocked off a small piece of grass. It was large and beautiful, and it might be the last ground upon which she stood.

"Think this is where the party's at?" she whispered.

"I'd bloody well guarantee it." Spike nodded to the middle of the tattered fortress, where stood their cloaked friend. The Reaper blended nicely in the midst of shadows, knelt before his satchel of goodies. "Grab something pointy and hop on out, sweetness. Big git's not even waiting to start the grand show."

There was every possibility Spike didn't intend her to take his words literally, but she chose to worry less about that and more about other things. She seized the ax Spike had hauled up Avonlea's overgrown drive and tossed herself out the passenger-side door before the Desoto could even consider slowing down. She heard her vampire call after her but refused to break. Her objective was firm and unmovable. Kill the Reaper. Do it now. Do it before Spike's incredibly lame thoughts of noble heroism could cement.

The ground rushed beneath her feet and wind whipped across her face. The length of chain breaking the drive from the structure swung under her legs with the rush of her leap.

"Hi honey!" she said cheerily, aiming a hard kick at the Reaper's upturned head. "Sorry I'm late. Bit of trouble finding the place."

The Reaper hissed, but hissing didn't save his head from meeting the business end of her foot. He rocked back, falling off his feet and flying back a good ten feet. Buffy hit the ground running. "You know," she said conversationally, smacking him hard with the handle of the ax.

"I guess I should be grateful. I mean, you are this colossally huge pain in my ass, but hey! Got me out of town. Got me over my emotional disease of an ex, got me in the best bed I've ever slept in, and got me laid big time." She crushed the teeth of the blade into the creature's side, jerked it out and hit him again. "But here's the half-empty. You... drove me out of town." The ax found the Reaper's neck. "Attacked me like a girl." She kicked him hard in his wounded side, swinging the blade high above her head before bringing it down again. "And here I think...it's because you were too much of a wussy to fight me face-to-face."

Buffy panted hard, blowing a lock of hair out of her face. In a matter of seconds, she'd chopped the Reaper down. It was easy—too easy, but she wasn't going to question it. With all the guy's fancy moves and diversionary tactics, he sure as hell broke without a fight. A few swings of her ax and he was scattered in several ooky pieces, wailing pitifully as she raised her weapon again.

"Definitely too much of a wussy," she agreed. "Don't feel too bad. If I had a nickel for every big name apocalypse-happy demon that fell this fast...well, let's just say, I would've cashed it in and gone to Disneyland by now."

Footsteps behind her broke her concentration. "Slayer—"

Buffy blinked but didn't waver. "Now's not a good time to distract me, Spike!"

"The git's dead, pet. We got bigger worries at the mo'."

She whirled around just in time to catch the end of the show. Pandora's Box had illuminated in a brilliant flash of color, spiraling upward as the earth beneath it began to tremble. A symphony of a thousand shrieks molding into one burst through the air. Symbols carved into the wood burned and sparked to life—a pillar of pure energy burst through the top and broke clear into the night sky. The blaze was blinding, blinking iron dark away with nothing but pure white. Everything faded away and she couldn't see.

"Spike!"

If he responded, she didn't hear. She couldn't hear over the thunder of a thousand demons bursting to newfound freedom in a world reborn.

"Spike!" Buffy stumbled forward awkwardly, ax falling to the ground. "Spike!"

It was no good. She couldn't even hear herself. It was over. Overconfidence tied with severe lack of preparation had been her undoing. She'd defeated the Reaper, sure, but not his pet project. She hadn't stopped the thing she'd come here to stop.

The world was changing. Everything was changing and she couldn't stop it.

And as quickly as it had started, it ended. The world fell still again. Dark. Silent. Secure. It took several seconds for her ears to stop ringing. Even longer for her eyes to adjust. Her skin prickled and her body hummed, and with every twist of her head, she expected another wail. Another demonic scream. The full pressure of evils unknown to this world still scratching at the air around them. Everything fell quiet. Fell still. Everything just fell.

And when the dark began to piece itself apart, she saw him.

She saw him.

"Spike!" Her legs wobbled, but she forced them to work. Forced herself to her feet even as she stumbled hard against the uneven terrain. He seemed a thousand miles away in that second. Still. God, were vampires supposed to be still?

"Oh god, you idiot," Buffy cried, nearly toppling over again. She couldn't seem to get this gravity thing down. "I told you! I told you not to...and what do you do?"

He lay on his stomach just a few feet from the ruins, Pandora's Box having tumbled from his grasp after he fell. It rested uselessly on its side, lid swinging off its hinge, the contents spilled and gone. But it was the last thing she saw—her attention was entirely on Spike.

Spike.

"You lousy son of a bitch. I told you!" She collapsed at his side. "I told you."

Spike didn't move. Didn't breathe. Of course, he didn't breathe—he was a vampire, for crying out loud—but the not-moving thing...he was a demon. A demon's hand had touched the box. He'd moved it with his demon hands and he was supposed to be okay now. He was supposed to be okay.

Buffy shook him again. Shook him hard. She wasn't beyond breaking a few bones if it got him to open his eyes. "Wake up!" she commanded. "Stupid vampire, wake up!"

Nothing. Still nothing.

She hated the feel of tears splattering her cheeks. God, she'd never cried so hard as she had in the last two years—cried for Angel, for herself, for her mother, for Angel again...she didn't want to cry for Spike. She wanted him to be the one who saved her from tears. "I am so kicking your ass for this," Buffy promised, peppering his face with wet kisses. "I swear to god, Spike. You can't do this to me."

Silence was her answer. He remained so far from her.

And then there was one thing she hadn't said. One truth she hadn't realized. It was honest but fast. It was something she'd known forever but only now understood. The burning in her chest. The tears strangling her throat. The swollen pain puffing around her eyes.

"I love you," she whispered. "I love you, you big dummy. I know I said I didn't know...but I do. I love you. And you can't—"

It happened without warning—without struggle. One second she was a basket-case, listening as the roar around her faded to a soft, calming lull. The next she was looking into his smiling eyes, full of mirth and shining with life. "Hey there, gorgeous."

Buffy blinked at him and then stumbled back. "What...?"

"Once in a lifetime chance, love. Can't tell me you wouldn't've taken it."

Astonishment and outrage replaced grief. Buffy was on her feet in an instant, trembling and pointing an accusatory finger at his unrepentant face. "You...you ass!"

"Buffy..."

"You made me think—"

"I told you it'd be all right," Spike reasoned, climbing to his feet. "I told you."

"And then—"

"Like I said...once in a lifetime chance." He smiled and took a step forward, then another when she failed to recover it in the other direction. And another. And another. And before she could help herself, she found her breasts pressed against his chest. Found her face captured

between his hands. Found her eyes lost in a sea of endless blue. "Didn't mean to scare you."

"Like hell," Buffy replied, not without a few snuffles.

He caressed her cheek with curled knuckles, leaning inward to nibble lightly on her lips. "I love you."

"I hate you."

"No," Spike replied, kissing her again. "You don't."

Damn her easily-meltable defenses. "No, I don't," she agreed, though not without a moan of protest. "But god, it'd make things easier."

"Tell me?"

"You don't deserve it."

He grinned. "Not much in this world I do deserve. Tell me anyway."

A long sigh coursed through her body. There was no sense in denying it. No sense in fighting. She hadn't had a chance from the very start. From the second their eyes clashed in the cemetery four nights ago. Hell, from the second their eyes clashed two years ago in the alley outside the Bronze. It would always end this way. They could have played it any way they liked but they would have ended up here. Fighting. Snarling. Dancing. Loving. They were bound to end up here—in each other's arms.

"I love you," she whispered. Then added, "Ass."

Spike chuckled and nudged her mouth with his. She found herself lost in his lips the next second, a slave to his tongue, wound in his arms. She was gone then—gone with him to a place from which she never wished to be recovered.

The world had a way of melting when he kissed her.

FUCK, but he loved her like this.

"Come on, Slayer," Spike implored, rocking impatiently on his heels. "Hit me!"

"Someone's a little too eager to be punched in the face," Buffy retorted dryly, though her eyes were dancing. God, she was a vision. Tousled hair. Sweat-drenched skin. Pulse racing a thousand miles an hour. Her sassy mouth twisted in a self-satisfied smirk. She was a vision. A pure, fucking vision.

And she was all his.

"What?" he threw back, flexing his shoulders. "Don't tell me you don't like it. Come on, Buffy. Give it to me."

She snorted and shook her head. "Too eager, I say."

"You're wrong. Just eager enough. Plenty eager."

She sidestepped a headstone, inhaling sharply and casting her eyes heavenward. "I do love this cemetery," she admitted. "It's so pretty. Why aren't the cemeteries at home this pretty?"

"Sunnydale's a bloody heap of dead folks, kitten," Spike pointed out. "Too many graveyards, not enough donations."

Buffy nodded. "I'll miss this."

He paused and arched a brow. "Miss the cemetery?"

"The quiet. It's really quiet here."

"It's not like the Hellmouth's a budding metropolis."

"Well, no," she replied, "but there's always some creep jonesing for the next apocalypse, and then things get really noisy in a big way. This place?" She spread her arms and twirled, and she looked so fucking cute he nearly tumbled over himself in his desperation to touch her. "It's totally *dead* out here."

Spike smiled and prowled forward. "Yeah. That's the point, love."

"No vamps rising. No ugly demons trying to ruin my date." Buffy grinned at him. "See? Totally unlike home."

"Take many blokes on patrols?"

She blinked. "Umm, hello? Vampire was my last, vampire is my current."

Mention of her *last* had his bones rattling with the need to mark his territory. Though she'd spent part of the morning convincing him with her hands and mouth that she was completely his, the claim was new enough to trigger his rawest instincts. His fangs tingled. He wanted to taste her again—affirm it again. Wanted to feel her humming against his lips. "Vampire is your bloody *only*," Spike growled. "This vampire, anyway."

Buffy winked at him. "Memo gotten."

"Not gotten enough."

"Is this possessive thing gonna be...well, a thing? Because as cute as it is now, I have a feeling it's going to get old."

Spike shrugged. "Don't know. Never been claimed before."

"Damn straight you haven't."

His grin broadened. He loved it when her eyes flashed green. And being one with her in this sense—broad, all-encompassing, every cell in his body attune to hers—removed all limits and pushed aside all boundaries. He'd never felt so alive in all his days—not as a human and certainly not as a vampire. He had her blood in him, her words, her very being. Just as she had him. It was more than he'd ever dreamed. More, everything, wonderful...and he couldn't wait to see what happened next.

It had happened that morning. Spike had awakened slowly, every nerve in his body singing with ecstasy, Buffy's luscious mouth wrapped



tightly around his cock, moving up and down his shaft as her hands rolled and squeezed his testicles. She'd smiled at him, much like she was now, and mentioned something about trying something she'd never before attempted.

*"N-never?" he hissed, thrusting his prick deeper inside her throat. "Oh, Christ..."*

*"Sordid sexual history is kinda blank," she replied before tonguing the underside of his erection. "Whole lotta stuff I never got to try."*

*"Fuck, Buffy..."*

*"Buffy wants to suck first." And with that, she'd taken his aching head between her lips and swallowed him whole.*

*"I'm yours," Spike sighed. He wove his fingers through her hair, tenderly massaging her scalp. He wanted to seize her, hold her, thrust hard. He wanted to fuck her mouth, but he didn't dare. Didn't dare. This was about her. Her exploration. Her curiosity. God, her heavenly mouth. "Oh... that's so good."*

*She released his cock with a wet plop. "Good, huh?"*

*He nodded and purred. "Fuckin' amazing."*

*Buffy dipped her head again, tongue exploring his sensitive slit, one hand squeezing his shaft. "Mmm. I like the way you taste."*

*"Buffy..."*

*"Musky. Manly."*

*"Slayer..."*

*"Is this good? You like this?"*

*"Fuck yeah." Spike lifted his head and fell back again. The sight of her feasting on his cock had his balls tightening and every nerve in his body prepared for send off. But it was too sweet. Feeling her—her mouth, her tongue, the faintest whisper of teeth against his skin. She was so warm and perfect and he needed more. "Your hand..."*

*The hand around his prick tightened. "This one?" she asked.*

*"Yeah. Ohhh...stroke me, pet. When your mouth's...just stroke me. God, that's it."*

*She began pumping him without further encouragement, mouth sucking hard. She slurped and licked and introduced him to new levels of pleasure. Knowing it was her—Buffy. His Slayer. His girl. The girl who loved him. It was her mouth. Hers. Her hands. Her eyes that met his. It was Buffy.*

*"Buffy!"*

*And when he came, she didn't pull away. She drank every pearly drop.*

Her fist connected abruptly with his nose, sending his head rocking back.

"Bloody hell!" Spike roared, hand flying upward. "What was that for?"

Buffy shrugged. "You asked me to hit you. I hit you."

"I thought we were talking about graveyards," he replied, groaning and surveying the damage with soft, tender strokes of his sore skin. "Bloody well broke my nose."

"Did not!"

"Think I need a doctor."

She rolled her eyes. "I think you're full of crap."

"Oi! Mind the wounded."

"What kind of slayer would I be if I only hit vampires when they asked me to, huh?" Buffy sighed and crossed her arms, though her irritation fell to the wayside when Spike failed to drop his hands and retaliate. With a thoughtful frown, she stepped forward. "Here...let me see it."

It was the perfect opening—and a thoughtful lesson while he was at it. The second she let her guard down, he sank his fist squarely in her jaw, knocking her off her righteous legs to the mossy earth and bouncing eagerly at the prospect of having one-upped her. It didn't last, of course. Buffy wasn't the sort of chit to take a smack to the face with a wink and a smile. She wouldn't be his slayer otherwise.

"Ouch!" she spat, leaping back to her feet. "You ass!"

"Let your guard down, pet."

"Yes!" Buffy agreed, aiming a punch at his eye, which he caught with ease. Didn't stop her spunk—she knocked him off his game with a harsh kick to his side. "Because I hurt you!"

"This?" Spike stumbled awkwardly, wiping away the bit of blood that had drizzled out of his nostrils as a result of her enthusiasm. "Barely felt a thing."

"Oh please."

"Kinda tickled, now that I think of it."

"You ass!"

"That one's stale."

"I'll stale you up here in a second."

He blinked. "Pardon me, pet, but was that supposed to make sense?"

Buffy all but snarled and lunged for him.

*She landed astride his hips, giggling at the look on his face. "Hey there, handsome."*

*Spike blinked blearily, doing his best to return to even ground. His cock strained, hard again and ready to go, rubbing against her naked ass with resurging desperation. "Oh my fuck, am I still alive?"*

*Buffy giggled again and sucked sweetly on his lower lip. "You never were."*

*"That explains it." He sighed happily, hands dropping to her hips and lifting her up so the head of his erection pressed against her soaking pussy. She was so wet for him. Drenched. Sucking him off had turned her on, and fuck all if that didn't make him want her more. He hadn't thought it possible. "You're heaven, you are."*

*"Heaven, huh?"*

*Spike grinned. "That mouth of yours, anyway. This pretty pussy..."*

*She pouted. "That's all? My mouth and my..."*

*Her skin flushed and her voice trailed off. She was so cute.*

*"Can't say the word, can you, love?"*

*"It sounds weird coming from me."*

*He brought her down on his cock—infusing his body in pure bliss. Warm. Slick. Wet. Tight. God, so tight. She clenched around him, hands prone on his chest, eyes absorbing his face. She was so beautiful. So bloody beautiful. A nymph. A goddess. And all his.*

*"No," Spike gasped.*

*"No?"*

*"All of you. All of you is heaven. Love you. Love you so much. Oh Christ, squeeze me like that."*

*She batted her eyes with mock-innocence. "You liked that, did you?"*

*"Buffy..."*

*"Say that all you want. I'm the one on top."*

*Spike favored her with a leer at that, and before she could murmur another quip, he had her on her back, cock pistoning wildly into her body. Deeper. God, deeper. Her silky walls compressing around him, holding him, her hips battling him with every thrust. Trying to reclaim him, seal him inside her body. Her*

*voice faded into low moans and whispers, her nails at his back, clawing, scratching, digging.*

*Heaven. Pure heaven. As close as he'd get.*

*"Buffy Buffy Buffy..."*

*"Abbh..."*

*"Feel so good. So wet. So tight."*

*"Oh...gab..."*

*Spike chuckled against his better judgment, raising himself up on his forearms to get a better view of her pretty face. Her eyes were squeezed shut, teeth worrying her lower lip. She mewled every time he slipped away, every wet slide out of her body, every aching move inside her soft, molten pussy. She was burning him alive and he was happy to go.*

*"Not so confident now, are we, love?"*

*She opened her eyes with a scowl, but he chased it away with another thrust. "Yeah, you like that," Spike crooned. "Like it hot. Like it hard. Like me digging just a li'l bit deeper..."*

*"Over-confident...jerk."*

*He chuckled again, lips falling to her neck. The thrill of her pulse had his demon writhing, but he held his fangs at bay. "You love it," he replied. "Just like you love me."*

*"Jerk!"*

*"Say it, Buffy..." He drew back and licked her lips, eyes blazing. Then, punctuating his words with hard thrusts, he ground out, "You. Love. Me."*

*"Lies!"*

*"You can't get enough of me. Or this. You love what I do to you." He smirked, mouth dipping to nurse on one of her breasts as his hand slipped between their warring bodies. The air was consumed with their gasps and sweet slap of flesh moving, wet smacks punctuating every thrust of his cock inside her. Her pretty pink flesh molded around him, suctioning him deeper with every plunge. "You...love...me."*

*"Fuck. Off."*

*"Am," Spike replied happily, though his response was dragged out on a moan. She chose a very opportune time to put those slayer muscles of hers into good use, and his body trembled as a result. A few more squeezes like that and he was a goner. "And you love me."*

*"Abbh..."*

*He slipped a finger over her clit and earned a sharp gasp and a hard twist in turn. "Say it, Buffy. Say you love me."*

"I hate you."

Spike chuckled and beckoned her forward. "Sing me another one, love. That one's lost its music."

"I can bring it back. I'm a trendsetter."

He shrugged as though the matter were of no consequence. "It's all the same, I suppose. Anyway, I know how to get my favorite song to play."

Buffy grunted with another well-aimed kick, this one crashing into his shoulder and sending him flying a good fifteen feet across the hilly terrain. "Damn annoying vampire," she grunted.

"Oh come on, pet," Spike protested, brushing dirt and bits of grass off his duster. "Don't go all pouty."

Buffy stomped her foot, lower lip jutting out. "I do not pout," she insisted.

The sparkle in her eyes betrayed her. She knew exactly what she was doing, and was rather unrepentant about it. Still, knowing he was being played for a fool, Spike couldn't help his melting defenses. "Truce?" he offered, hands coming up.

"Truces never work with you."

"Now, now," he chided, "you'll hurt a bloke's feelings. I'd say they work out really well."

"Except when you leave me to die because you're toting your ho-bag girlfriend away."

He arched an eyebrow. "Are you still brassed about *that*?"

Buffy waved a hand. "Angel could've killed me!"

"But he didn't. You were better. You're better than the lot of us."

"Humph!"

Spike grinned and took a step forward. "Come now, love," he drawled, running a hand down his chest and hooking his fingers through the belt loops of his jeans. "You're not really mad. Wouldn't be near as much fun if I just let you ride out your high horse, would it?"

She pointed her nose upward and crossed her arms. "I say again: humph!"

"Buffy..."

"You're a mean man."

"Evil," he corrected. His hands itched to touch her and his feet could barely wait. Slow, methodical steps accompanied every breath that rolled off his lips. "Bad. Wicked. Naughty. All of the bloody above. And you love it. You fucking *love* it."

A pause then. Her eyes grew wide and her voice wavered. "Do not."

"Liar."

"Nuh uh."

"Uh huh," Spike retorted in the same manner, reaching for her arm. "Come now."

The game ended without warning. Her pout melted in favor of a mischievous smirk, brows flickering as that piece of sin she called a tongue took a swipe of her lips. "Come where?"

Ripples of excitement seized his body. "Doesn't matter where, love," he retorted in much the same manner. "As long as you're on my cock."

"You're bad."

"Very. And I'm gonna kiss you."

Buffy grasped his cheeks and dragged his mouth to hers before he could blink. "No," she replied against his lips. "I'm gonna kiss you."

*She bit him. Bit him hard enough to draw blood. Dug her teeth into his lower lip and sucked, nails digging into his forearms. Spike growled against her mouth, bruising her with his thrusts and doing his damndest to fight off his orgasm. He wasn't ready to come. Not ready—he wanted to feel her pussy tighten and drench him. Wanted to feel her spasm before he allowed himself to tumble over. She knew what she was doing—god, she had to know what she was doing.*

*She released his lip with a wet plop, contracting her muscles around his cock. "I do," she said softly.*

*"Animal, you are..."*

*"I love you, Spike."*

*He grinned. "Fuck yeah, you do. Love you. My naughty girl."*

*"And...I want it." Her head flew back against the pillow, fingers clutching*

*him tighter. He fucked her harder. Harder. Needing more. Needing everything. "Spike...do it."*

*"Do..."*

*"Make it...forever."*

*There was no way he could second-guess her. No way he could help himself. Stopping was impossible and his demon knew what it wanted. Knew what he needed. In a blink, his fangs burst into his mouth and made a haven of her throat, drinking, consuming, feeling...oh god...*

*"Mine!" Spike snarled into her throat. "You're mine, Buffy. All bloody mine."*

*He tensed then. Holding himself between two worlds. The one with which he was most accustomed and the one he was exploring with her. She spasmed hard, drenching his cock with her hot juices. She clutched and gasped, clawing her pussy so hot and tight. So wonderful. So...*

*"I'm yours," she whispered, hips rolling seductively against him. The words had his heart clenching and unneeded breath seizing his throat. "Yours, Spike."*

*The demon roared in triumph. The man stared in wonder. "Buffy..."*

*"Yours." She thrust her pussy upward, pulling him in deeper. "And you're mine."*

*Sentiment she made permanent a second later, her teeth piercing his skin and triggering the most powerful orgasm he'd ever known.*

*She made him hers, and he accepted. After all, he'd always belonged to her. Always. Every step had merely been leading him here.*

*The words just made it complete.*

She smelled of grass and perspiration, spiced with faded hints of body wash and her rose-scented shampoo. Like nature. Like the night. Her lips were soft, her tongue exploratory. She tasted of peppermint and wine, and him. He tasted himself all over her, and it near did him in.

"Buffy," he whispered, walking her backward until she was trapped between a mausoleum and his hard body. "Need you."

"Need me?" Buffy replied, nipping at his lips. "You need me?"

"Always."

"Right here?"

"Right anywhere." Spike explored her throat with his lips, his hands occupied with her soft, perfect breasts. He stroked her—played with her nipples through her thin cotton T-shirt. "Feel me?" he murmured,

rubbing his jean-clad cock against her center. "Feel how bad I need you?"

Buffy grinned, her hands dropping to his belt. "Am I special or is this a permanent condition?"

He chuckled. "What can I say? You bring it out in me."

"So it's just me, right?"

"Just you."

"Good." She kissed the corner of his mouth as her nimble fingers dragged his zipper down. Then her hand was worming through the flaps of his fly to free his cock. And god, her warmth would melt him right to the bone. "I'm a jealous sort."

Spike nuzzled her soft flesh. "Mmm. You and me got that in common, pet."

"Really?" She favored him with a cheeky grin as they fought to free her right leg of her slacks. "Never would've guessed."

"Minx."

"Yeah, but you love it."

His fingers glided over her pussy. She'd gone without knickers tonight—likely as he'd destroyed the last pair she'd packed before leaving home. Bloody shame, that. Buffy had scowled at him but without true anger. They weren't her good panties, anyway, as she'd told him. She hadn't packed those, thinking it unlikely that she'd be getting naked with anyone when she was assigned this crazy mission.

"Love it," he agreed, aligning his cock with her dripping opening, teasing her clit with soft taps. "Love this. Love you."

"Lots of love for an evil guy."

Spike shrugged, pushing himself inside her wet haven. Her scorching heat swallowed his dick, the burn was too sweet to forfeit. In just a few days he'd already lost sight of how he'd ever managed without this. Without her warmth—her smiles, her quips, her playful eyes, her sweet pussy...without *her*.

"I'm an anomaly," he answered, seizing her in a brutal kiss as he began to thrust.

It was a quick, desperate coupling. With the night air against their flesh and an insatiable need to feel the other tremble into orgasm, they had each other howling with release in minutes. Spike shivered, face



buried in her throat, eager tongue lapping at the mark he'd given her. The mark she'd let him give her.

The one making her his.

*"We...didn't talk much..."*

*Buffy smiled up at him, caressing his cheek with a tenderness he would never grow accustomed to. "We talked enough."*

*"It was just a second, love. I don't think you got it."*

*"I'm not a moron, thank you. I understood. You spoke slowly and used small words. Besides, slayer much? I have to know these things."*

*"Vampire mating rituals?"*

*"Vampire rituals in general."*

*"But these...these things..." Christ, it was difficult to think with her pussy squeezing him like that. Even more so when his brain was fried with pleasure and wonder, and all he wanted to do was lose himself in her arms. "Buffy..."*

*"I wanted this. Obviously, or I wouldn't have done it."*

*"But..."*

*"I love you and you're not going away." She blinked hard and forced her eyes to the ceiling. "It hurt with him...even though it was a fairytale, it hurt when it was over. But you...you're real, Spike. I told you that. And if we... I'm not going to let you leave me."*

*"Couldn't," he agreed with a gasp, unable to keep from renewing his thrusts. More, more, more. He always wanted more. "Not you. Buffy..."*

*"And...I just...wanted it...final."*

*"And normal?"*

*She waved a hand before grasping his shoulders, her hips resuming their rhythmic rolls under him, her pussy recapturing him every time he dared leave her body. "We're freaks."*

*"Oh yeah..."*

*"I can't...have normal. Not without you. You're...you're my normal, Spike..."*

Spike purred, but it fell into a groan when his cock slipped free of her warmth. "Have you given any thought to what you're gonna tell the Scoobies?"

Buffy frowned. "About what?" she replied, pulling on her pants. She was a vision. Eyes shining from her orgasm, hair even wilder than before. Still bloody hard to believe she was his, but he wasn't about to

question it. Not when he still didn't trust the world to take it away again.

"Us."

Her eyes grew distant for half a second, thoughtful, but she ultimately shrugged with a casualness that made his heart soar. "To deal with it? Xander took a vengeance demon to prom and boned an evil slayer. Willow's dating a werewolf. And you're...well, you tried to kill us, but saving the world twice—willingly, even—makes up for it."

Spike barked an appreciative chuckle, tucking his cock back into his jeans. "How you figure?"

"Cause this is my gig and I say so." She dropped her shoulders the next second, a warm smile tickling her lips. "Honestly? They'll throw a massive wig. I see many hissy fits in my near future...possibly an intervention or two. But eventually, they'll get a handle on the idea that my life is my business and this is my choice. And if they don't...well...I'm not gonna apologize. I spent too much time apologizing for Angel. You're going to be a good boy for me, so—"

"Says who?"

"Says me."

"Vampire, love."

She waved a hand. "Slayer, *love*. And you'll be good for me because you love me, and it'd kill me if you hurt anyone. Ergo, no bities for Spike."

"Think so, huh?"

She nodded. "I know so. You're whipped. I can feel it." A thoughtful pause. "I have an excellent sense about these things."

"Actually," Spike countered, "you have *no* sense about these things. Even so, pet...it's my nature."

"To kill humans. You know...the kind I'm supposed to kill *you* to protect. That's *my* nature."

He spread his arms. "We're at an impasse."

"You need blood for food. I can deal with that. Pig's blood—"

"Is disgusting. You fancy cleanin' the loos at the county fair with your tongue?"

Buffy sighed, her head rolling back. "Spike...for me? I can't handle it if you're going to be out there hurting people."

"I know."

"Then why—"

Spike smirked. "'Cause I like keepin' you on your toes. Already thought this one out, Slayer. Got me a plan."

"Hopefully nothing I'll have to stake you over."

"There's a vamp-run gig in LA. Import human blood at a fancy price, yeah, but it's the good stuff. I can swing the cash."

She burned him with a suspicious glare. "Legally?"

"Does it matter, so long that the human population doesn't snuff it?" Spike broke away with a sigh, spirits falling. While he'd known this conversation would be difficult, he'd hoped to postpone it for at least a few days. "There aren't a lot of options for blokes like me. Vamps who have no cause to behave 'cept for the girl they love. I can either munch on the tasty towners without landing them in a morgue or drink imported human blood. Blood those humans will lose one way or another. Can't be legal, but at least it's not..."

Buffy held up a hand, smiling softly. "Spike, I was kidding."

"You were?" He blinked, then said with conviction, "I mean, of course, you were."

"Do you have any idea how much it means to me that you're willing to do even *that*? You have nothing to keep you from making my life a living nightmare. Not like...well, I hate using the A-word, but he had a soul."

"Think I hate the s-word more than the A-word," Spike muttered.

"I wasn't saying... My point is his reason was, well, that. You don't have that but you're still...for me."

"You're all the reason I need. All the bloody *soul* I'll ever need."

"And I know that. I *know*...and anything you do to keep me from... It means the world." Buffy sighed and glanced down. "That's what I'm going to tell my friends. You're who you are and you always have been, and you're doing this for me. Human blood or not, you're doing it for me. Not killing."

"Humans," Spike interjected swiftly. "Demons are on the bloody market. Gotta give me *some* violence."

Her face fell slack. "Oh, heaven forbid you try to *help* me save the world."

Spike glanced around. "Not so loud, kitten."

"You ashamed?"

"Of you? Never."

"But that's... I want you with me. Always. I kinda made that clear this morning." Buffy smiled tenderly, reaching up to caress the place on her throat where his fangs had made her his. "I just trusted you wanted me with you, too...and even though this isn't what either of us want as far as your hunting patterns go...I thought...it's a compromise, right?"

*Not what he wanted.* A slow grin spread across his lips, the sudden weight on his chest lifting. Silly girl. Silly, gorgeous, brilliant girl. It wasn't as though he'd wanted to concern her—rather, as soon as admitting he was in love with the Slayer, he'd all but conceded having her would coincide with a radical change in diet. Truthfully, he was blown the hell away at her acceptance of his alternative. Keeping Buffy meant more to him than anything. Even if it meant giving up human blood altogether—he didn't want to do it, but he wouldn't have put up much of a fight. It was his curse and his blessing. For her, there was little he wouldn't do.

However, there was no reason she needed to know that just yet. Leave a bloke with some room to stand on.

"I love you," Spike said, stepping forward and tilting her chin upward to meet his kiss. She poured so much into kissing him. Devouring him. Stripping his mouth with her tongue and loving him with silent words. It was difficult to remember he was in the middle of making a point with her making love to his lips, but he forced himself to pull away with a grin. "You're all I need."

Her eyes positively shimmered. "Really?"

"Well. You, sex, blood, violence, and the telly. I got you, and with you I get sex. Lots and lots of it." She flushed but didn't object. Spike just grinned before continuing, "And we already covered blood. Violence I can get on any given night in good ole Sunnyhell. Reckon if we fix up a place, we'll get a telly. But none of that's doable without you. You're the bloody deal-breaker. And you give me more than I thought possible."

The power of her smile would cripple a lesser man. "Well," she replied, beaming. "I am rather giving."

"I'll say."

"And I love you."

"God, I love those words."

"Good, because you'll be hearing them a lot."

Then she was kissing him again, melting away rational thought for the warm haven of her mouth.

He would never tire of kissing her.



GILES HADN'T PICKED UP THE PHONE.

Buffy flashed Jerome an apologetic smile, twirling the phone cord around her finger. Since she'd officially checked out of her room at the Birch House, she had to beg for use of her host's private line to make a final call before leaving Natchez—which he'd granted graciously, if not eagerly. Jerome was, head-to-toe, a showman. He thanked her for her stay and invited her back again, though whether or not the offer was genuine or a part of the package, she wasn't sure. After all the trouble she'd given him, she couldn't imagine being welcome beyond this visit. She hoped so—her girlish mind had already pictured weekend getaways with her vampire.

Natchez would always be their place.

"Does he have a cell phone?" Jerome asked, glancing up from the book he was reading.

Buffy smiled awkwardly. "Giles is allergic to technology."

"Ah. One of those."

"Very, very British."

The other end of the line picked up at that. "Hello?"

"Wow," she said, turning away from Jerome to gain as much privacy as possible—which wasn't much, given the fact that she was on his personal line. "Lazy much? What happened to picking up the phone the second it rang?"

"My apologies," her Watcher replied sleepily. "The world didn't end, so I assumed all went well. I was indulging in a long nap."

"It did go well. Very well. Spike saved the day."

"...Spike did."

Jerome's brows winged upward but he didn't look up.

"Yeah. He grabbed the thing and...well, it ended." Buffy blew out a deep breath. "Well, we're on our way back. I just thought I'd let you—"

"We?" Giles repeated, fatigue abandoning his voice. "Who is 'we'?"

"Spike and me."

"Spike is coming with you?"

"Yes, he's coming with me. Things are different, Giles." Buffy glanced to Jerome, whose eyes were latched onto his book. He was trying to listen without being obvious, which made it all the more obvious. She had to laugh—her host was many things, perhaps most prevalently a gossip-hound. "I...uhhh...kinda fell in love with him."

Dead silence.

"...Giles?"

His voice was grave when it tickled the receiver again. "You're not serious, are you? Tell me you're not serious."

"Giles—"

"This is one of your funny jokes."

Buffy rolled her eyes. "No, Giles. I'm not joking. Spike and I...well, we...it just happened. I don't get it and I certainly won't try to explain it. But he's coming home with me. And...we...we kinda got...uhhh...married."

Jerome's head flew up, his eyes wide. His reaction, though, was nothing to her Watcher's squawking.

"What?"

"Well...in Spike's—uhh—custom. Not in the American—"

*"You let him claim you?"*

"Yes, and before you go into a big lecture, it's done and you can't make me feel bad about it. It was actually my idea."

"Buffy—"

"And we're going to take the Desoto home. I'm not ready to end my vacation."

"Do you have *any* idea—"

"It'll also give you time to tell the others and get used to the idea. I know exactly what I'm doing. Things are gonna change." Buffy glanced up, catching Jerome's uninhibited staring. His eyes bounced back to the book immediately, a warm blush spreading across his cheeks. She

grinned in spite of herself. "Anyway, Spike's waiting in the car. We'll be home before the semester starts."

Giles was still in a rage—for all the good it did him. "I can't believe you'd—"

"See you in a couple of months."

*"Months?"*

Buffy hung up the phone before he could tear down another righteous tirade and turned to her host with a knowing grin. "He...he said congratulations."

Jerome just arched a brow, his eyes sparkling. She imagined her phone call would be a hot topic at breakfast tomorrow.

"Tell Edith I said goodbye? And Donna?"

He nodded. "Will do. It was a pleasure, Anne."

His tone sharpened around her alias, alerting her he was very much aware—or had grown so—that she was flying under the radar. It didn't matter anymore. "Yeah. I love your place...and if Spike and I ever come back, I promise I'll be a better guest."

"As I said, you're welcome anytime."

Something in his eyes told her he was speaking the truth.



"READY TO RUMBLE, PET?"

Buffy grinned, settling in the seat beside him. It wasn't a chariot or a horse-ride into the sunset, but she'd grown to appreciate the piece of junk Spike called a car...even if she'd never admit it. "Ready and willing."

Spike tossed her a wink. "Just how I like you."

"Any idea where we're going?"

"Does it matter?"

She grew silent for a second, considering. No, it didn't matter where they went. As long as they were together nothing seemed to matter. The next few weeks would open doors she'd never even considered. And though they might lead down tumultuous paths, she was confident she and Spike could emerge from any conflict better for it.

She loved him. He loved her. And he wasn't going to leave.

Nothing mattered beyond that.

"No," Buffy replied, leaning over and brushing a kiss across his cheek. "It doesn't."

"Then let's find out when we get there."

An eager giggle bubbled off her lips. Spike grinned at her and reached for her hand. Sun bounced off the blackened windshield, old rock blasted through the stereo, the air smelled of cigarettes and alcohol, and she didn't care.

It wasn't where she'd seen herself going, but she wouldn't trade it for the world.

Not so long as Spike was beside her.

"Hold on, kitten," he murmured. "We're in for a wild ride."

His eyes were dancing, and she believed him.